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A Narrative of Decline…

Our traditional experience of community is in flux. Blame it on our dwindling interest in organized religion, the number of times we move house, our daily spatial mobility, population density, or the impact of television or cars. Either way we see less of our neighbours than our great-grandparents would have done. Local human contact appears to be diminished. Collectively we carry a 'core social wound'.

Our experience of community – similarities and differences

But this is not the same wherever you go. In some London neighbourhoods community is a verb rather than a noun. By moving in you do not acquire an automatic sense of community: community is something you seek actively. In other parts of the country a sense of community may go hand-in-hand with moving into in a particular area. Yet what these different experiences of community share is a similar sense of decline. Wherever you go it seems that community is not what it once was.

Sounds Familiar

Isn't this what we've always told ourselves? We are by no means the first generation of Britons to claim that our sense of community is in decline. During the late 19th century there were those like William Morris or John Ruskin who bemoaned the death of community. What makes the discussion today distinct is the range of solutions on offer.

A Local Restoration

So how do we restore community? For many the starting point is a reflection on the past. Just as Ruskin and Morris pined after life in the pre-industrial English village, so Philip Blond and Lord Glasman – to take just two –lace their respective visions of community renewal with references to medieval England. Even if you don't buy into this neo-medieval perspective there's a good chance that you share their passion for a renewed sense of local community. If we develop a greater attachment to our neighbourhoods and the people who live there a stronger sense of community will ensue. But how do you go about it?

Some Solutions

Do nothing and hope for bad news

Negative as it may sound, nothing unites a community like a sense of shared adversity. It might be the threat of cuts or closures, it could be the announcement of plans to build an unwanted supermarket or wind farm in the area. As Elias Canetti once explained, a fire will unite the audience in a theatre more than a play ever can. Often you'll find successful local community groups that were formed originally in opposition to a shared local threat. It's important to recognize the extent to which an external threat can galvanize people in any given area and transform a latent community into a real community.

Do nothing and hope that the recession gets worse

There are others who suggest that as times get harder we'll be forced to experience a greater sense of community. This is interesting, and certainly contains undertones of a millenarian sense that what society really needs is an epic disaster. Then, in our post-Armageddon daze, we'll get back to basics and experience a renewed sense of community.

Create Narratives

But community does not have to be about straitened circumstances or resistance. There is always scope for a sense of community inspired by positive action. On the one hand this might involve a scheme or project attached to a narrative with genuine appeal. Just as communities form around a sense of resistance and solidarity they might be inspired by anything from guerrilla gardening to the introduction of a complementary currency.

Points and Prizes

Building on this, another strand within current thinking on community is the idea that community renewal can be achieved by offering incentives for good community behaviour. This might involve a points system whereby one good turn earns you social credit that can be redeemed at a later date.

Appeal to our Desire for Knowledge, Mastery, Society and Fun

But the idea of a social credit system is reductive, to say the least. Perhaps a better way of framing this is to talk about desire. It's important to ask what people hope to get out of their involvement in a community initiative. It seems that many of us want more than the burr of altruistic virtue or points. Instead we seek knowledge, mastery, society or just fun. It's important not to see any incongruity between the active desire for any of these and community renewal.

Government Intervention: Tax externalities, consider social returns

Another element of the discussion surrounding community renewal is the idea of taxing externalities with revenue being fed back into the local area. It could also be possible to offer subsidies to organizations or individuals whose services provide a social return. In other words, as we get to know more about the mechanics of community spirit – exactly where this occurs and how, who is responsible and the

positive effect it can have – we are better placed to nurture its constituent parts. These are just some of the ways that we may be able to renew community spirit.

An afterthought

Stronger Communities: How Strong is Too Strong?

Over the coming months and years we're going to hear a lot about 'stronger communities'. Try [googling](#) 'stronger communities group' and you'll see just how many committees and steering groups have already been set up along these lines. The notion of 'stronger communities' is at the heart of government rhetoric on localism and the Big Society. But has the idea of 'stronger communities' been thought through?

One of the most striking elements of our discussion was the divergence of views on the desirability of much stronger communities. Some villages, neighbourhoods or estates are already strong communities. Yet this does not stop them from being prison-like and hard to leave. In a strong community you may find that justice is communal and unchecked just as there are elements of social control that you would not associate with modern liberal values.

There is a danger with any government-led emphasis on 'stronger communities' that we end up empowering not just communities but the busy-bodies, curtain-twitchers and unelected 'community leaders' within. A stronger community is not always a better community. We need to strike a balance between the need for greater community cohesion and the core ideals of modern liberalism in which it will always be possible to opt out of your local community just as you can choose to opt in.

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