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SOME SOCIOLOGICAL ISSUES ABOUT AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

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## Some Sociological Issues About American Communities

Communities are among the more ubiquitous units of social organization. With few exceptions men organize their daily activities more or less permanently around a common territory. The resulting collectivity is a community.<sup>1/</sup> The members of a community interact within an institutional context that derives largely from the Great Society and organized on a locality basis. While there is considerable variation among communities in a society, they are essentially microcosms of the society.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in advanced industrial societies such as the United States. While American communities vary in the size and density of their settlement patterns, their economic base, the social composition of their populations, and in the scale of their organization, their institutional and structural arrangements are essentially similar. The class stratification system of American society, for example, is fundamentally the same in all American communities, though the distribution within the class system varies among communities in the United States. Therefore, though one city may be more "middle" class and another more "working class," the class relationships, the prestige accorded classes, and the behavior of class members is much the same in both communities. For this reason as one moves from one community to another in the United States, he carries his class status with him.

As microcosms of the larger society, American communities then show considerable similarity. Yet they show considerable

variability as well. Not all ways that communities in the United States vary are documented equally well, however. Variability in the composition of their populations, their functional differentiation, the residential segregation of the population along class and ethnic lines, and of the mobility of the population all are well documented. There likewise are studies of differences in the power structures of communities, the optimum size of cities to sustain various cultural activities, and of their economic base and political organization. What perhaps is most lacking is documentation of variation in way that the values and organization of the larger society are integrated and function in local communities. Nor is much known about how patterns of innovation and adaptation of local communities to the value structure and organization of the larger society varies among communities.

Within these limitations on our knowledge we shall discuss several issues that the literature of sociology on American communities has generated over the past decades. These may be identified as first, a decline in community autonomy over organizations and functions located within it. Concomitant with this decline is a growing dependence of the community and its inhabitants upon the culture and organization of the Great or Mass Society, upon organized subsystems that lie beyond the control of the community, and upon other communities.<sup>2/</sup> Second, there is a concern with a loss of identity of residents with the local community. Corollary with this is the growth of a mass culture and of the association of members around specialized rather than communal

interests.<sup>3/</sup> Third, there is a concern with elite control of decision-making and governmental processes in local communities, processes that presumably are organized around democratic forms.<sup>4/</sup> Finally, attention is being turned to the community as the arena where many of the value and organizational conflicts in American society actually are played out. In connection with this concern, attention also is being directed to the role that local communities play in stabilizing and changing the social institutions and organization of the Great Society.

The concern with autonomy of communities arises from a number of sources: a professional concern with the extent to which the community may effectively plan and control the local environment, a political concern with the operation of democratic processes in the society, and an ideology of localism that is part of the value organization of American society. Considerable evidence is mobilized to document a decline in community autonomy.

A striking feature of communities in advanced industrial societies such as the United States is their interdependence with one another and their dependence upon institutional and organizational systems that derive from the larger society. Interdependence among communities in these societies arises in part from the fact that they compete for common natural and social resources such as water, land, and tax revenues, resources that usually are scarce and therefore must be allocated. But it arises also from other conditions related to the mobility of both

goods and people in a dynamic society, and the problems these exchanges generate for social control.

Clearly a society characterized by dynamic interdependence limits autonomous action. Yet with the growing interdependence of communities in American society, new institutional and organization means have been developing, as elsewhere in the world, for relating communities and their inhabitants to one another. Some of the major means for relating communities to one another derive from the state and federal politics and their power to create formal organizations for handling problems that arise from the relationship of a community and its inhabitants to others. Indeed, the major formally organized way that American communities exist is as political jurisdictions chartered by the states. Deriving their sovereignty from the state, American communities have always been subject to concurrent jurisdiction with other local units such as the county and legally limited by state and federal jurisdiction.

To a growing extent in the United States these new organizational means for relating communities to one another take the form of functionally specialized authorities, often on a metropolitan or regional basis. These authorities generally assume jurisdiction over a particular function or activity such as transportation, water and sanitation, schools, or law enforcement. The Metropolitan Boston Transportation Authority, The Chicago Sanitary District, the rural and urban consolidated school districts, and the Los Angeles, California and Dade County,

Florida law enforcement agencies are examples of such functionally specialized units that serve a large number of political communities in a metropolitan area. But communities are related to one another not only through politics but by organizations in the private sector as well. Community based activities such as competitive sports organized into leagues and the many voluntary organizations built around public and private functions of communities are examples.

The relation of communities to state and federal politics has been changing toward more state and federal programs related to urban planning and problems. The extent to which federal programs related to urban problems have grown has been recognized in the creation of a cabinet position, Secretary of Urban Affairs. The large number of programs relating to public housing and transportation, urban redevelopment, and the underprivileged in communities undertaken by the federal government undoubtedly change the relationship of the local to federal government. Yet it would be mistaken to assume that such programs serve only to weaken local power and autonomy. Most such programs in the United States are vested in locally based organizations that are accountable to local as well as federal authority. In many ways they have enormously increased the power of local bureaucracies, providing resources that could not be commanded locally.

Perhaps the most significant change in communities in the United States (as elsewhere in advanced industrial

societies) a consequence of the ways that communities are integrated with the larger society.

To an ever growing extent, the component organizations within a community become units of organizations whose scope and influence lie beyond the community. One of the important consequences of this fact is that decisions affecting organizations in a community, and therefore often the functional integration of the community itself, are made by individuals or organizations that are not part of the community. The policies and programs of organizations in any locality then seem to a growing extent made in centralized offices that are more responsive to their organizational demands than they are to those of the community or the members of the organization who live in it.

In large part these changes come about as a consequence of the economies of large-scale enterprise, the advantages of bureaucratic organization of functions, and the power that develops from large-scale organization. It is as true for the many voluntary organizations that are based in a community as it is for industry and labor. Collective bargaining, for example, becomes less responsive to the requirements of a local community than it does to the requirements of an international union and the industry or craft around which it is organized. And a vertically integrated national corporation is less responsive to what consequences a decision about one of its member units will have upon the community than what effect that unit has upon the corporation.



While many American communities today undoubtedly are subject to external contingencies and decisions that lie beyond local control, the case can be overdrawn. As Thernstrom<sup>5/</sup> has pointed out in his historical study of Yankee City, much of the important industry in the early period of many American cities was controlled by capitalists who resided outside the community. Perhaps the change then is more one of scale than of kind.

A growing literature on mass culture and organization and on identity with the community strongly suggests that Americans are less tied to local than they are to specialized or extra-local interests. They are characterized as having lost a sense of identity with the local community, as apathetic in local politics, and as mass men.

While these characterizations often are poorly documented several things appear to characterize the relation of contemporary Americans to their local community. Studies of American communities show that residents of communities identify named areas that have more of a status ascriptive function than a locality function in the sense of a place where residents carry out much of their activity.<sup>6/</sup> To the degree that residents utilize local facilities, they are primarily governed by contingencies of convenience rather than by a sense of solidarity with the local organizations.

There is considerable variation among the residents of a local community in the extent to which they are oriented toward it and its problems. Since the studies by Merton of "local" and "cosmopolitan" persons, it is clear that a

substantial proportion of persons in any community are "locals" in the sense that their primary interest and orientations are toward the community where they reside.<sup>7/</sup>

Furthermore, a number of studies make clear that while the local neighborhood may have declined as the basis for primary relationships, the urban family typically has extensive contacts with kin who reside in the local community.<sup>8/</sup> Other studies show that most urbanites today spend perhaps more, rather than less, time with the nuclear family, largely as a consequence of the decline in hours spent at work and that occupation rather than community size is the major factor in social contact with others on a primary basis.<sup>9/</sup>

Finally, it seems clear that with the growth of mass culture there are fewer sharp differences among the residents of American cities. Even the poor have access to television; there are fewer differences in dress and, even in life style. Though mass culture may have standardized differences among inhabitants, the distances between the elites and the mass have been reduced in American communities. Indeed as Edward Shils has pointed out, the mass in modern societies today is perhaps closer to the center than ever before.<sup>10/</sup> The same undoubtedly holds for American communities as is evidenced by the growing pressure they place upon the elites for equality of rights, access to the means of the society, and access to the sources of power.

Studies of American communities stress not only that there is a decline in autonomy to make decisions but that there have been shifts in the power structure of American

communities and in their domination by local elites. The main point appears to be that local decisions are made by a local elite that more often today consists of public officials and professionals who are indirectly controlled by economic interests. They suggest that public issues and decisions are controlled by these elites rather than by the members of the local community through processes of referendum and civic control. The facts are complicated however by questions of the structure of decision making in American communities, particularly the role that the electorate in any large community can play in decision making. Without much comparative study it is difficult to know precisely what elite control means. Decision making in American communities in the nature of the case represents a balancing of interests. The evidence suggests that whose interests tend to be maximized depends to a great extent upon the issue. Elite control perhaps is less substantial than some studies suggest, particularly since the community is involved in many decisions that lie beyond the control of any local elite. Any local elite in its attempts to control is restricted in part, therefore, to issues that lie primarily within the domain of local autonomy.

Mention has been made of the fact that communities are a microcosm of the larger society. In a most important sense, however, the American community is the arena where the value and organizational conflicts of the larger society are played out. This should be quite apparent in considering the current conflicts that beset American society--conflicts

over civil rights, the control of programs to aid the underprivileged, over the quality and quantity of education, over employment and public assistance, even to a degree over international policies.

Such issues clearly come to focus in American communities not only because a community is above all a place where daily activities take place but because on the one hand the values of the larger society and their organization impinge on people in their daily lives and on the other quite often the main agencies for implementing these values and for exercising social control operate in and through the community.

The current conflict surrounding civil rights may serve as a case in point. It is within the confines of the community that some Americans experience differential treatment--in local housing markets controlled by local real estate interests, in local schools where educational means are not equal, in local employing establishments where jobs are not available, or in local cultural facilities where discrimination operates. National pressures to change the situation must operate in part through the mobilization of local groups and organizations operating on these local situations as well as upon general system organizations.

It is in the community that violence erupts and where rioting must be dealt with. Under these circumstances it is the local police who first are called upon to enforce the law and it is the local courts who generally are called upon to administer justice--even though in some cases they are under a more general jurisdiction. A local community, too, has

considerable power to legislate, legislation that affect peoples rights and opportunities. For in the United States much of the law in relation to land use, traffic, housing, health, education, and welfare, is developed and enforced at the local level. The community is likewise a major political unit in either stabilizing or changing these conditions. It is not surprising, therefore, that one is most likely to encounter conflict and violent outburst in the context of a governing community in the United States. Indeed, it attests to the fact that communities are perhaps more autonomous and viable as units in the American social system than much of the literature of American sociology suggests.

Geared, as it has been for much of its recent history, to investigating the current structure and functioning of American communities, sociology in the United States has neglected the investigation of the community as the arena within which value conflicts of the society are often engendered, frequently carried on, and usually resolved. The sociology of the next years may well redress these omissions.

## FOOTNOTES

1. See Amos Hawley, Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure, New York: Ronald Press Co., pp. 257-58 and Talcott Parsons, The Social System, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951, p. 91.
2. For a summary discussion of this topic see Roland L. Warren, The Community in America, Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1963, Ch. 3.
3. Ibid., Ch. 3. Also see Maurice R. Stein, The Eclipse of Community.
4. There is a voluminous literature in American sociology on community power structures beginning with the work of the Lynds (Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd), Middletown in Transition, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1937), Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960.
5. Stephen Thernstrom, "Yankee City Revisited: The Perils of Historical Naivete", American Sociological Review, 30 (April, 1965), pp. 234-242.
6. H. Laurence Ross, "The Local Community: A Survey Approach", American Sociological Review, 27 (February, 1962), pp. 75-84.
7. Robert K. Merton, "Patterns of Influence: A Study of Interpersonal Influence and of Communications Behavior in a Local Community" in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, Communications Research, 1948-1949, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949, pp. 189-214.
8. Michael Aiken, "Kinship in an Urban Community", Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1965.
9. Albert J. Reiss, Jr., "Rural-Urban Status Differences in Interpersonal Contacts", The American Journal of Sociology, LXV (September, 1959), pp. 182-195.
10. Edward Shils, "The Theory of Mass Society", Dogenes, 39, pp. 45-66.