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[Bekin, C., Carrigan, M. and Szmigin, I. (2007) "Communities and Consumption," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 27(3/4), pp. 101-105.]

Communities and consumption

The community concept has a long history and a prominent place in sociological thinking. However, the concept is also contentious and we have avoided any attempt to define it for the purposes of this editorial. Nevertheless, we feel a brief overview of some of its uses is relevant. Strath (2002) reviews the history of the community concept and argues that it can be traced back to ancient Greece, where "community" and "society" were used interchangeably. He suggests that it was only in the 19th century that community and society began to be used as counter-concepts and to play a crucial role in shaping the social sciences (Strath, 2002; Jacobs, 2002). The community concept is indeed entwined in the works of the most prominent Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment intellectuals, from Kant to Hegel, to Marx, to Durkheim and Tönnies, Weber and Simmel. And in the continued process of defining and re-defining these scholars' key theories, even more attention has been drawn to "community" (Strath, 2002).

In the 20th century, economic and social changes challenged traditional social concepts and organisations (Jacobs, 2002). Arguably, some of the main thoughts on community (and society) in the early 20th century came from the Chicago School of urban sociology. According to Castells (2002/2000), they were dealing with one of the main issues of American society at the time, namely a collective of competitive and diverse individuals and communities trying to survive in large urban areas. Despite his divergence with the Chicago School, Castells (2002/2000) suggests they made a sound contribution to knowledge on the formation processes of a new society geographically organised in the large urban areas of their time. He proposes that in the 1960s and 1970s the community, social and urban issues in America were different from those that fomented the Chicago School, and suggests that rather than social and cultural integration it was the struggle over control and orientation that were the new issues of a rising urban-industrial society. New social movements were constantly emerging, challenging notions of industrialisation, development and economic growth, and calling for a renewed relationship between humans and nature. Gender and diversity were key issues, and so was state intervention in individuals' lives (Castells, 2002/2000).

Jacobs (2002) further argues that at the time there was much opposition to US state intervention in community affairs. This was reflected in some of the research that followed and on the "community empowerment" discourse of the US political agenda, as a means to make local urban communities fend for themselves and be less dependent on state welfare (Jacobs, 2002). We feel this is a relevant piece of historical discourse, particularly at a time in which localisation and community empowerment is advocated as two of the varied strategies for sustainable development in developed societies. This thus leaves one to wonder whether current localisation and community empowerment efforts are also a means to pass on the responsibility for systemic issues from the realm of the state and markets to the individual level, including the responsibility for "externality" issues regarding production and consumption.

Castells (2002/2000) also argues that the social sciences have remained quiet since the last years of the 20th century, and that urban sociology needs to follow "new" routes for theorisation on the information technology era. In his view, these routes are based on inherent aspects of a networked society which include the co-existence of, and increasing conflicts between the global and the local, individualism (meanings enclosed in the representations, projects and interests of individuals) and communalism (the meanings enclosed in a shared identity, buttressed by a system of shared beliefs and values), and between the "space of flows" (space electronically connecting geographically distant places in a network linking individuals and activities) and the "space of places" (space organising individuals and activities based on locale), all highly influenced by virtual networks of communication as well as physical interaction. Hopefully this special will fill a few of these gaps.

Once again, argues Castells, the social integration issue, alongside other recurrent concerns and social movements, have come to the fore – although under new circumstances. For example, he suggests that while "in the early twentieth century the quest was for assimilation of urban subcultures into the urban culture", "in the early twenty-first century the challenge is the sharing of the city by irreversibly distinct cultures and identities" (Castells, 2002/2000, p. 398). He argues that in this age of pluralism and fragmentation, the question is no longer how to share a dominant culture and code, but how to make multiple codes communicable – hence the importance of information technology and virtual communities, as well as of communities in which ties are fomented through common codes and interests.

Castells's view that the social sciences have remained quiet since the last years of the 20th century counters Jacobs's (2002) arguments about the social sciences having generated new knowledge on new social realities. Jacobs (2002) suggests that recent research has generated a body of knowledge on urban change and the complex issues faced by local communities, which in turn have framed the emergence of what Jacobs (2002, p. 2385) calls a New Political Culture (NPC); a culture concerned with the natural environment as well as more individualistic issues such as "citizen democracy, gay rights, abortion and lifestyle politics". This seems consistent, however, with Castells's views on the co-existence of the local and the global; the individualised and the communal. It also seems coherent with Micheletti's (2003) notion of "individualised collective action" through consumption, in which individuals keep their sense of individualism while also striving for collective action. According to Jacobs (2002, p. 2385), this NPC of post industrialist societies challenges traditional and hierarchical politics, is more interested in single issue politics advanced by varied and diverse groups, is concerned with "responsive forms of local democracy" and is sceptical of bureaucratic processes. Jacobs argues that this NPC is reflective of societies where citizens have become highly educated, with higher incomes, and service occupations linked to technological advances; technologies which in turn facilitate more opportunities for communications and networking (also in line with Castells, 2002/2000). Indeed, these views seem consistent with discourses on the increasingly affluent and sophisticated consumer (Titus and Bradford, 1996), who facilitated by technological advances and the Internet have arguably become more knowledgeable of corporate behaviour and production practices. This in turn is seen as conducive of much consumer resistance; the Internet once again playing a central role in information dissemination and connection between interested consumers (Szmigin *et al.*, forthcoming). Consumer resistance, which can be viewed as political

(Micheletti, 2003; Dickinson and Carsky, 2005), has also become more fragmented, and despite its concerns with systemic issues usually linked to global production practices, it normally seeks to act at a localised level thus creating scope for community formation (Szmigin *et al.*, forthcoming).

The above discussion reflects the plethora of meanings, definitions and issues associated with the community concept. Discourses on community have addressed communities of practice (Goode, 1969; Greer, 1969; Wenger, 2002), communities of interest (Rose, 1996), epistemic communities (Cinquegrani, 2002), virtual communities (Jones, 1995), hybrid communities (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999), imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), consumption and brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Cova, 1997; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and even alternative consumption communities (Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003; Kozinets, 2002). It seems obvious that (non-) consumption should form a base for postmodern communal ties given the current relevance of consumption and material accumulation in developed societies.

This special issue echoes the wide-ranging notions of community explored above by bringing together six diverse perspectives on community and consumption. Specifically, it addresses issues of community through consumer resistance and alternative consumption, home-confinement, queer consumption, political consumption, and discourses of national identity mediated through media and sports consumption.

The first paper is by Paul Hewer and Douglas Brownlie. In "Cultures of consumption of car aficionados: aesthetics and consumption communities", the authors explore online communities of consumers connected by "debadging", a bricolage practice concerning "stripping down" or "cleaning up" brand insignias and signs from their cars. Through an exploratory netnographic research, the authors analyse consumers' discourses on car customisation, and reveal the social connectivity developed via internet discussion boards. Paradoxical discourses of resistance to commodity culture but not to car consumption are evident, as are exchanges of advice and information on how to "debadge". In addition to providing a "linking value" (Cova, 1997) to consumers, debadging and the specific virtual community in their study allow for the expression of car aficionados' love of cars, as well as an appreciation of the importance of aesthetics in debadging practices. This has led the authors to conceptualise such consumers as designers, and the discussion boards as crucial reference points. Such a comparison arguably blurs the line between producer and consumer roles, an aspect that also emerges through Gill Seyfang's paper.

In "Growing sustainable consumption communities: the case of local organic food networks", Gill Seyfang fills an empirical research gap in the area of community action for sustainable development. She develops an innovative and evaluative framework based on the New Economics theory of sustainable development and applies it to a case study of a local organic food co-operative. The research found that local organic food networks can provide an opportunity for consumers to join with others in building alternatives to mainstream food producers. Nevertheless there are a number of obstacles to further development, mainly financial but also in terms of raising the public's awareness of environmental issues around food.

The theme of shopping as community action is continued in Deirdre Shaw's paper "Consumer voters in imagined communities". Here the political context of shopping is introduced, where the choice to buy or not is compared to voting. Such consumer voters operate within a communal context where they feel part of an imagined community of like minded people even if their actions are individually organised. Consumption here was expressed by participants in terms of voting, leading the author to suggest a consumption-as-voting metaphor. The problem, as has been previously highlighted by Heertz (2001), is whether shopping can or should be a credible alternative to political action.

Notwithstanding, the politicised turn to the imagined community topic is further developed by John Harris in "*Cool Cymru*, rugby union and an imagined community". Harris critically conceptualises the Welsh nation as an imagined community, and fundamentally problematises notions of Welshness. In his paper, images of a unified, "cool" Wales as popularised through the nation's currently leading music bands are questioned, and the role of rugby in the process of perpetuating these images is critically scrutinised. This is achieved through a focus on discourse, geography, the creation and celebration of the sporting "metrosexual" celebrity, and issues of gender. As put by Harris himself, "common characteristics are taken to signify and identify any particular community", so his focus on the de-unifying aspects of Wales and Welshness threatens the very existence of a community concept.

Similarly, Peter Lugosi's paper entitled "Queer consumption and commercial hospitality: *communitas*, myths and the production of liminoid space" highlights the limitations of the concept of community when looking at gay consumption in hospitality venues and in turn challenges the use of the term community more generally. Community here is an ideological construct and the author seeks to develop a framework that helps to understand the processes of reproducing ideological assumptions about the gay community within the context of hospitality spaces. Important to this discussion is an understanding of the consumer experience and ideological assumptions underlying the construction of this experience. To develop this understanding, the author's conceptual paper synthesises three theoretical strands; concepts of the liminoid and *communitas*, conceptions of myth and mythmaking, and spatial dialectic in the production of material, abstract and symbolic space.

Finally, another notion of community is explored in "Autopoiesis and the home-confined consumer: the role of personal communities". In their paper, Hilary Downey and Miriam Catterall examine the consumption of home-confined consumers through their "personal communities". A radical constructivist longitudinal approach is employed, and findings suggest that personal communities enable the home-confined consumers case-studied in this paper to achieve a sense of individuality, self-identity, independence and creativity, regardless of any marginalisation they may experience in other social and market contexts.

Together these papers reflect the diversity of current research on community and consumption, which hopefully will foster further exploration and debate on the contentious theme of community and rich field of consumer research.

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