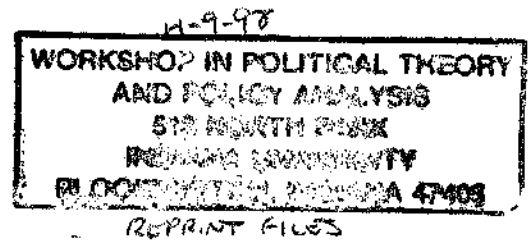


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**Community: Tracing the Outlines of a Seductive Concept**

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# Community: Tracing the Outlines of a Seductive Concept

by

Arun Agrawal

## Abstract

The ghost of the traditional community may only have hovered over Comte's sociology; it has descended to occupy the center of the stage in current writings on development, environmental conservation, resource management, and democratization. Disillusionment with decades of intrusive resource management strategies and planned development have forced a recognition of the possibility that community may form a critical hinge in meeting desired social goals. No longer is community, then, the refuge within which tradition lurks to trip progressive social trends. Instead, vague and disputed as its referents are, community has become the focus of thinking on devolution of power, meaningful participation, and cultural autonomy. This paper traces the outlines of our current seduction by the concept of community. It seeks to further two arguments. One, I draw parallels among the normative assessments of community at different historical junctures. I specifically focus on scholarly views about community at the turn of the 19th century, in the middle of the 20th century, and today and point to what might account for our attraction and indifference to community. Second, this paper focuses on two different sets of characteristics that the notion of community evokes: community as shared understandings and action orientations; and community as a form of social organization. I use the disjunction in these meanings to examine the extent to which community can serve a productive task in furthering development, environmental conservation, and democratic consolidation.

## Community: Tracing the Outlines of a Seductive Concept

The complexity of community thus relates to... on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization... Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.

Raymond Williams, *Keywords*.

### I. Introduction

The ghost of the traditional community may only have hovered over Comte's sociology; it has descended to occupy the center of the stage in current writings on development, environmental conservation, resource management, and democratization. Numerous scholarly and policy-oriented publications, reports from conferences and workshops, and NGOs and aid agencies insist on involving communities to realize development, democratic consolidation, and sustainable resource use. Disillusionment with decades of intrusive resource management strategies and planned development have forced a re-cognition of the possibility that community may form a critical hinge in meeting desired social goals. No longer is community, then, the refuge within which tradition lurks to trip progressive social trends. Instead, vague and disputed as its referents are, community has become the focus of thinking on devolution of power, meaningful participation, and cultural autonomy. In so far as it has become the locus of visions about possible ways to organize society, *fin de siecle* thinking on the subject has come full circle to become aligned with how social theorists often imagined community nearly a hundred years ago.

Few other concepts in the social sciences have received the kind of recurrent and persistent attention as has "community". Its complexity, and the heterogeneity of its referents, guarantee that it

cannot easily be defined or measured.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, its obvious relevance to everyday life means that it cannot be easily displaced or dismissed. The combination makes continuing exploration of its meanings and the implications of turning to it for addressing social issues necessary, even rewarding. Precisely because "community" is significant to such an enormous range of concerns, there is also considerable confusion about such questions as: What is a community? Does it only emerge spontaneously or can it be constituted? And, if it can be created, how? Vexing questions about community have come to assume critical importance in light of works that see it as foundational to the possibility of peasant subsistence, rural development, environmental conservation, and democratic consolidation.<sup>2</sup>

This paper traces the outlines of our current seduction by the concept of community. It seeks to further two arguments. One, I draw parallels among the normative assessments of community at different historical junctures. I specifically focus on scholarly views about community at the turn of the 19th century, in the middle of the 20th century, and today. Using these views, I point to what might account for our attraction and indifference to community. Second, this paper focuses on two different sets of characteristics that the notion of community evokes: community as shared understandings and action orientations; and community as a form of social organization. I use the disjunction in these meanings to examine the extent to which community can serve a productive task in furthering development, environmental conservation, and democratic consolidation.

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<sup>1</sup>Some scholars simply refuse to embark upon the seemingly fruitless task (Gusfield, 1975: xvii). We can, nonetheless, find valiant attempts to define, measure, and prescribe the preconditions for community. See Taylor's thoughtful studies on the relationship between community and anarchy for a discussion of the conditions that characterize community (1976, 1982). Singleton and Taylor draw upon this earlier work to succinctly list the conditions for community (1992: 315). Hillery (1955) reviews more than 90 definitions of community to place them into different categories, and Stoneall (1983) examines five different theoretical approaches to studying and defining community.

<sup>2</sup>Community has, naturally, been used in many other contexts as well, as for example, to refer to professional, ethnic, religious, national and other collectivities (Hillery 1963: 779). Recall, for example, Benedict Anderson's well-known definition of the nation as an "imagined political community..." ([1983] 1991: 6). Some of these uses provide important clues to the nature of "community", and in the course of this paper we will draw upon them. The focus, however, will remain on the use of "community" in the specific literatures mentioned.

The investigation proceeds through three steps. In section two I engage past theorists and explore how their hopes and concerns about community continue to influence current analyses. The answer, I suggest, turns on whether we possess determinate and appealing theories of unidirectional social change. Section three examines how the notion of community has come to assume significant weight in a number of recent writings. In surveying these literatures, I direct attention to the promise scholars writing about development, conservation, and democratic consolidation find in glossing over dissensions within a community and papering together the multiple meanings of the concept. The fourth section opens up the different meanings of community and questions the extent to which "community" contains the possibilities many thinkers believe it to possess. The section shows that glossing over dissensions might make it impossible to realize the promise scholars view in the notion of community. The conclusion to the paper explores the implications of my arguments for our visions about community and emphasizes the need to delink different aspects of community.

## **II. Tracing...**

Studies of community can conveniently be traced back to late 19th century analyses of social change by such theorists as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte, and Ferdinand Tonnies.<sup>3</sup> For these theorists, ongoing social changes "inevitably meant a decline in the significance of local forms of social organization" (Hummon, 1990:24). In the analysis of social change, Marx's thoughts on alienation, Durkheim's work on solidarity and anomie, and Weber's writings about the disenchantment of the world continue to reverberate in current analyses of what constitutes community and how communities change.<sup>4</sup> Nor were Marx, Durkheim and Weber the only major scholars of the portentous transformations rocking their world. Sir Henry Maine sought to explain social changes in terms of a shift from "status" to "contract" (1871). Comte (1896) saw the world as

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<sup>3</sup>Tonnies' classic analysis of changing social relations in his *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, published first in 1887, also proved foundational for theories that proceeded through construction of types and was prior to Weber's use of the idealtyp.

<sup>4</sup>Studies exploring the effect of rapid social change on community and community structures have continued to be produced, of course. See, for example, Gunasinghe (1976), Hay (1988), Mishra (1990), Van and Kees (1992), Warakai (1989).

poised at the brink of a third, final, stage of evolution—from religious to metaphysical to scientific/positive. Spencer spoke of a similar evolutionary design—a movement from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous structure as the basis for social organization where exchange becomes key ([1898] 1967).

For Marx and Engels, capitalist advance replaced existing traditional relations with market relations based on exchange. The cash nexus weakened and unglued the social bonds that kept the lord and the serf tied together. In the space created by the weakening of these bonds lay the possibility of advancing toward new modes of production and allocation that were, ultimately, not only inevitable but also desirable (1848). In their formulation of societal change, extant community attachments possessed little valence; their passing was reason only for limited lament.

Durkheim, in *Division of Labor and Society*, saw the emergence of a new form of organic solidarity that would integrate individuals in industrial society more closely than the earlier mechanical solidarity based on identity of skills and interests (1893). The new patterns of human association, because they were based on complementarity, promised a "system of special functions" united by "definite relations" (quoted by Gusfield, 1975: 8). But in the next ten years, Durkheim revised his earlier assessment. His analysis of suicides already linked the integration of an individual in socially cohesive groups to well-being (1897) and connected suicides with increased levels of prosperity. In the introduction to the second edition of *Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim advocated associations based on common occupational activity as the means to create community. Through the identity of feeling humans would gain from shared occupations, he believed it might be possible to inflect association with community. Loss of communal cohesion of the older type, he came to believe, could not be replaced simply by the "organic solidarity" of complementary skills.

Under the determining influence of Darwinian evolutionary theories, most 19th century scholars who wrote about the changes affecting their era saw society moving along a definite and irreversible evolutionary path. Along the way, members of a society came to relate to each other on very different terms from those of the past. Status, tradition, and religion gave way to equality, modernity and a scientific temper. But if change was clear and irreversible, value judgements on it differed and in part

influenced views about community. Marx, Spencer, and the early Durkheim saw the change as liberating humanity from the coercive and limiting world of the past, from the "idiocy of rural life." The enlightenment belief in progress inevitably colored assessments of ongoing social changes (Gusfield, 1975: 6), and correspondingly, of community.

Other scholars were not quite so sanguine about the prospects of change. Instead of liberation from the tyranny of custom, they saw "progress" to be dissolving the ties that anchor humans to their milieu and give them a sense of who they are. Their nostalgia for the old suggested that a more unequal, unpredictable, impersonal, anomic, and alienated world was coming to replace the known comfort of living in equitable and harmonious communities whose members cared for and supported each other. Raymond Williams has pointed provocatively to the impossible search for community where those who miss its presence, believe it existed just before the current set of social changes (1973).<sup>5</sup> When scholars do not have a unilinear view of history, nor a vision that endorses the desirability of the coming age, their assessments of community are far more likely to be positive.

The thoughtful legacy of scholarly writings from the end of the 19th century strongly informs both mid-20th century writings about community in the context of third world development, and our current preoccupation with community. Modernization theories, formulated amidst widespread concern about the direction of change in newly emerging nations in the so-called third world, betrayed their underlying assumptions even by what they described as the correlates of modernization: economic *development*, social *mobilization*, *rational* authority, greater political *participation*. But in seeing particularistic affiliations of kinship, religion, ethnicity, or caste as impediments to modernization, they also argued against community explicitly. After all, community formed the home to these traditional attachments.<sup>6</sup> If nineteenth century critics mourned the loss of community, modernizationists argued that without the disappearance of the ties that community encourages, modernity would be impossible. In contrast to writers like Tonnies and the later Durkheim who saw the disappearance of community to

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<sup>5</sup>See also Laslett (1973) for a revealing study of how the Industrial Revolution changed the English countryside.

<sup>6</sup>Lerner (1962), perhaps, provides the classic statement on the apathy, fatalism, passivity, and static nature of traditional communities.

mark the coming of a more impersonal and demeaning age, modernizationists saw community as the world to be effaced in the interests of the poor and the marginal.<sup>7</sup> The erasure of community could be regarded with a semblance of hope because of beliefs about the Utopias that would replace community. Armed as they were with a positive theory of social change, and the certainty that take-off by traditional societies toward the developed state led to desirable outcomes, it is scarcely surprising that their assessments of community were negative insofar as community life posed obstacles to modernity.

The main thrust of this section, as it has selectively drawn upon a range of scholarly writings related to community, has been to posit a link between normative views regarding community and theories of social evolution. I have suggested that when scholars possess teleological theories of social change where the end-state is an appealing one, community is seen to possess rather limited transformative capacities. It becomes an obstacle to History and the Angel of Progress.<sup>8</sup> When such determinative theories of social transformations are lacking, and we regard change ambivalently, community comes to assume far more positive connotations. Instead of the end-state toward which society is moving being the locus of longing, community comes to assume the role of an anchor for imaginings about appealing forms of social organization.

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<sup>7</sup>At their most sympathetic, modernization scholars saw the place of communities in a modern world through the lens of "community development" which would transform existing qualities of communities (passivity, particularistic ties, attachment to traditions) into appropriately progressive ones (belief in the ability to control the environment, political centralization, secularization, and rationalization of authority). Descriptions of "community development" are available in Chitere (1994), Christenson and Robinson (1980), Dalton (1971), Mukerji (1961), Sinha (1983), and Turner et al. (1983). For studies that elaborate on what modernization represents, see Almond and Verba (1963), Deutsch (1961), Geertz (1963), Lerner (1962), Pye (1965), Pye and Verba (1965), Shils (1962), and Ward (1963).

<sup>8</sup>Benjamin (1968) describes a Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" which shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.



### III. Seduction by a Concept

Anthropological and ethnographic writings have played a significant role in influencing current conceptions of community. Among those studying peasant societies, a strong emphasis on such aspects of local communities as reciprocity, moral economy and risk avoidance is in part a consequence of the earlier structural-functional approaches in anthropology. Ethnographic writings often depicted rural communities using social-systemic models and language, and examined the relations of these groups to larger patterns of change only to a limited extent.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, village communities have characteristics that resonate with the ideas of status related exchanges, *Gemeinschaft*, high levels of dependence on land, mechanical solidarity, and imperfect markets. But they are also often hierarchical, conflict ridden, and highly competitive.<sup>10</sup> Anthropological descriptions of community have highlighted their static and bounded nature, conflict as well as cooperation within them, and generalized reciprocity as well as amoral familism to characterize interactions.<sup>11</sup> But present day writings seem inclined to be more selective in the characteristics they ascribe to communities. In discussing the possible utility of community to development, environmental conservation and democratic consolidation, scholars display a penchant for highlighting the positive: to create community as a "warmly persuasive word."

#### 3.1 Community and Development

If earlier studies of peasant societies focused on changes community underwent in the process of development (Redfield, 1941, 1947, 1955), scholars of development, today, have come to see community

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<sup>9</sup>The belief that village communities are closed corporate communities has come under fire from various quarters recently. Schiel (1990) suggests village communities be seen as open systems considerably influenced by the state. See also the opening essay by Dirks, et al. (1994) in *Culture, Power History* and the various essays in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) for a discussion of the conditions under which ethnographic writings treated village communities as timeless, changeless entities. The conception of village communities as closed, static systems awaiting culture contact was common in studies of community development as well as early anthropological writings.

<sup>10</sup>Griswold (1992), in her study of images of community in Nigerian novels, makes the same point in relation to rural African communities.

<sup>11</sup> As Li reminds us anthropologists "have a long track-record of producing detailed, nuanced accounts of the multiplicity of interests at stake in the constitution of communities at the local level (1996: 502).

and participation by communities as necessary to development (Alliband, 1983; Chambers and McBeth, 1992). Grassroots development, and participation by local communities have increasingly assumed the status of received wisdom among NGOs, development practitioners, and other members of the development community (Annis, 1988; Durning, 1989; Korten, 1990; Uphoff, 1986). Even critics of development see participation and community initiated development as necessary to the alternative visions they espouse (Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1992; Ferguson, 1994; Sachs, 1992).

The reasons for the emphasis on community are clear. There is widespread agreement that development practice in the past few decades has tended to benefit primarily the powerful and the rich. Initiatives and programs for development have had a way of getting side-tracked from their professed objectives toward depressingly familiar outcomes. Even where policymakers have explicitly aimed development projects at marginal and poorer populations, the objectives of such programs have been vitiated. These outcomes have led to a questioning of centralized, top-down development programs. Large development projects involving large sums of money and visualizing large change in existing social relations are seen as less likely to be successful than more modest proposals undertaken with the assent and participation of communities. As issues of power and participation have become critical, "real" development, most thinkers today assert, can be achieved only with the involvement of local communities and the integration of popular aspirations in development planning (Clark, 1994). Community participation and utilizing existing community institutions potentially reduce costs of development programs, and conflicts stemming from power asymmetries between government officials and community members. Involvement of communities leads to better representation of the preferences of poor in program design and implementation.

As goals, community development, community participation, and community empowerment are central to development aspirations.<sup>12</sup> Recent writings have even come to see community development to

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<sup>12</sup>Studies of community development are available for developing as well as developed countries. See, for example, Kaufman (1959), and Vengroff (1974). Phifer reviews community development studies in the US. In the 1950s and 60s, studies of community development saw it as the appropriate tool for achieving social change oriented to bringing about modernization. In more recent works, Wilkinson takes community to be an integral part of the very definition of development (1985). Twumasi (1981) notes that traditional community development tended to further entrench elite power and must be reformed to ensure participation of the wider community. See also Andah (1981) who advocates active rural community participation in the development process.

supercede or replace development since it conveniently incorporates social as well as economic aspects.<sup>13</sup> Even studies that see markets and proper pricing as instrumental in promoting development, acknowledge the importance of community in achieving more "holistic" or sustainable development (Clugston and Rogers, 1995). Other studies attempt to establish positive links between community, social capital and civil society, and development, arguing that without attempts to achieve all of these together, sustainable development might be impossible (Flora, 1995; Fonseca et al. 1994). Indeed, community is a concept around which successive generations of scholars of development, despite their theoretical and ideological differences, can find some common ground. The power and the multiple possibilities of the concept are evident from the fact that modernization, rational choice, as well as poststructuralist theorists can all, in different ways, see community as a relevant unit whose involvement is central to the processes of development.

### 3.2 Community and Environmental Conservation

For environmentalists, the notion of community-based conservation becomes significant for very similar reasons as those that have propelled "community" to the fore in development writings. A building consensus holds that protecting biodiversity and large areas of wilderness in hermetically sealed parks is near impossible. The very concept of "wilderness" and "virgin forests" has come under question with a growing recognition and acceptance that humans have intervened in natural processes in even seemingly isolated regions.<sup>14</sup> In tropical areas, which contain much of the wildlife and biodiversity that conservationists see as necessary to protect, the growing presence of human populations in the landscape makes the creation of large-scale wildlife and conservation parks a politically difficult option.<sup>15</sup> Even

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<sup>13</sup>Robinson (1995), using Tonnie's ideas of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, presents community development as compatible with most of the shibboleths of development that have found recent currency: civil society, participatory action research, empowerment, face-to-face association and individual liberty.

<sup>14</sup>For arguments that humans have played a significant role in influencing vegetation communities and types of biodiversity even in seeming wilderness areas, see Oldfield and Alcorn (1991), Posey (1985), and Posey and Balee (1989).

<sup>15</sup>There are, of course, a large number of scholars and policy-makers who still insist on keeping communities out of conservation (Scott et al. 1995).

where wildlife parks and conservation areas are present, they are viewed by local populations to intrude on their customary rights to collect forage, hunt for subsistence, or gather fuelwood. Under these conditions, without the cooperation of local communities, many programs for protecting the environment have failed. Such failures, coupled with the focus on grassroots development, and the emergence of the human rights and indigenous peoples' movements, have led to the acceptance of the fact that top-down, center-driven conservation might be impossible.<sup>16</sup> Because the fate of much of the world's biodiversity lay in the hands of poor people in the third world (Western and Wright, 1994: 6), communities must, therefore, be involved in conservation efforts (Fellizar and Oya, 1994; McNeely and Miller, 1984; Perry and Dixon, 1986). As Western and Wright put it, "community-based conservation includes natural resources or biodiversity protection by, for, and with the local community" (1994: 7).<sup>17</sup>

The significance of community has emerged not just in writings about biodiversity or wildlife. Where many scholars had earlier asserted (and continue to assert) that natural resources, without private or government ownership, are likely to be consumed and decimated, opinions on how renewable resources should be used have shifted tremendously. Common property theorists has demonstrated, through empirical case studies and theoretical reflections, that communities can own, manage, defend, sustain, and enhance resources such as drinking water, irrigation systems, forests, pastures, fisheries, and wildlife (Berkes, 1989; Bromley, 1992; McCay and Acheson, 1987; NRC, 1986; Ostrom, 1990; 1992; Peters, 1994; Pinkerton, 1989; 1992; Stevenson, 1991; Wade, 1987). Others, who are not necessarily students of common property, have also advocated community involvement in attempts to manage resources (Bailey, 1986; Douglass, 1992), often in partnership with the government authorities or market institutions. Such advocacy possesses special appeal where 1) national governments have limited resources or capacities to manage resources themselves, or where state control and management of specific resources has been a failure; and 2) there are significant externalities associated with the private use and management of resources. Communities, on the other hand, are seen to possess better

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<sup>16</sup>For a review of the emergence of an international system of national parks and protected areas, and the differing motivations that have prompted nature protection in parks, see Conca (1996).

<sup>17</sup>Zerner's study (1994) of Indonesia provides a nuanced discussion of the notions of custom and community in the context of conservation.

information about their resources, have greater capacity to enforce rules locally than a distant state government, and can overcome some of the problems of externalities. The arguments of commons scholars often provide support to those who see in communities and indigenous peoples natural managers and guardians of resources (Thomas-Slayter, 1992).

Under the influence of the turn to community a number of governments in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have begun to involve rural communities in environmental conservation. Experiments to involve communities have given way to full scale programs that seek to grant communities a greater share in authority over resource management and/or benefits from the use of resources. In countries such as India, Nepal, Bhutan, Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, attempts to involve communities in resource management and devolve responsibilities to them are in different stages of progress (Lynch and Talbott, 1995; Raju et al., 1993; Sarin, 1995). These policy shifts show that the rhetoric around community has already significantly influenced how we view resource management. But it is also worth pointing out that most programs to involve communities are in their infancy, their results uncertain and unknowable for a few more years. They represent a leap of faith, undertaken in light of some evidence that communities around the world have shown success in managing resources productively and sustainably. Adequate assessments of their performance are not yet available.

### 3.3 Community and Democracy

The undermining of socialist visions regarding the organization of society, in part resulting from the collapse of communist party states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, have provided a fillip to electoral democracies around the world. As scholars and activists have cogitated upon whether new electoral democracies would last, they have often seen grassroots democratization as essential for democratic consolidation.<sup>18</sup> Participation in political processes at the local level through strong community building is then seen as essential to the emergence of vigorous democracies at the macro

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<sup>18</sup>According to O'Donnell, "[I]f political democracy is to be consolidated, democratic practice needs to be spread throughout the society, creating a rich fabric of institutions and authorities" (1988: 283). See also Diamond (1995).

level.<sup>19</sup> If local participation at the level of the community does not exist, electoral competition at the national level may simply be a farce, a facade to legitimate existing authoritarian distribution of power.

The issue, of course, possesses a respected pedigree of debate in the writings of such important philosophers as de Tocqueville, Arendt, Rawls and Habermas. Standard theories of democracy from Schumpeter onwards suggest that a high level of political participation might be antithetical to democracy - it can endanger freedoms and rights, impede governability and destroy pluralism (Easton 1965, Huntington 1968, Huntington and Nelson 1976, Nozick 1974, Riker 1982, and Sartori 1987). Other theorists of democracy, however, argue that without extensive citizen participation electoral democracies run the risk of becoming hostage to the manipulation of voter preferences by rich and powerful elites. In exploring the limits of formal democratic systems, they highlight the significance of community, and discursive public arenas in which individuals can engage each other to craft deeper and better informed understandings of their personal and collective interests. Involvement in community organizations and collective activities can also provide citizens common grounds to make demands upon the state, thereby improving the functioning of higher level bureaucratic and representative institutions and making democracy more meaningfully responsive (Arendt 1973, Cohen 1988, Dryzek 1990, Habermas 1989, Pateman 1970, 1979, Warren 1992).

This section has examined how community is treated in three different literatures. But this strategy of organizing the discussion is primarily to indicate the extent to which community has become central to a wide variety of public aspirations and policy objectives; it should not be taken to mean that the basic meanings of community differ radically in these different writings. There is considerable overlap and similarity in the way community is imagined, the tasks it performs, and the way it is deployed. Indeed, many scholars increasingly suggest that resorting to community would help achieve many of the goals simultaneously that might otherwise be in conflict with each other (Fox, 1992). In earlier writings, the goals of democratic reform and economic growth/development often did not go

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<sup>19</sup>See Simone and Pieterse (1993) for the significance of local civil society to democratic change.

together.<sup>20</sup> Authoritarian systems (as, for example, in China, HongKong, Korea, Taiwan or Singapore), could promote economic growth and development more easily. Other writers saw the achievement of environmental goals to be antithetical to economic growth. But community becomes the magic wand with the capacity to reconcile democracy, development and conservation. Three major objectives of national policy around the world--growth, equity, and environment--can be joined together under the umbrella of community.

#### **IV. Outlining...**

In each of the three literatures that the previous section considers, community emerges as a social and discursive entity that breaks the flow of dominant beliefs. The rhetoric on community makes it possible to imagine it as an alternative to massive levels of centralization, and to systems where social organization is based on unrestrained self-interest and purely economic exchanges. Because contemporary images of communities depict them as small, locally situated, harmonious formations, these images can be at least rhetorically instrumental in contesting accumulation of power. Simply for this reason--other appealing options are kept alive--the stress on community must be welcomed.

But the current focus on community is haunted by its conflation of quite different meanings of community, identification of the resulting idealtpe with actually existing instances, and the tendency toward reification. As Li points out, such simplification and elision has the advantage of making policy propositions more authoritative by muting possible criticisms founded on distracting complexities (1996). But even if ethnographic accuracy need be only a minor concern in initial evaluations of influential metaphors, Ostrom's penetrating critique of misdirected policies based on simple models of "tragedy of the commons," "prisoner's dilemma game," and "the logic of collective action" (1990: 2-23) shows the pitfalls of working with gross simplifications. Current conceptions of community, similarly, bear the potential of prompting harmful policies and even a backlash against community.

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<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Haggard and Kaufman (1992) who suggest that authoritarian politics may be better able to adjust economic policies for growth. The literature on the subject, one can make the case, is resoundingly inconclusive Hirschman (1994), and (Ruschemeyer et al. 1992).

In each of the literatures considered in this paper, the concept of community is central, but beset by definitional and boundary problems. Scholars and policy-makers conflate at least two different sets of ideas about community as a relevant entity to further desirable social goals.<sup>21</sup> First, those who see in community the foundation of new strategies to develop, conserve and democratize, idyllically view it as an organic, harmonious, self-reproducing unit which can dispel alienation because its members can find in it fulfilling roles. Community members are presumed to possess common ties and interests, and share beliefs about how to achieve their interests. These ideas about community relate to the notion of shared feelings, identities, and beliefs. Second, as a social organization, the concept of community evokes a quite different, and potentially related set of attributes. Communities are located in a place, they have stable memberships, members meet each other regularly in face-to-face interactions, their interactions span a range of issues, are multiplex, and are unmediated by third parties. The two notions of community are linked by an implicit understanding that by participating in community activities in face-to-face interactions, members can gain a new understanding of their own and collective interests.<sup>22</sup> This emergent understanding can align divergent interests, beliefs and identities, and, thereby, obliterate the disjunction between individual and social preferences that marks social dilemmas.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>I construct the schematic view of community that follows in this paragraph from a number of sources. These include theoretical writings on community, and empirical sources on the role of community in democratic consolidation and sustainable development. The most important of these are Arnold (1990), Bellah et al. (1984), Berkes and Farvar (1989), Ellickson (1991), Etzioni (1996), Korten (1986), Li (1996), Lynch and Talbot (1995), Singleton and Taylor (1992), Taylor (1982), Wade (1988), Young (1990). But as Young points out (302), "there is no universally shared concept of community, only particular articulations that overlap, complement, or sit at acute angles to one another.

<sup>22</sup>The importance of face-to-face interactions for building shared understandings is also emphasized by Bay (1981), Gould (1978), Manicas (1974), and Unger (1975).

<sup>23</sup>Political theorists such as Sandel go a step further and suggest in community a constitutive conception of the self: "What marks such a community is not merely a spirit of benevolence or the prevalence of communitarian values, or even certain 'shared final ends' alone, but a common vocabulary of discourse and a background of implicit practices and understandings within which the opacity of persons is reduced if never finally dissolved. Insofar as justice depends for its pre-eminence on the separateness and boundedness of persons in the cognitive sense, its priority would diminish as that opacity faded and those community values deepened" (1982: 172-3).



Clearly, it is not just the nation that is an imagined community. All communities must be imagined<sup>24</sup> since it is only through acts of imagination that a single concept can carry so many different elements. The conflation and elisions necessary to construct a politically appealing notion of community may increase the ambiguity of its meanings, but it is this very ambiguity that has allowed a large group of scholars to harness "community" for furthering different objectives. Yet, the above view of community, lying at the core of current policy advocacy, is also deeply problematic at both representational and conceptual levels. It is sufficiently problematic, I suggest, as to undermine the potential gains of concept simplification. The two sets of connotations that community evokes serve different, unreconciled, and perhaps, irreconcilable, purposes in the current focus on community.

The aspect of community that is responsible for its appeal, as a diverse range of scholars turn to it, is what I call "community of common understanding": Communities are closely-knit collectivities of humans. Their members share core values. Members cooperate with and trust each other. Trust, common values, and shared meanings and understandings are what allow scholars to imagine community as the site where multiple objectives can be fused to create a "warmly persuasive" concept.<sup>25</sup> If a human collectivity is a community in the above sense, it is quite likely that it would be successful in working toward objectives deemed desirable. Closely knit collectivities whose members share core values of cooperation and trust each other, should be successful candidates for achieving goals of participatory and sustainable development, conservation, and democratic consolidation. By recasting the individual into one whose preferences match those of the social aggregation of which he is a part, and whose

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<sup>24</sup>See, for example, Wendy Griswold's interesting study of the way in which Nigerian novelists construct a fictive village community that is illustrative of the impact of global cultural production forces on aesthetic creation (1992). See also Nugent's attempt to trace carefully the emergence of community in Namiquipa, northern Mexico, and its relation to the state (1989).

<sup>25</sup>It is this notion of community that has also prompted what Nisbet calls "*The Quest for Community*." Individuals can find in community the security and fulfillment that conditions of modern life increasingly render difficult to achieve. Out of "dissolution and insecurity has emerged an interest in the properties and values of community that is one of the most striking social facts of the present age... In many spheres of contemporary thought the imperatives of community are irresistible (Nisbet [1953] 1990: 21). The reasons why community appeals may have changed-- its healing powers now are presumed to address the failures of decades of development policy and the needs of conservation and democratization. But the words themselves fit the current state of affairs as well, perhaps, even better.

actions therefore do not have to conform to a narrow conception of individual rationality, the idea of community as shared understanding robs rational choice analyses of much of their cutting edge. If individuals value collective goals appropriately highly and derive satisfaction from actions oriented toward the community, the rupture between social and individual goals--staple of positive political theorizing about the problems of development and conservation--can be breached.<sup>26</sup> Simultaneously, this view of community also addresses those critics who dismiss rational choice accounts on the ground that their concept of the self is without context, ahistorical, and does not take into account the fact that all subjectivities are constituted through specific social and discursive practices. According to this view, subjects are created through interactions in a collectivity.

Community as a form of social organization (small groups whose members are attached to a place and undergo regular, multiplex, face-to-face interactions) would possess little appeal, except to anarchists, if it did not come associated with the idea that its members also possess shared understandings and action orientations. After all, it is "community as shared understanding" that assures success in different policy-relevant arenas. Larger collectivities whose members share strong common understandings, beliefs, and are other-oriented can be equally successful in solving collective action problems.

But the first aspect of a community--where it stands for shared understandings and common orientation to action—is precisely what external interventions can do little about. States, NGOs, bureaucratic authority, aid, policy reformulations, none of these can create community as shared understanding. What they can directly influence are elements that relate to the second aspect of communities--community as a form of social organization: shared territory, regular and frequent interactions over a range of livelihood issues, and stability in membership. External interventions, in their search to encourage community as shared understanding, can only promote those elements that the second aspect of community implies. How far does the first aspect of community get influenced by interventions that modify the second set of community attributes?

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<sup>26</sup>See Lichbach's extensive review of the ways in which "community" can form a solution to collective action problems (1996: 89-127).

Shared space, face-to-face interactions, and multiplexity seem intuitively appropriate dimensions to promote community as shared understanding. The intuition is misleading. It is based on the belief that if individuals relate to each other without mediation, their transactions will be transparent and alienation, hierarchies and domination will be eliminated. Such a belief prompts two responses. First, there can be no interactions between individuals without mediation of space, time, and representational mechanisms (computers, telephones, language, voice, gestures, facial expressions, bodily gestures, touch, sight, hearing). In the necessary presence of these communicative media, transparency of selves is an illusory ideal. As Young points out, both face-to-face and non-face-to-face interactions are mediated relations and in both there is separation and miscommunication as there is consensus and communication (1990: 314).<sup>27</sup> Identity of interests, and identification of the individual with the collective, therefore, is similarly illusory. Its existence is possible but this possibility cannot be taken as a guaranteed condition that follows the existence of community. Community, as transparently shared understanding stemming from face-to-face interactions, can only be a fictive construct.

Second, even were unmediated, transparent transactions somehow to be rendered possible, they would be no guarantee of the elimination of alienation, hierarchy, and domination. Alienation of individuals from each other, hierarchical relations, and domination are founded upon the presence and use of power in ways that convert some individuals into means to the ends pursued by others. Transparency of transactions does not entail the end of power nor ensure equality among those engaging in transparent interactions.

The above negation is not to suggest that community has no role to play in devolution of control from central to dispersed loci, and in strategies to develop, conserve and democratize. My intention is quite the opposite. It is to point to the fact that community as shared understandings cannot found the basis of any realistic program of devolution of powers. That seemingly easy option is a convenient Utopia, not an option. Instead, one must turn to community as a form of social organization in which the concrete existence of difference, hierarchy, and conflict must be painfully and tediously negotiated if the

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<sup>27</sup> One might point out that in face-to-face interactions, there is greater immediacy. But apart from the issue of what constitutes greater immediacy (apprehension of sensations, or the sensations themselves), there is again no necessary relationship between greater immediacy and greater transparency.

political goals of development, conservation, and democratic consolidation are to be meaningful. In the absence of attention to these troubling aspects of community and willingness to engage them, the turn to community is likely to remain an empty promise.

## **V. Conclusion**

It is in a somewhat unnoticed and unremarked disjunction between its different referents that the irony of the recent attention to community lies. Community has become central to goals of democratization, development, and conservation. But it has two aspects: as a) community of common understandings; and b) community as a form of social organization where members share space and interactions. Community as common understanding and fellowship is what accounts for the appeal of the notion, but policy changes can accomplish little to further this aspect of community. And the aspect of community which policy can influence, may or may not encourage the aspect of community which is desired, and which is presumed to help accomplish the goals of development, conservation, and democratization. This irony assumes sharper focus, and the turn to community requires greater critical attention if we locate it in light of longer term shifts in views about community.

The current valorization of and turn to community needs to be understood at least in part as belonging to a variable cycle of positive and negative views. That is to say, rather than seeing community simply (and short-sightedly) as a possible solution to social problems that have proved remarkably durable (How to develop? How to ensure sustainable resource use and conservation? How to ensure participatory and long-lasting democratization?) we must wonder about why it is that our attention to community comes at this particular historical juncture? Without such a self-reflexive transformation of the analytical vision, we, as advocates of community, are unlikely to discover the historical status and moorings of our own advocacy.

The notion of community has evoked nostalgia and rejection, the one often following the other. Around the turn of the 19th century, scholars reviewing the transformative powers of capitalism accorded community a negative or positive valence depending on how they viewed the changes. Loss of

community, thus, could be seen as progressive human alienation, *and* as portending the emergence of new social and economic order that would lead to greater freedom for human beings.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when greater certainties about the direction of social change prevailed and modernization theory held sway, communities were seen as repositories of tradition and an obstacle to "progress." Without the transformation of existing social relations, developing nations could not tread the same path as had nation-states in the West. Optimism about the predictability of social change, and the capacity to influence such change by injecting human or physical capital, meant that community was seldom seen as necessary to development. Today, such optimistic imaginings have gone away with a whimper.

It may not be coincidental, then, that today we quest, once again, for community. Old teleological certainties about a history with direction have been swept away in the wash of the postmodern resurrection of Nietzsche. A variety of new social movements have thrown into disarray the possibility of relying on analytical categories such as class to understand social change. And the experiences of countries and populations in the South, the trumpeting of the World Bank and the IMF notwithstanding, have failed to oblige the theorists of "stages of growth". Tradition has emerged again as the rationalized focus of nostalgia for the old, only this time in the guise of the "indigenous". History repeats itself: not as tragedy, nor as farce, only as yet another moment in an enduring search to solve problems.

In voicing the above doubt, my paper seeks to create a greater urgency about showing how community as a form of social organization can be the focus of current policy advocacy. It attempts to shift attention away from the politically and analytically easy but ultimately misleading option of "community as shared understanding." Rather than relying on the idea that face-to-face interactions in small groups somehow bear the potential to transform asymmetric political relations among group members, it urges attention toward the concrete negotiations that can modify the effects of alienation, hierarchy, and domination.

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