

# Elements of a theory of local community

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July 11, 2023

## Abstract

This essay reflects on why local communities continue to exist and spread. Why does the planet not become one place without borders? Why instead do we humans preferentially group ourselves into communities that are neither “too wide” nor “too narrow”? What connotes today’s form of community? Why do these communities take root in places? Why, finally, do local communities constitute a “sufficient causes” for socio-economic development? The answer to these questions is drawn from multiple strands of literature, attempting to make coherent arguments that complement each other.

Keywords: Local development, Damon Centola, Complex contagions, Community, Social distance-reducing signals, Collective action, Fundamental cause

## 1. Introduction

This short paper is theoretical in nature and asks what are the “fundamental causes” that make possible the competitive advantages of a local economic system. It is well known, in the literatures of development economics and regional studies, what the “proximate causes” are: those which, while explaining a phenomenon, in turn require to be explained. Let us remember this in two schematizations. The first, represented in Figure 1, is due to Roberta Capello (2015, 262). Along the rows we find the advantages in terms of costs and dynamic efficiency, while along the columns we identify spatial, socio-cultural and industrial factors.

	<b>Spatial proximity</b>	<b>Social and cultural proximity</b>	<b>Small business concentration</b>	<b>Industrial specialization</b>
<b>Reduction of production costs</b>	Reduced transport costs of intermediate goods	Structure of local agents Use of external labor (homework) Outsourcing stages of production	Production flexibility	Availability of specialized manpower Interindustrial division of labour
<b>Reduction of transaction costs</b>	Job offer/demand meeting Large local market upstream and downstream	Networks of interpersonal relationships System of institutions and shared rules Common code of conduct Sense of belonging Capacity for explicit cooperation between actors informal contracts	Flexible, non-bureaucratized relationships between companies	Adequate technical knowledge for the choice of suppliers
<b>Increased efficiency of production factors</b>	Existence of a critical mass for specialized and infrastructural services Large market for specialized inputs	Widespread industrial culture Mobility of tacit information Widespread entrepreneurial know-how	Flexibility in quantity and quality of inputs in the production process	Information services aimed at sectors of specialization
<b>Increased innovative capacity (dynamic efficiency)</b>	Localized accumulation of knowledge	Socialization of the risk associated with the innovative activity Accumulation of common knowledge	Competitive stimulus to innovation	Accumulation of specific knowledge

Figure 1: The economic advantages of the district (rows) and their origin (columns)

Source: adapted from Capello (2015)

The other schematization, which, without any claim to exhaustiveness, we wish to mention, suggests that there are ultimately three reasons for the competitive advantage of local economic systems: 1. Those deriving from external economies; 2. Those involving the reduction of transaction costs; 3. Finally, those attributable to umbrella term of social capital. The first two connotations have been explored by droves of scholars since Marshall, and it is easy to refer to some classic contributions (Beccattini 2000, Boschma 2005, Dei Ottati 1995, Marshall 1932, Schmitz 1995). Point (3) constitutes the sociological approach: the concepts used are many (embeddedness, intersubjective trust, shared norms, relational goods, and so on), but the most inclusive category is that of “social capital” (Burt 2010, Trigilia 2005).

Whether we refer to the first, or the second, schematization of “proximate causes,” the question remains: what are the structural connotations that, behind the listed factors, explain the vitality and dynamism of a “place of development”? The answer we will argue is that that place constitutes a “local community”. But what, exactly, is this form of human organization? In the next few pages, the issue is articulated in three parts. First, what is community today, in the age of globalism and virtual reality? Second, why are communities persistent and widespread in human history, and why is this still the case in the midst of the 21st century? Finally, why communities have, in the form that remains crucial today, local roots? We will answer these questions by drawing on different streams of literature, trying to propose a coherent theoretical design.

## **2. For a theory of local community**

Economic development always occurs in precise and delimited social and cultural contexts: in local communities in which certain specific groups of people, firms and resources are reproduced. In this sense, development is local or it is not. To put it the other way around: there are no general trajectories of economic development, which are articulated and concretized in local trajectories; on the contrary, there are only local paths of development, which are practiced and studied one by one, and which can sometimes converge into unifying interpretive categories.

The main interpretive categories in this regard are two: place and the community of culture. “Place” is *situated life*, a space animated by meaningful social relations for those who inhabit it. Territory, and thus geographic contiguity, does not always characterize place: there may be places whose spatial dimension is not anchored to a concrete cutout on the earth, relating rather to imaginary, cognitive, digital spaces and so on. Territory is thus a special case of place: it occurs when the latter is manifested through physical proximity.

The “community of culture” is the modality that the community assumes today. Traditionally, the family and/or group of friends are elected as the ideal model of human coexistence, since they are based on spontaneous solidarity, concrete and affective ties, and harmonious social interaction. We call this ideal model “immediate community” and it is opposed to social structures resting on formal, impersonal and hierarchical relationships. As Figure 2 shows, community is a dense network of intimate social relationships organized around a single core of activity, such as the household or the village.

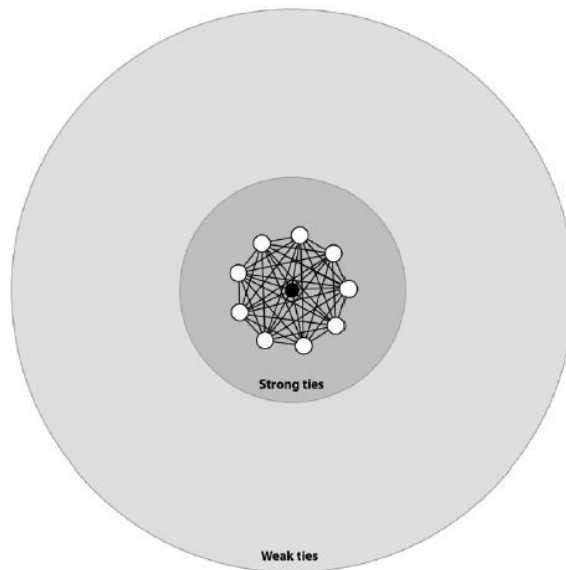


Figure 2: The so-called “immediate or traditional community”

Source: Hampton (2016, 106)

In the contemporary era of globalism, people cross political and geographical borders both virtually and physically, communicate through the ether, and, by traveling and migrating, make societies increasingly heterogeneous. We should therefore expect feelings of community to become anachronistic and should witness the decoupling between community and the actual basis of interpersonal relationships. Yet community remains more central than ever in our imagination, since it constitutes the only symbolic order capable of enhancing the characteristics that unite people, rather than those that divide them.

This enduring centrality cannot be maintained, in the age of globalism, with the “immediate community.” Instead, an alternative model, which we call “culture community,” asserts itself. It is based on a shared *ethos*: the identity of individuals is shaped by traditional group values, collective memory, and the commonality of a heritage of events and symbols. One of the major differences between the two meanings just referred to is that immediate community presupposes face-to-face relations, and thus applies to small groups such as precisely family members or friends, while the community of culture can be expressed by much larger and more articulated collective entities, such as social classes, peoples and nations (Pazé 2004, 7-9).

Today the “community of culture” indicates a social place whose perimeter – physical or symbolic – can be experienced directly by the subject in her daily activities. Therefore, in it the person, relative to other forms of collective organization, keeps under control, in quantity and quality,

the intersubjective relations she has, as well as the management of the resources necessary for the performance of social life. The perimeter of the community must be, for the subject, neither too large nor too small; but this dimension refers to the subjective capacity for control – expanded by knowledge and technology – over social nexus and resources, not to the numerosity of the population. It represents, as Figure 3 shows, that social *milieu* – broader than the notions of family and kinship; more inclusive, but also narrower, than the notions of society and state – that encompasses both proximity and similarity and distance and difference. In it the intermediate gradations of sociability – the more and less close interpersonal associations – are organized and can endure.

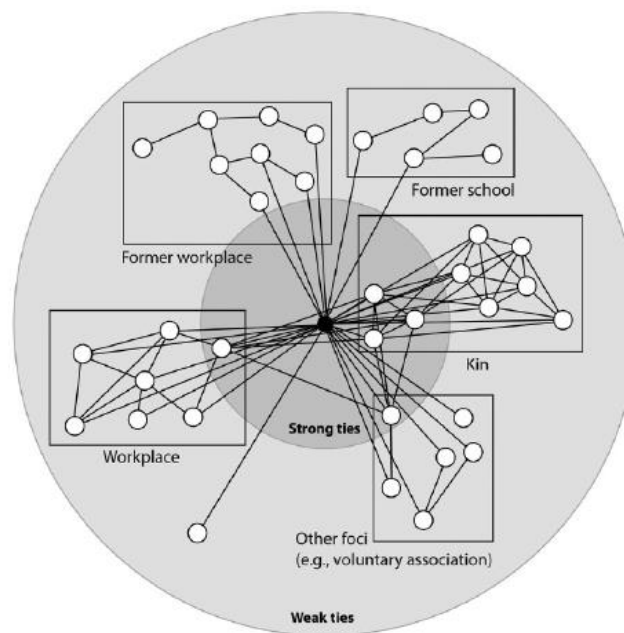


Figure 3: The actual shape of the contemporary “community of culture”

Source: Hampton (2016, 115)

The main structural feature of the “community of culture” concerns, as the expression itself suggests, the shared use, although not necessarily without conflicts, of a culture. Culture is the totality of practices that are meaningful to us, that is, it is the set of languages with which we interpret and modify our world. It expresses *irreducibly* collective benefits: in fact every language, in which culture is articulated, exists in so far as it is used by a group of speakers. But no one can speak alone, just as no one can play football alone. Both language and football are inherently social activities, constructed to involve multiple people. Today’s community is thus *a directly controllable social space in which culture is an irreducibly shared good*. Thus conceived, it constitutes the only viable path to

universalism. In fact, the subject's constitutive immersion in the community is the precondition for the subject to be able and willing to confront/discord with other subjects, seeking shared spaces.

Thus, in this paragraph we have defined "place" and "community". We must now examine why and how these two concepts interact in local development pathways, elaborating a theoretical framework of local community, that is, an explanation of why community places are still the foundation of economic development.

### **3. The enduring robustness of communities: three theoretical arguments**

We have noted that the local community constitutes a social mesolevel, between microgroups of the familial or clan type and macrogroups of the national-state or even cosmopolitan type. We have also argued that its enduring robustness lies in its ability to match – even in the age of globalism – closeness and similarity with distance and difference. These propositions, if we are not to stop at charming suggestions, must be backed up by theoretical arguments. Here we select three, which we expound along a sequence that proceeds, in our view, from least to most stringent.

We begin by asking why people – when they are able to make voluntary choices – enter and identify with a social group, or conversely abandon and repudiate it. More exactly, let us ask how large and how differentiated is the group to which people wish to enter. Social psychology, with Marilynn Brewer (1993; Leonardelli et al. 2010; Smaldino et al. 2012), answers that, under very general conditions, people prefer groups that are neither too large nor too small. The reason is that each of us cultivates as much a sense of belonging to some collective entity as we do a sense of distinction from that same entity. These are antithetical motivations, but one does not eliminate the other. Rather, each of us seeks the best way to balance them, selecting groups of intermediate size, which ensure sufficient similarity, inclusiveness, mutual monitoring and security; and which, at the same time, ensure adequate differentiation and thus also potential for autonomy and innovation.

The best "social identity" – a concept that evokes mutual recognition – is one that satisfies the need for inclusion within the in-group and accommodates the need for differentiation through the distinctions between the ingroup and the outgroup. However, compared to the size of the overall population, ingroups of intermediate size represent minorities. It follows, according to Brewer and colleagues, a counterintuitive implication: on the surface, everyone should find their own

convenience in “rowing with the flow”, in being on the side of most, in joining the majority; on the contrary, the need to balance assimilation and distinction makes the benefits of minorities prevail. This helps to clarify why the human world is always articulated in constellations of minorities, which in places take the form of communities, that is, why groups capable of collective action and mutualism never cover the entire population<sup>1</sup>.

The second argument helps elucidate a fundamental question: why the human world is not flat, but neither is it infinitely fragmented; that is, why is it populated by local communities, which unite *different people but not too much*? The coordination, and even cooperation, of humans does not stop at small and homogeneous groups, but neither does it reach the formation of a single planetary collectivity. Well, what allows the group to be enlarged and varied; and what at the same time prevents us from overcoming any limit of size and heterogeneity of the group itself? A simple and powerful answer invokes social distance-reducing signals (Leeson 2008).

As a well-established literature illustrates, social collaboration can arise from self-enforcing exchange, in all situations in which no one pays to defect (Carpenter and Robbett 2022, Chapter 7). But this form of exchange can only work when a small number of like-minded individuals are involved, for which the reputational mechanism of multilateral punishment applies: the group sanctions the one who defaults, being able to identify her and let everyone else know that she has defected. In contrast, multilateral punishment appears inadequate when there are many members of the community, as this increases the costs of monitoring, and when they are socially distant, that is, heterogeneous in terms of beliefs, values and tastes. In fact, social distance makes it more difficult to transmit information, which would make the sanctioning of opportunism effective, in two ways: by increasing the cost of communicating with others; and by increasing the difficulty of the convergence of group members on social norms, which establish what is meant by opportunism and how it should be sanctioned.

Social distance, or heterogeneity, is thus the extent to which individuals share beliefs, values and preferences. Although some dimensions of social distance, for example gender and ethnicity, are exogenously fixed for individuals, many others, for example religion, language and customs, are not. This means that, to a large extent, people can change their position in social space; and that social distance is, at least in part, a choice variable endogenously determined by the subjects themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The social psychology approach recalled here, differs profoundly from the one associated in recent years with “Dunbar’s number”. According to anthropologist Robin Dunbar, the volume of the primate neocortex, by limiting the ability to process information, influences the amount of stable social relationships – in which the identity of subjects and how they relate to each other is known – that can be entertained. However, many factors are involved in the processes of human socialization, making elastic the brain volume constraint on which Dunbar reductively focuses. See the critique by Lindenfors et al. (2021).

For example, members of one group may choose to adapt to the customs and practices of the other group by learning its language, adopting its religion or accepting its protocols for settling disputes. However, these adaptations require *costly commitments* that result in easily observable signals. They appear to be *credible* behaviors, in the eyes of the other group, the more their cost exceeds the benefit the first group could obtain by pretending once, that is, the more they represent profitable investments only in the long run. Through these signals, one group can credibly approach another group, facilitating social interactions and economic transactions.

In other words, in order for large and heterogeneous groups to come into contact, subjects need to adopt onerous strategies, through which they reliably signal *ex ante* their willingness to coordinate or cooperate. Since the cost of these strategies is feasible within a precise range – outside which it is too low to be credible, or too high to make collective action convenient – it follows that communities can expand and diversify (also) depending on the length of that interval. No human group can reproduce itself in the long run if it is too narrow and homogeneous – as, evolutionarily, it is shown to be incapable of meeting the challenges of change, in terms of quantity and quality of resources – but neither if it is too extensive and differentiated – as the costs of its organization would explode. We conclude from this that the enduring spread of local communities is not fortuitous, rooted rather in the needs and possibilities of primarily human collaboration.

The third argument builds on the analysis of collective action. As is well known, the Olson or cooperator's dilemma shows that it is in everyone's best interest not to pay the costs of cooperation, even assuming that the initiative corresponds to a goal common to all. This implies that no one participates in a collective action in which everyone would have an interest in everyone participating; but if no member of the group is inclined to cooperate, then the group as such does nothing to promote the purpose that all its members share. The main responses to this dilemma include incentives, threats of sanctions, and social norms that push people to voluntarily provide public goods. However, we are faced with answers that raise a "second-order social dilemma": the measures in question are nothing more than a new public good, which can only be obtained if its costs are sustained; but, with regard to these costs, the dilemma of the cooperator arises again, since each member of the group, being able to use the good for free, has no convenience in contributing (Bellanca 2007, Chapter One).

To address Olson's dilemma, a very extensive literature agrees on the thesis according to which there is a positive relationship between social cohesion and cooperation: the greater the cohesion, the greater the propensity to bear the costs of the public good. The main justification of this thesis concerns the possibility of sanctioning offenders: the frequency of interactions between group members increases the opportunities to apply sanctions. However, if we introduce the distinction between *the ability* and *the will* to effectively punish the opportunists, a contradictory tension



emerges: the same condition that facilitates the solution of the first-order dilemma can undermine the answer to the second-order dilemma, as the greater the social cohesion, the greater the difficulty in punishing someone with whom we are contiguous. If two subjects interact “too” intensely, they end up sharing values, behaviors and interests; it becomes difficult (very onerous) for one to hit the other, rigorously applying a sanction (Sabin and Reed-Tsochas 2020).

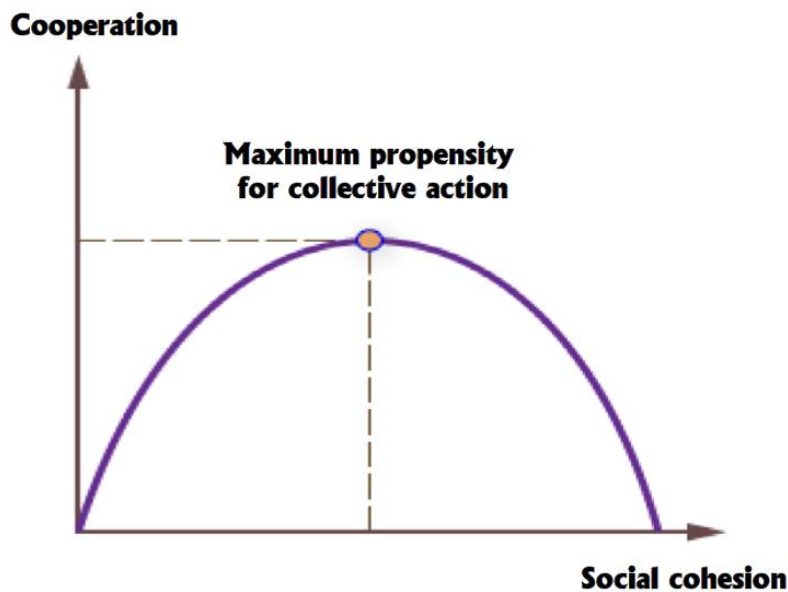


Figure 4: The trend of cooperation in relation to the level of social cohesion

As seen in Figure 4, the relationship between social cohesion and collective action can be represented by means of an inverted U-shaped curve, inspired by the famous Kuznets curve: by placing on the vertical Cartesian axis a measure of cooperation, and on the abscissa axis a measure of cohesion, as cohesion increases we see the increase of cooperation up to a maximum point, beyond which the latter begins to decline. In the upward slope of the curve, it is the ability to punish defectors that prevails, while in the downward slope a negative relationship between social cohesion and cooperation holds true, as the unwillingness to punish prevails, which the more it asserts itself, the more internal cohesion within the society increases. Thus, a society expresses the greatest propensity for collective action when it is neither too much nor too little cohesive, that is, when it is a community in the meaning we have ascribed to this term.

#### **4. The enduring robustness of *local* community: the cyclical alternation of wide and narrow bridges**

The three theoretical arguments so far converge in showing the reasons for today's relevance of the form-community. One step is still missing: why is the community of culture, in the age of globalism, rooted in some special places, which we can call "places of development"? In this regard, Damon Centola's contributions offer important elements of an answer. They make it possible to explore human societies not so much along the Big/Small, or Global/Local axis, but along the Liquid/Solid axis. A "solid society" – antithetical to a "liquid" one – is defined by the high correlation between the characteristics of its various networks. It functions as if each of its members belongs to a single network: since race, gender, level of income and wealth, residential location, occupational profile, religious beliefs, cultural level, and so on, proceed in the same way, society is organized through islands of segregation; those who have studied in the best schools are also those who hang out with the influential people, and are also one of the richest, and so on. It is enough to know where a person stands in one network to know where he stands in every other network (Centola 2015).

To examine how behaviors can spread, we distinguish between "simple contagion" and "complex contagion": the simple form occurs when the transmission of a behavior requires only contact between those who already adopt it and those who might adopt it, while the complex form involves exposure to a multiplicity of sources-not repeated exposure to the same source-that are mutually independent and mutually reinforcing. If, for example, Titius gets the flu from his son, it is superfluous for him also to be infected by his wife; if he hears news on the radio, he doesn't need to hear it on television too: in such cases he is undergoing simple contagions. For Titius, on the other hand, to adhere to a belief – accepting a social norm or a cultural practice – it is often decisive that he be infected in a complex way, that is, that the messages from his friends converge with those emanating from his religious preacher, his work colleagues, the political party for which he sympathizes, and so on. The personal "threshold" of complex contagion is defined as the number of activated contacts required to trigger its transmission (Centola 2018, 37).

Indeed, most of the innovations initially appear to be not very credible and very risky. Moreover, not a few among them require use, normative acceptance, and emotional adherence by multiple parties or groups to activate, i.e., the success of some form of coordination. These are all problems whose severity explains why, when faced with the possibility of a belief change, people tend to resist. An already acquired belief can change only if a convergent plurality of sources intervenes. While, therefore, simple contagion is sufficient to receive information or to change an opinion, it is almost always inadequate to shape beliefs that are relevant in social life.

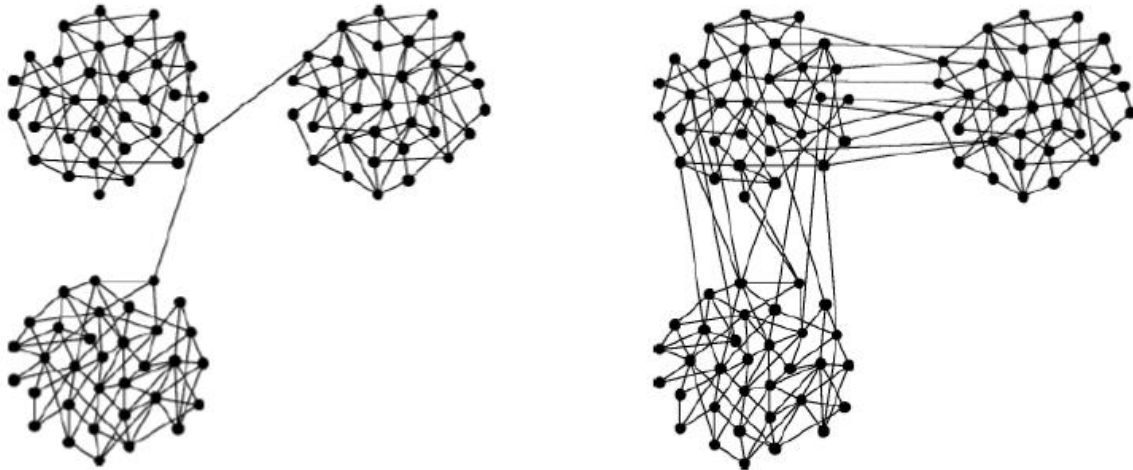


Figure 5: Narrow bridges (left) and wide bridges (right) in social networks.

Source: Centola (2021)

As Figure 5 shows, simple contagion (of information and opinions), in order to spread effectively, needs “long and narrow bridges” (the “weak links” of Granovetter 1973), where the “bridge” connects otherwise disconnected components, and its “length” manages to connect actors and networks with different characteristics. Complex contagion (concerning beliefs), rather, requires “wide bridges” in order to activate multiple contacts (Centola and Macy 2007). Indeed, a wide bridge engages one group of people in relationships with members of another group through multiple overlapping connections. It is “large” not in terms of capacity, but in terms of redundancy: it allows those on either side of it to hear the opinions and recommendations of multiple stakeholders, especially peers and colleagues, and to discuss and debate ideas with them. The wider it is, the stronger the ties are. The decisive aspect is not territorial proximity: «while physical proximity can make the connection *relationally* strong, it is the width of the bridge that makes the connection *structurally* strong for the propagation of complex contagions» (Centola 2018, 46).

The phenomenon of contagion is decisive, because without it, apart from exogenous traumas, the opinions and beliefs of a society would remain unchanged indefinitely. Well, a perfectly solid society would block the form of simple contagion: in fact, if the subjects were distributed within “too” overlapping networks, few “long bridges” would form, capable of connecting different networks to favor simple contagion. On the other hand, a perfectly liquid society would block the form of complex contagion: in fact, if the subjects were placed within “too little” overlapping networks, few “wide bridges” would emerge, capable of favoring the complex contagion.

The same requirement can be presented in terms of the coexistence of similarity and diversity among the nodes of the social network. Indeed, in order for the complex contagions of new ideas and new behaviors to spread, neither similarity nor diversity alone is enough (Centola 2021, 164-66). Similarity (or homophily) promotes social reinforcement: subjects become convinced of a change if it is adopted by people similar to them. Similarity also promotes emotional involvement: a subject feels more solidarity with those who appear to her to belong to the same world. But change also requires diversity: to accept the abandonment of an established norm, perhaps one that is still functioning, it is necessary to ascertain that the new norm is embraced not only by one type of subject, but by multiple heterogeneous types. Thus, in social networks capable of complex contagions, similarity and diversity coexist.

In short, anyone who wishes to disseminate or incorporate an opinion or a belief must thus avoid a society that is “too” solid, centered on similarity, as well as one that is “too little” so, centered on diversity (Centola 2015). A society is all the more inclusive and desirable, not if it is small or if it is local, but the more *imperfectly* “solid” (or “liquid”) it is, i.e. the more it is communitarian in the sense illustrated in paragraph 2. Almost everyone in it subjects are simultaneously members of multiple groups, and a large proportion of the groups are in networks that are not overly related. In it, everyone can combine the various affiliations to build their own effective social identity.

The co-presence in the community of “narrow and long bridges” and “wide bridges” carries two important implications. First, this community draws strength from its ability to hybridize locally prepared practices and knowledge with those absorbed elsewhere, from its effectiveness in combining the exploitation of specific assets generated internally with the exploration - fostered by weak extra-local ties - of technical-organizational paths initiated by other local systems. The local community becomes stronger and more dynamic by anchoring itself to several territories, connoted by different strategies, policies and resources. Thus, if on the one hand it is immersed in multi-level local networks, on the other hand it is immersed in multi-territorial or multi-scale networks. Only by making itself permeable to plural innovative logics that transcend its geographical boundaries can a local community co-adapt and co-innovate.

Second, some parties – those who preside over “bridges” – may take advantage over others; thus inequalities may form in the community. But those who take advantage through one type of “bridge” enjoy different resources from those who take advantage through the other type of “bridge”: thus different forms of power coexist in the community. On the basis of the feature just mentioned, we obtain an image of community that is very far from the dominant stereotype in the history of ideas, expressed by Figure 2, according to which the *community* would tend toward a fraternal or horizontal model of power, while the *society* would nurture the paternal or hierarchical model. On the contrary,

in the conception we are defending, community itself, like society, presents power asymmetries and conflicting tensions. However, since community is nothing more than an imperfectly “solid” (or “liquid,” if you prefer) society, it affirms multiple types of connections between subjects – the two types of “bridges” – and multiple types of benefits-in controlling types of “bridges”. It is this feature of it that facilitates polyarchic decentralization: the plurality of strong subjects and the plurality of the sources of their strength.

Figure 6 captures this crucial point. The first row depicts authority-based systems, in which actors connect to a central node to perform an action, such as participating in the production or exchange process. This type of system can be highly centralized, with a single authority in charge of providing the service, or more decentralized, with a number of interconnected authorities providing and managing the organizational infrastructure. The second row shows systems in the form of peer-to-peer networks, in which actors may still be connected to authorities, but are also directly connected to each other, such as is the case in sharing systems. Well, the community can organize as much as an authority-based network as a peer-to-peer network; what distinguishes it, therefore, is not the row but the column, that is, the other coordinate in Figure 6: the level of decentralization.

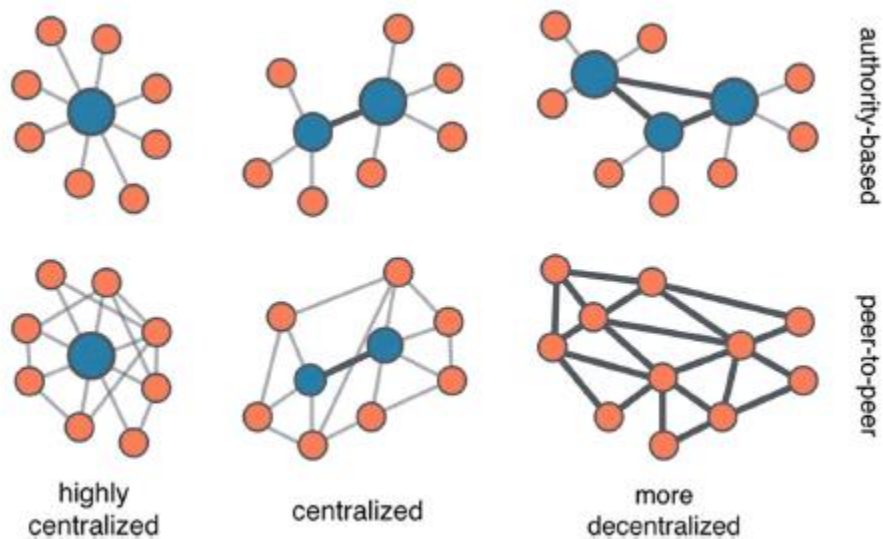


Figure 6: From centralized authorities to decentralized peer-to-peer networks.

Source: De Domenico and Baronchelli (2019)

We are at the last passage, in which the dynamics of complex contagion explain the indispensable function of community places. The propagation of complex contagion goes through two stages, separated by a sharp discontinuity (Barash 2011). Because the overall social space is never uniform and frictionless (not ergodic), initially change can spread only through short-range connections, until it saturates to «locally clustered community» (Guilbeault et al. 2018). Once

saturation is reached, the rate of contagion propagation decelerates, just as the number of potential infected decreases. However, in cases where the saturated community has sufficient long bridges to other communities, the change can “jump” from one place to another. As soon as it touches a new community, provided it has adequate wide bridges, its propagation essay rapidly increases with the availability of new infected. This continues until the community involved becomes saturated; at that point, its long bridges can come into play, and so on, until the whole system is infected.

What we are describing is a pull-apart path that is carried out *through* and *by means of* places. Change proceeds by making use of the wide bridges to reach a critical mass in one place. Subsequently, it can take root in other places, even very distant and different ones, making use of the long bridges. In turn, in those places, change may reach critical mass through the wide bridges, but it then calls in the long bridges to access new social spaces, with a cyclical alternation without which the dynamics of complex contagion could not occur. In short, the framework suggests that, within social networks, *change occurs in places that express the characteristics we recognize in contemporary communities*: they balance wide bridges and narrow bridges, similarity and diversity, the ability to converge locally on a norm and the ability to spread a norm, connecting different and distant places.

The four theoretical arguments just mentioned make the local community “robust” in the contemporary world, as they capture relevant dimensions of how it actually works, without conceding anything to idealizing and normative perspectives.

## 5. Conclusions

We conclude this brief essay by asking: in what sense does the theoretical framework we have presented contribute to capturing a “fundamental cause” of socio-economic development? In paragraph 1, we defined a “proximate cause” as one which, in explaining a phenomenon, must itself be explained. Compared to it, the difference of the “fundamental cause” cannot consist, of course, in the circumstance that it grounds the phenomenon without being grounded: in fact, any scientific explanation descends from premises, and any premise in turn requires a justification. Rather, a cause can be defined as “fundamental” when it captures a mechanism whose influence on the system studied is sufficient to change its trajectory. A cause is sufficient if its presence guarantees the occurrence of a result: X always causes Y, even if Y also has other causes. For example, the presence of solar radiation on the surface of an object is sufficient to heat the object, although the object can also heat

for other reasons. This means that you can have Y without X, but you will never find X without Y. In terms of set theory, the set of units containing X is a subset of the set of units containing Y.

It is objected that it is seldom true that one condition is sufficient for the occurrence of another: possibly, it is instead a group of conditions that, jointly, may be sufficient. However, there are many phenomena in which a causal link is detectable that is so preponderant that it is a reliable sufficient condition, even though we overlook other factors and other nexuses. For example, if a person dies from eating food to which she was allergic, we assume that the causal mechanism was an anaphylactic reaction. This approach is called *the billiard-ball model*: «one event, ball A hitting ball B, is the cause of – and thus explains – another event, namely, ball B’s beginning to move» (Elster 2007, 9). The thesis we have sketched in these pages argues that the local community constitutes a fundamental cause, or a sufficient cause, for socio-economic development. It needs much further elaboration, but we trust that the arguments advanced will allow for a better continuation of the investigation.

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