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Community, Locality and Social(ist) Transformation

Abstract

Community is elusive, desirable, rhetorical; something lost and something to be built; a relationship, a concept, a synonym, a place (real or imagined). This article explores the roles that the complexity of community's conceptualisation has played in the development of political identities, goals and rationales for action. Drawing on the ways in which it has been conceptualised and utilised in sociological, historical and political understandings of social change, and a series of interviews with members of British socialist organisations, I examine the relationship and equation between 'community', and 'location', 'local' and 'place' that develop as these terms become drawn into a wider project for social transformation. I argue that ideas of location have not only framed how community is operationalised to imagine and enact this transformation, but that location itself is conceptualised in multiple, equally complex ways through this association. Social change becomes relatable, an articulable experience of large-scale processes, of social problems, of power and resistance. Community is reified, and change is made possible through a sense of locality.

Keywords

activism, community, local, location, memory, place, political goals, projection, social change, socialism

Introduction

Community is a desirable but elusive place to inhabit. It is invoked in explanations of the loss of social bonds and identities; it is a solution to our social and personal problems if only we could regain or cultivate it (Bauman, 2001). It is at once tangible and intangible, variously – and often simultaneously – an experienced relationship of proximity or locality, and an imagined geography or ideal state of being. The idea that community *once was* and *could be* again, further complicates the term in an appeal not just to place but to time. Community can be constructed in memory, or can be an idea projected into the past and future. How the parameters of a community come to be formed and defined, and how a sense of belonging is bestowed or adopted, are thus longstanding questions for sociology. Our ability to understand its construction and meanings are hampered by both its popular sentimental appeal – 'Who does *not* wish to live in a 'community'?' (Crow and Allan, 1994) – and the variety of ways in which it is employed. Yet it is this same complexity that makes the term so important in understanding experiences of social, cultural and political change and continuity; in how groups articulate collective identities and social problems. This capacity, and the multiple meanings and sentiments attached to the term, have meant that 'community' also has political capital. Debates, policies and rhetoric, as well as the understandings that develop through political participation, rest on its appeals to collective identity and purpose, inclusion and exclusion.

Both the sociological and political potential of community lie in how its experience is defined and narrated. Exploring the relationship between the different, often overlapping ways in which the term has been treated as a place, an experience, an identity and an ideal, can help us to understand its role as a form of social critique and analysis, a hopeful vision, and an articulation of experience. In 2009-10, I undertook a series of interviews with members of British socialist organisations, exploring the influences and experiences of those who were actively engaged in working towards social transformation. Within these narratives, allusions and appeals to 'community' played a decisive role in activists' reflections on the role of both geographically localised activity in how they conceptualised their collective identity as a political group, and the importance of the idea(l) of community in the development of an ideological position. This article explores what happens to the concept and practice of community – how it comes to be approached, appropriated and utilised; its roles and purposes – when it is drawn into an active project for social transformation. The everyday merges with ideological concerns, forming reflections that combine an understanding of experienced sociality, with a desire for an as yet unaccomplished social change. A remembered or imagined sense of lost community, and the radical potential of community spaces, establish the parameters of political achievement. In examining how these relationships of place, time and identity interact, these interviews highlight how employing 'community' in political practice helps activists to narrate, embody and reify an understanding of the past and future trajectories of their movement, and to provide a rationale for political action in the present.

Community and Social Transformation

The meaning of community has, historically, varied: its applications and appropriations creating distinctions between, and responding to, the development of different forms of social organisation and relationships over time. So too, sociological approaches to community have found varying forms of expression, underpinned by a tension between, or an attempt to reconcile, competing or overlapping responses and understandings. As Raymond Williams (1976: 75) notes, the term has evolved in part, in a complex interplay with the much broader *society*. From the 19th century, it was used to distinguish 'direct relationships' from 'organised establishment'; 'immediacy and locality... in the context of larger and more complex industrial societies'. From its earliest days, sociology had a complicated relationship with the concept. As Bonnett (2010) notes, the idea of a lost solidarity or authenticity to social relationships, measured with a 'political unease' with the social, economic and political processes of modernity, underpins the work of early theorists. It is present not only in Tönnies' famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, but in the implications of Weber's 'disenchantment', or Marx's desired 'return of man into himself'. This notion of a lost, more intimate or communal sociality implicated the present state of social life in a complex relationship with the past and future through the imagined, the feared and the hoped for (see also Turner, 1987).

'Community' is often viewed as a nostalgic concept, 'an affective yearning... with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world' (Boym, 2001: xiv). The potential to romanticise, to construct a concept of community that defines it as an 'unequivocal good' or in some way equates the term with a desirably more 'organic' form of social organisation (Joseph, 2002: vii), highlights the centrality of the imagination – and its finite capacities – in how we have long considered its conceptualisation and practice. It acts as a mnemonic device that constructs both 'a suitable past and a believable future' to ensure a sense of continuity (Misztal, 2003: 17); 'a resource and a repository of meaning' (Cohen, 1985: 118); a shared image of 'communion' even where its members do not directly know one another or have had quite different lived experiences (Anderson, 1983: 6). The community imaginary in this sense, involves the appropriation and deployment of memory and projection, and an engagement with short- and long-term frameworks of understanding and experience. It is framed and shaped in terms that make it relatable, knowable and affective. In this vein, some conceptualisations have emphasised the 'elective', participatory aspects of community founded in shared biographical details and lifestyle choices (Savage *et al*, 2005). It is viewed as forming in multiple, dynamic, continually developing and adapting spheres or networks of social interaction (Calhoun, 1998; Pahl and Spencer, 2004), or constituting a 'nexus of stories' that connect the personal to the communal (Morgan, 2008).

While we may consider that all communities are to an extent imagined, in their attempted enactment they become territorialised in a number of different ways. Indeed, one of the most prominent ways of understanding community for sociology has been the 'community study'. This approach has a complex history, falling in and out of favour at different points over the past 60 years for its tendency to focus in detail on individual and *localised* sites (see Crow, 2002). Studdert and Walkerdine (2016) argue that community's conflation with terms such as 'location' have led to a definitional 'gridlock' that comes to replace or stunt any interrogation of community's deeper conceptual development. It is a conceptualisation that they outline as requiring an understanding of the relational nature of sociality (2016: 618):

'who' we are, our being-ness, is the outcome of constant sociality enacted in common and created and sustained in common through the inter-relational linking of action, materiality, subjectivity, speech and the world of accepted meanings.

Acknowledging the limitations of equating 'community' with terms that limit or set its parameters artificially, in academic research as well as public and political life, is important. However, in examining the field of community studies, there are multiple aspects of this relationality (or at least the principle of it) that do not preclude the use of location or locality, but rather embrace it as precisely a *relational* term. The use of localised sites is not viewed as limiting by those who use and develop the community study framework, but rather as one through which we can explore the impact and reproduction of macro-social processes in

localised, everyday activities – their lived experience (Frankenberg, 1990). These sites are argued to foreground the wider ‘lines of division’ – of class, gender or nationality – that manifest in interpersonal and localised relationships (MacDonald *et al*, 2005). Moreover, this field has seen a recent revival due to the perceived potential of the community *re-study*¹. The ability to re-study and develop on former sites of research has been viewed as a further way to gain insight into how, *over time*, the lines of division shift; how the structure of a community and its sense of collective self-identity are changing within the broader social, political and cultural environment (Phillipson, 2012; for a good example see Lyon and Crow, 2012). The process of revisiting opens up the time-frame, making communities an important point of reference in researching processes of change and continuity. It allows researchers to be more reflexive, with the potential to cast doubt on or improve existing knowledge about places and social groups (see Lassiter *et al*, 2004), and to be wary of how the parameters of a community come to be delineated and defined (Pahl, 2005).

Beyond attempts to study community itself, the term has been utilised elsewhere, with similarly complex relationships between locality and social change. Where early sociologists reflecting on the impact of industrialisation invoked often idealised forms of past communality, those exploring the more recent and ongoing *loss* of industrial production and cultures have been keen to examine ‘community’ in relation to new largescale social transformations of production, capitalism and identity. Linkon and Russo’s (2002) study of the loss of the steelmaking industry in Youngstown in the US for example, draws on Bellah *et al*’s (1985: 153) term ‘community of memory’: a ‘real community...one that does not forget its past’ and thus forges a strong identity and a shared vision for the future. To Linkon and Russo, for those feeling the loss of the industries around which their sense of collective identity developed, understandings of place, memory and community become intertwined. This is not only in the threat to established structures of sociality or a yearning for past certainties, but in the realities of the inclusion and exclusion that community entails. In examining Youngstown, they highlight the development of ‘separate and conflicting communities of memory... differences of class and race... of how to relate the past to the future’ (2002: 4). The divisions within and between communities that are brought to the fore when the future of a locality is in question here highlight the complexity of identifying and defining the parameters of collective identities and the ‘constitutive narratives’ that tie identities to places.

Alice Mah (2012) has spoken of the ‘positive potentials of place’ in her work on communities impacted by processes of deindustrialisation. Interested in the ‘legacies’ left by periods and processes of social change, she focuses on the ‘landscapes’ left behind, and the ‘living memory’ of place in the development of a sense of belonging. From the social conditions created in such shifts, Mah raises the possibility of enacting social change – to shape local politics, maintain cultural heritage and identity, and to collaborate in regenerative projects. In viewing the potential of place as a relationship between ‘how people manage their current situations’ and what they ‘will fight for’ (2012: 178), her approach raises questions about not just the dynamic between social change and its localised experience, but

the roles of memory and the future-oriented imagination in exploring and even determining the perceived trajectory of a community. In each of these works, 'community' is both localised in its treatment and existential in its implications; involved in a battle for memory, recognition and belonging in the present, and for the future. What these cases also highlight is how the multifaceted meanings applied to the term have been important in conceiving not just the experience of social change, but the active struggle for and against it.

Community, Locality and the Struggle for Socialism

For Bonnett, the same desires that modernity's perceived problems inspired within early sociology are also the 'source of socialism's most basic hopes': the goal of a 'reintegration of life and labour', achieved in the 'ethos of comradely struggle' (2010: 29)². Whether implicitly or explicitly, theorists on the left have often looked hopefully to ideas, practices and ideals of (or treated as synonymous with) community. Among the most well-known relationships between community and political action is the position and vision of the New Left in the 1960s. Developing partly as a response to new forms of direct action and participation in political activism, the New Left drew directly on the concept and practice of community in their desire for the forms of democratic participation they envisioned as central to building and enacting socialism. This 'prefigurative politics' sought to embed and embody political structure and methods in personal and everyday relationships and interactions, and in the process forge new 'counter-institutional' infrastructures in opposition to both the institutions of the state and of established political organisation (see Breines, 1989). This approach epitomised and politicised the distinction between *community* and *society* in its conception and its method, seeing the oppositional potential of the former against the latter.

In the questions and criticisms that it would attract, this approach also came to epitomise a number of problems that this distinction throws up. A 'hang-loose ideology' as Gitlin (1980) puts it, developed in diverse localised arenas, created complicated structures of accountability and inclusion – problematised further by a mass-mediated political environment that demanded (and presented regardless) a clear message, identity and aims. For Westergaard, the assumption that a radical consciousness could be developed through localised relationships represented the 'antithesis' of *class* solidarity (1965: 107); of that which 'involves identification with, a recognition of common interests with, workers in other situations' (Westergaard, 1975: 252). For Cockburn (1977), while the term 'community' had been adopted by many on the left by the 1970s, its relationship to the state as well as its utilisation across the political spectrum, rendered it problematic. 'Community' is often defined and shaped by the needs of the state – localising and limiting political responsibility for social problems created at state level³; presenting both problems and solutions as *classless*. Indeed, the language of *class struggle*, she argues, better reflects the relationships and problems of local life than the language of *community*.

The tensions between community and organisational needs/capacities is an issue that has been central to a much more recent revived interest in re-thinking the *idea* of communism beyond the experience of the twentieth century (see for example Badiou, 2010; Dean, 2012;

Douzinas and Žižek, 2010). This conceptualising project has developed alongside a series of works that firmly place socialist and communist struggles and ideals in a *community as location/place* discourse. This is often a speculative relationship but one with highly practical implications. David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* seeks to reconcile the desire for social change in a capitalist system with the fact of having to live in the very system one wants to transform. He notes the 'necessary limits to even the most vaunting of ambitions' built into the embedded and localised situation from where an alternative social and cultural infrastructure is imagined: 'where we can see it from... how far we can see... where we can learn it from?' (2000: 254). Substantive political change, he argues, must also arise out of this situation – in simultaneous and loosely co-ordinated shifts in thought and action in space and over time, building an 'insurgent architecture'. Architecture here acts both as a spatial metaphor and with a mind to the practicalities of negotiating and constructing socialism in place.

G.A. Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?* (2009) begins to examine similar questions in a short piece premised on the idea that the basis for a socialist society at large already exists in the co-operative and communal aspects of everyday social interactions. Cohen considers the underlying ethos of socialism as something familiar and routine, present in forms of co-operation that are already at work in smaller-scale social relationships. He uses the not unproblematic analogy of a camping trip to exemplify this, where being in such close quarters necessitates a co-operative spirit. In this sense, to Cohen, a new society built on these principles is not just philosophically but practically possible. The question for him remains how we can harness them on a larger scale. More substantively, Michael Hardt (2010) attempts to reconceptualise communism in terms once again reminiscent of those who position *community* in opposition to *society*. The 'common' in communism represents an autonomous communality and (drawing on Foucault) a new 'biopolitical' humanity that defies not only the laws of private property under capitalism, but what he laments about the notion of public property and the role of the state in many understandings of socialism. To reclaim the common, is to reclaim ourselves, our knowledge, the very language in which we speak, from capitalism's appropriation of them.

For Erik Olin Wright (2010) the more speculative aspects of the potential of community and the local are built in the practicalities and tangible aspects of already existent forms of organising. In his 'real utopias' project, community is invoked in the development of alternative forms of organising social and political institutions that have begun to 'rupture' with capitalism; to build an achievable cumulative social transformation; or to build sustainable alternative economic models. These are engaged at a localised level: participatory local budgeting, worker-owned co-operatives and citizen's assemblies. The 'social' in socialism, he contends, can be found in these alternatives that break from the active institutional reproduction of class division and capitalist power, and importantly, from the passive reproduction of power relations in everyday routine and habit.

Many of the ideas and actions that inspired the New Left in the 1960s remain undiminished with time or have made an active return. 21st century visions for transformation present similar concerns, questions and ideals that invoke 'community' for the purpose of

social change. Specifically, the role of community as bound up in a framework of locality as well as in an ideal, has been viewed as a platform for political action and ideological development, much as it is for developing a sociological understanding of social change. It ties the personal and political, and treats this tie as inherent in socialism and/or communism (depending on an author's definition of each). However, beyond academic studies and theoretical approaches, this relationship and the constructions of community that help shape and are shaped by it, have an active life too in the visions and work of activists. Activists do not just inspire political ideals to be studied, they attempt to enact them. Their understanding and uses of 'community' can shed light on the intersection of the term with locality, memory and ideology, with political rationales, and the lived experience of seeking social transformation.

Methodology

What follows is developed from a series of oral historical interviews with 34 members of British socialist organisations⁴, carried out between November 2009 and August 2010. The interviews explored how participants developed their political understanding, found motivation, their involvement in specific activities, and what they imagined they would be able to achieve. In a recent article (Nettleingham, 2015), I drew on this same set of interviews to explore how and why a specific event – the Miners' Strike of 1984-5 in the UK – had proved so predominant in the narratives of those who participated. This included a discussion of the role that community was perceived to have played in the event, and how and why it had come to be idealised and adopted by activists over time. However, the term played a much broader role in the interviews than can be conveyed through the remembering and imagining of just one event. As such, in this article I explore the centrality of its conceptualisation, experience and practical application to a much broader range of concerns. In these interviews, 'community' was most often treated as synonymous with 'locality'. Yet, locality itself was expressed in a number of different and highly conceptualised ways that both reflect trends within the works discussed above, and provide a valuable insight into community as a realm of experience, identity and desire. The analysis is broken down into two broad areas, the first addressing how an imagination for a community lost or to be found informed activist rationales for action in the present. In the second, it engages with participants' understanding of community as the place in which their action must and would be undertaken, its effects felt, and in which substantive social change could be achieved.

The Future of Communities Past

A desire for 'community' and an understanding that frames it as something lost and to be regained, abounds in the narratives. The participants articulated a positive hope of building community structures and the fusing of politics with everyday life. This is built according to what they imagine a socialist society to entail, and in how they are forced to engage the implementation and maintenance of the infrastructure of such a society. An active social and cultural life within a location-specific community structure is viewed as key to organising and

mobilising in the short- and long-term. Imagined in the invocation of historical precedents, how localised social relationships and day-to-day life would work come to dominate the extent to which an alternative is imagined.

John, a 25 year old communist student focuses on the frameworks established by the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) in Germany in the 1920s and 30s as a model through which to describe his vision:

my conception of revolution... is that the working class is so organised, so intellectually strong that it basically rules society already. So it just sort of comes together and says "We run things now" and that's the sort of thing we should be aspiring to... [the SPD] had its own football clubs, women's clubs, cinemas, theatres, and that's precisely the approach that we need. We need to become part of society to overthrow that society.

Like John, Neal, 40, a member of various organisations during his lifetime, believes that having this type of 'enormous culture that was essentially their own' embedded organisations such as the SPD within the communities they sought to represent, and helped to create new forms of communal belonging. This facilitates the 'double job' required of a political organisation as he describes it, fusing the desire to transform society with an acceptance that to do so the transformation must be patiently built over time. Most importantly, this kind of historical precedent acts not only as an example of something that has already been done but, as such, of something that could feasibly be achieved. It may be limited in scale but Neal argues it represents an ambitious project:

if you think about the money that there is in unions, labour groups and stuff – look at the potential... if we had in London, say four or five places you could go where we knew that actually these were places that were part of a network for the left... it would help to build up.

The use of historical precedent here though is about more than a fondness for the historical memory of a more stable or desirable past – being 'homesick for a home that one never had' (Boym 2001: xiii). These examples are drawn upon and appropriated to actively inform present action. It is the overlap between this community ideal and the experience of community life that makes the appropriation of historical models so important, and constructs both a vision for society and rationale for action. It simultaneously reflects both the social relations they hope to create and the reality in which they must act to bring it about. The narratives of the participants reflect and are reflexive about this relationship between the limitations of the field for action and the limitations placed on the imagination as they consider the realisability of their goals. Indeed, the prominence of such precedents is shown to derive from a conscious understanding of the limitations of place. Reimagining or attempting to revive a community infrastructure via past examples raises problematic issues for some participants who feel that a movement that tries to base itself in a community of any sort faces dangers where the traditional or historical forms that are referenced have

ceased to exist. For example Simon, a 25 year old local organiser for a socialist party, suggests that:

You don't have huge community sectors anymore, whereas I think in previous generations you could have had things like community centres from pubs to working men's clubs to, I don't know, local sports groups, and that sort of thing doesn't really exist to the same extent.⁵

These features are considered part and parcel of what was both essential to maintaining a sense of belonging, epitomised a common struggle, and are a model for what would be needed to maintain a much wider struggle today. In the absence of an established infrastructure lifelong communist Steve, 68, is concerned with how day-to-day life will be organised:

if we'll have a socialist society tomorrow, how do you get people to be involved in running things? How are people gonna run the local pub? And for me that's quite an interesting dilemma... The only way you can have a proper democracy is if things are publicly owned, but then it's important, how do the public, the masses of ordinary people, actually own and control things, and make decisions that are gonna affect them?

The process of how you create and manage a more desirable way of living and working cannot be led by historical referents alone then. Rather, these participants see it is something that is built, that is participatory, and that needs management. Community here works against, around or within *society* as it exists already, and in doing so aims to re-imagine the distinction between the two. Socialism is going to be the product of such a process, so where the sense of community that underpins it will come from is an important question. Conflicting ideas were expressed as to whether community *structures* such as clubs must emerge organically from a community as it exists, or whether community could be created via their construction. The role of political organisations working at a national level to either tie a loose aggregation of community activities together or to establish them was implied in this, but without further reflection on the tensions that this might present. There was instead more excitement and idealism about what community offered. Labour movement activist Catherine, 55, for example, views community as inherent in social life already. In a vein not dissimilar from G.A. Cohen, socialism to Catherine is found 'on the streets, in people's houses' and as such, this is where it must come from. Just as *community* is viewed as distinct from *society*, and indeed superior to it, so the socialism born of community relations can be greater than the capitalist society it opposes.

The Realisable Community, the Realisable Goal

Stories derived from a participant's own experiences of being embedded in an existing form of community life can be seen to influence the development of their political ideas in very

direct ways, and in how they come to frame success and failure. Carly, 38, who found it difficult to find a role within a single political organisation, describes it as a process of mediation between organisational structure and individual action. In her own life and work in a community as it already exists (or rather as she understands it), she has felt able to facilitate others in positive ways whilst sticking to her principles, and that this has the potential to alter the way society is structured:

each piece of work that I have done with a community, or a family, or a young person in crisis, which has involved engaging with state apparatus and community mechanisms... have embodied my practice and my beliefs every time

There is a sense of contentment to be found in localising what is achievable. There is also an interesting and self-identified gendered dynamic that emerges in her experiences. She frames her work in caring and women's advocacy roles as pitted against the masculinity of institutions of state; her actions against the tactics of established left-wing organisations. However, she also ties these relationships into a broader story of growing up in a male-dominated environment. Community here exists in opposition to the established 'boys' club' of the state and the left. Her actions are viewed as directly helping a community, and this is part of her overall vision for society:

I feel that I have managed my life as practice, so I feel happy with my lifestyle, my choices, my decisions, my attitudes, my approach. I feel that I have managed to integrate into the way I live my life, my policies, my beliefs, my values, at almost every step of the way within a capitalist framework... I have managed to do social activism on the front line as my career, my profession. I have never sold out.

Carly is able to take personal ownership of socialist principles through attempting to act locally and embody an ideology within the confines of her existing circumstances. Acting within a 'community' setting provides a sense of hope and possibility in and of itself, and drawn from this can also be a broader sense of purpose. A couple of stories by other participants highlighted this further. George, 55, a member of his party for more than 30 years, notes how a sense of community was particularly important in the fight for social housing in his area. The action that he and others took is felt to be an achievement of unity despite a lack of success overall (the houses were all lost to private landlords). This sentiment continues with another story from George:

The old hospital was due to be run right down... we ran another huge campaign against the management argument which was to concentrate services, and they came up with all sorts of weird and wonderful arguments for that. But we managed to win that argument, and I think just to spite us they then named the hospital the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother hospital. But in a sense we still know it's ours, we still know we

defended it. Now, it's probably gonna have to be defended again with the new government's privatisation plans.

The feeling of ownership and the empowering nature of achievement that it represents both prop up George's understanding of what it is to make such defences, and are an on-going concern for the future. Here, maintaining the gains made through earlier successes is as important as making new gains, and perhaps even establishes a way of feeling the positive impact of a gain against every new threat. This is not the achievement of a desired social transformation, but action that holds back a very different transformation of a localised communal amenity and identity.

When speaking about what he felt he had achieved Steve proceeded to tell a story about a car park:

I'm a member of an advisory committee for a local common that's just up the road here. We had a sub-committee that I was on – this is all very parochial – looking at car parking on the common... Wandsworth Council introduced car parking zones where people now pay to park. People then started to park at the car park on the common 'cause it's free, and they used it as a commuter car park... we felt that you know, the car park on the common, rightly or wrongly, was for use for people that were using the common.

In a discussion which had engaged in ideas about his life experience and role as a communist and his vision for what could be, when asked about his own achievements Steve chose to talk about this. By his own admission it is 'parochial', particularly when compared to other actions noted later on in his narrative including having written a book, and having been smuggled in and out of Greece in the 1970s to rescue a political dissident. When considering his achievements, it was small gains made in a local setting that took precedence. Work in a 'community', to protect the common use of common land, provides something tangible to point to as an achievement, but also something that has had a lasting impact.

Socialist organiser Susie, 49, also describes this type of relationship with achievements tied to specific locations. Four years earlier, her local job centre was faced with closure, and then again two years later. In both cases, Susie and others from the local branch of her party 'organised around it and twice we've managed to keep that open.' This achievement is however, representative of far more than the status of a local job centre:

they're only little victories but nevertheless they are victories that people can see that are real. And instead of it being abstract... there's no point saying "Well what we need is a revolution" and "we won't need job centres in the end" – you can't say that. What you have to say to people is don't you think it's terrible that 1. Our services are going, and 2. People are going to be losing their jobs.

The movement will gain support if campaigns are visibly active and effective at a level which is both easy to understand and part of everyday life. As such, localised achievements are a way to build consciousness of wider social problems and class struggle *through* a relational sense of belonging, even where a proposed solution may not be widely accepted or understood.

Common to all descriptions of achievements made at the 'community' level is the direct involvement of people. Away from abstract or society-wide concepts of change, there exists a desire to either help people as individuals and groups, or to draw them towards one's wider aims through making it relatable. The limited nature of community is viewed as the realm in which things *can* be achieved, and as such when participants discussed their goals it is in the steps *towards* a goal, or that are the manifestation of an idea in practice. Given the scale of an ultimate goal such as replacing capitalism with socialism or communism, the ability to act locally is a valuable way for participants to achieve anything at all. A mass class struggle is by implication something for the more distant future, whereas community is both a way of helping it along and making a substantive difference in the now. The discrepancy of scale between the activist and the battle they wish to undertake is not lost on the participants. As Greg, 43, a former organiser for a now disbanded anti-capitalist organisation reiterates:

as Marx says, we make history but not in circumstances of our own choosing, so those circumstances dictate quite a lot of what happens.

Most accept that the changes they are making are just steps along the way. The achievements they describe, whether considered large or small scale, personal or organisational, are the tangible markers of their ideological aims, enacted in specific places and the conditions in which they find themselves. As retired trade union activist Paula, 62, suggests, the very best and very worst moments tend to be the ones that are remembered; become the benchmarks for action, 'because they're more concrete and time specific'. In this sense, while the potential field for action is limited, achievements in this field come to signify the scope of what activists want to, and believe they might be able to do. The necessity of working at a local level in turn necessitates the need to feel part of a community, and the desire to broaden it.

Discussion

What the narratives of the participants present here is a form of political participation and understanding that works at a number of levels. A collective cultural memory (of the SPD's activities, of working men's clubs) informs and frames what is seen as desirable and possible, but further reflects the perceived loss of a former way of life. The concept and practice of 'community' lies at the heart of this. It remains in many ways a 'mnemonic' community, but one which is based not in concrete relationships of experience, but where memory acts to make the communities of the past and future more tangible. Indeed, the forms of sociality that they would like to see are often projected from the past into the future, with *community*

again being viewed as the solution to solving the obstructions presented by *society*. It involves an imagining that *locates* the future in the tangibility of place, and this helps to reify that which cannot yet be real. In doing so, the connection between community and locality both limits what can be imagined as possible, while providing the basis for action towards what is desired.

The limited scope of localised action in the present places emphasis on possibility, foregrounding the importance of personal, relational and small-scale forms of political action and sociality. In envisioning both the product and process of social change simultaneously, political actors rely on community being both ideal and tangibly located to frame the action they can or should take. That many of the elective aspects of community belonging are deferred into a desired future participation, doesn't just highlight a perceived lack of what would make large-scale transformation and a mass-mobilised class struggle possible under current conditions. They also indicate a desire to create (or re-create) forms of sociality and communal being. This is sometimes positioned in a *community vs society* narrative, sometimes as specifically against existing organisational structures of state or party (as can also be seen in the concepts of 'prefigurative' politics in the 1960s or the 'commons' more recently). *Class* is not made distinct from *community* in the struggle, and if anything, participants viewed community as a way of including rather than excluding; of seeing the wider fight embedded in locality rather than abstracted in rhetoric. Through acts viewed as steps along the path to social transformation, the reproduction of a social and cultural community in both a short-term organisational and localised setting and long-term societal setting becomes a key aim of the ideological project. They describe the impact of social, political and historical change on the communities that once were, and the role of 'community' in enacting or attempting to enact social change, as a negotiation of imagination and localised experience; ideal and necessity.

The complexity of the spatio-temporal relationships drawn upon here in the conceptualisation of community's roles and meanings, highlights the importance of understanding community in the terms in which it is narrated and articulated. Community is not bound by its equation with *location*. Rather, in the various and multifaceted ways in which locality is also conceptualised, and in how place and time are negotiated, location is an essential part of the inherent critical capacity of the idea and practice of it. Community becomes a relatable expression and manifestation of much broader and abstracted processes of social change. To paraphrase Harvey (2000), is it from where we are able to see the transformation to come and from where we begin, or perhaps begin again. It allows the articulation of the lived experience of these processes, of social problems, of power and resistance. Community is reified through a sense of locality, their equation articulating personal connections to the past that inform relational and communal identities in the present.

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¹ The work of Ronnie Frankenberg has been particularly important to the revival of the community study, with *The Sociological Review* producing a *Festschrift* to him in 2005: Vol. 53, Issue 4. A further special issue of *The Sociological Review* dedicated to the re-study appeared in 2012: Vol. 60, Issue 3.

² Indeed, if we examine the projects of the 19th century 'utopian socialists' for example, we see a blurring of the distinction between early socialism and early sociology in their articulation and establishment of experimental communities aimed at an immediate and affective social transformation (see Levitas, 1990).

³ Echoes of this can be seen in the 'Big Society' (read: Small State) agenda of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010-15, where responsibility for public services was devolved to charities,

local organisations and councils (see Featherstone *et al*, 2012). One key difference being that here 'society' becomes more synonymous with 'community' rather than in opposition to it, expressing altered conceptualisations of the 'state' in the period in which it was attempted.

⁴ Current or former members of the Communist Party of Britain, Communist Party of Great Britain (PCC), Globalise Resistance, International Socialists, Socialist Alliance, Socialist Party of England and Wales, Socialist Workers Party. In the text, I have not directly attributed party affiliation to participants and have replaced real names with pseudonyms. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 68 (individual ages are indicated), with 19 identifying as men and 15 as women. Class identity was articulated through the adherence of all participants to working-class struggle rather than personal class status.

⁵ This quote is reproduced from another article drawn from this research (Nettleingham, 2015) where it acts as representative of how the ideal of community is enacted in the collective activist memory and ideological appropriation of the Miners' Strike of 1984-5 in the UK.