

# Community practice within the context of civil society-state relations

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A desire for community, the emotion that drives so much community practice, is constructed from numerous sources. The most obvious include: personal experience or, what Etzioni (1995:91) refers to as, communities of memory: 'ideas of community that derive from long-established belief systems that link the present and the past, communities fashioned, above all, from tradition and religion'; mass media portrayals (television programs like *Neighbours* and newspaper coverage of the fortunes of the local football club); institutional arrangements (including programs targeted at building 'community capacity' and the designation of local government boundaries); and academic debates such as those covered below. Ideally, practitioners are aware of the well-springs of their particular views of community - personal experience, professional training or affinity for a particular form of political activity - and are open to reflecting on a concept that is riddled with ambiguity, ideology and emotion.

The chapter begins with a brief examination of some constructs from political philosophy: state, market and civil society. The institutional actors within these three spheres of activity make a major contribution to how the concept of community *feels*, to borrow from the insightful comment by Bauman (2001:1) who says '[w]ords have meanings: some words, however, also have a 'feel'. The word 'community' is one of them. It feels good: whatever the word 'community' may mean, it is good 'to have a community', 'to be in a community'. The interrelationships between the spheres of activity are relevant to how community identity comes into being, and to how communities become a focus of intervention and site of action. The chapter proceeds to describe two concepts vying with community as a focus for explaining social engagement and as a guide to practice. There is no agreement whether 'social capital' and 'networks' are 'old wine in new bottles' or whether they are valuable additions to the community practice lexicon. The section that follows identifies the dominant, contemporary understandings of community and the final section returns to a perennial debate in community work. Can community practice be harnessed to challenge the status quo and influence struggles over the social and economic directions of nation states and global institutions? Whatever the answer to this question, how practitioners assist communities into position vis a vis other institutional actors, especially state institutions, is an important strategic consideration.

## The state-civil society relationship within political philosophy

Civil society, a term used by 17th century political philosophers, originally referred to the types of institutions needed to manage the breakdown in social order, attributable to pronounced economic and social change following the Industrial Revolution. In *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, Seligman (2002) portrays the concept as a European, Enlightenment and Christian attempt to recast the source of a moral order as residing within human, not transcendent, agency and to make sense of the emergence of separate spheres of legal, moral and economic activity. Civil society constituted the realm in which individual autonomy and notions of the wider good could be debated and accommodated. It was the arena of the politically engaged (male, privileged) citizen.

For a century or more no distinction was made between the state and civil society, with the latter referring to a 'realm of political association instituted among men when they take leave of the "state of nature" and enter into a commonwealth' (Seligman 2002:15). Gradually, the state adopted a clearer identity as super-ordinate to civil society whilst being its creature. The state's emergence is explained in various ways. For liberal democrats, such as Bentham and John Stuart Mill, an institution was required to ensure the unfettered pursuit of interests based on the free vote and the free market (See Keane 1988). From this perspective, state-civil society relations were fuelled by an emotional state of 'natural affection' among citizens keen to prosper financially, with the state interceding to secure harmony. In contrast, the earliest political economists, such as Adam Smith, viewed civil society, not the state, as the major force capable of taming or civilising economic activity. Others saw an even more intricate interplay between the spheres of activity. In Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (see Wood 1991), 'the content of civil society [is] largely determined by the free play of economic forces and individual seeking. But civil society also includes social and civic institutions that inhibit and regulate economic life' (Kumar 1994:76). Marx reasoned less dialectically about the independence of civil society from the economy. He believed that the defeat of feudalism had encouraged individuals to attend to private, defined as economic, interests in civil society and to act politically within the state. The new public-private dichotomy was the more insidious because the state, according to Marx, opted to protect the interests of the bourgeoisie and not to arbitrate between competing interests.

The interrelated issues of association and autonomy, self-interest and political participation, public and private pursuits within a context of state-civil society-market interrelationships continue to be debated after four hundred years. The current consensus is that civil society denotes a sphere of more or less spontaneous engagement by individuals with public issues. Communities are considered to be important actors within civil society; co-existing with groups representing the collective citizenry, such as political parties and trade unions, as well as sectarian and issue-focused non-government organisations, such as charities, not-for-profit groups and social movements. In short, civil society refers to how social groupings attempt to organise and conduct associational life, whether in the neighbourhood or within global forums.

The state represents the institutions of the military, government, judiciary and public services as they operate over a geographically bounded territory, the nation state or society. It complements civil society as a sphere of public engagement. Citizens participate less directly in state institutions, generally through elected and appointed government representatives. The state's most important institutions are those capable of violence and coercion. Franzway, Court and Connell (1989) define the state as the persistent, technical institutionalisation of power.

Both the state and civil society are generally distinguished from the private realm of the personal, family and domestic life. This is a crude distinction when one considers how the state, through legislation, policies and cultural channels, influences familial relationships and individual identity. In Connell's view (1990:520), '[t]he state is indeed the main organiser of the power relations of gender'.

The relationship between the market and civil society is also contested, with many commentators including the market within civil society. The market in capitalist societies is a set of institutional arrangements that facilitate the exchange of goods and services for an economic fee. The key element is the production of surplus value for profit, rather than the production of use value. Critical social theorists like Gramsci and Habermas view commercial actor attempts to colonise the 'lifeworlds' (the socially constructed practices of everyday living) of citizens as setting them apart from other civil organisations. Habermas' formulation of public space is considered important because it distinguishes between state apparatuses, economic markets and democratic associations, 'distinctions that are essential to democratic theory' (Fraser 1993:111).

The boundaries between the spheres of activity continue to be porous, with consequences for the legitimacy and vitality of particular forms of community practice (Hoatson, Dixon and Sloman 1996;

Hoatson 2001). Marked shifts in activity have been observed between the three spheres and between actors within the spheres since the early 1980s in Australia. This claim is exemplified by government contracts with organisations in civil society and the market to deliver publicly financed services. For some commentators, the state has turned its back on community in favour of supporting market-based actors. Offe (1996), for instance, describes a tripartite role for the state which omits any mention of civil associations other than the market. The state, he argues, maintains the dominance of capital for the market, compensates for the disruptive consequences of capital, while challenging its total dominance.

Despite the fluidity of the boundaries, institutional actors in the three spheres attempt to secure social order and social regulation on the basis of distinctive principles (Martinelli 2002). States use a principle of authority or hierarchical relations to intervene in the affairs of the private sphere and civil society. Examples include legislation to protect children from abuse and budget allocations for community building programs. Markets adopt the principle of economic exchange to coordinate transactions, as is evident in housing and labour markets. Civil society operates on a principle of solidarity, as, for example, Australians for Reconciliation or social support groups for refugees.

Actors in civil society come together to apply pressure - through lobbying, advocacy, civil disobedience and law-breaking - to alter the decisions of state institutions and to challenge the rules of exchange fostered by the market, as well as to build satisfying communities for themselves. The uneven and contested exercise of authority, exchange and solidarity shape social life, including the expression of community in social life.

Contemporary government policy, political movement organisation and professional practice resonate with principles drawn from theories of the state-civil society-market relationship. A snapshot includes:

- de Tocqueville's view of civil society as providing education for citizenship (see Keane 1988, Ch 2) has long provided the justification for government programs, including support for *neighbourhood houses, community education projects and self-help groups*.
- Gramsci's formulation that civil society is the sphere of 'cultural politics', the simultaneous exercise of hegemony and resistance to state-sponsored ideologies, has been an organising principle since the 1920s (Buci-Glucksmann 1980). Reflecting this thinking, government funded community practitioners who identified as socialists and feminists in the 1970s, consciously positioned themselves 'in and against the state' (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1980). Gramsci's description of a prefigurative politics - small-scale experiments of the imagined society to which one aspired - influenced community practitioners in the 1960s and 1970s to encourage worker and community cooperatives. Today's *housing cooperatives* carry on this legacy.
- Gramsci's (1978) notion of the superiority of direct and participatory forms of democracy compared to representative democracy, in which the state becomes an object of change not the guardian of select interests, continues to be adopted by social and cultural movements keen to transform the state-civil society relationship. Some feminist organisers and community cultural developers incorporate this tradition through the *inclusive decision-making processes* and *staffing policies* they adopt to run women's health services or to mount a cultural event.
- Distributional justice arguments, like those of Pateman (1980), dominated the 1980s. This work sought to identify the circumstances when it is just, efficient and effective for the state to limit the rights of individuals for the public good. The result was a raft of *equal opportunity legislation* with an emphasis on 'opportunity' to education and employment. Somewhat paradoxically, Rawls' (1971) *Theory of Justice* provided a justification for those

keen to apply the brakes to even this form of social justice. By arguing that 'liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty', he made social justice a second order principle (In Selznick 1992:377). The subordination of social justice to liberty has been evident in government arguments regarding trade unionism and is being used, as we write, by Australian governments to justify the security measures they are taking in the so-called *War on Terror*.

- Locke and Hume's conceptualisation of a social contract, which establishes mutual obligations between citizens and the state (See Boucher and Walzer 1998), has become bipartisan orthodoxy influencing a wide array of policies, including *Work-for-the-Dole* and *Landcare*. It resonates with the approaches being taken by several notable Indigenous leaders who are concerned that a hand-out mentality has destroyed their people's self-esteem and sense of enterprise.
- With the emergence of poststructural theory, pluralistic conceptions of the common good have flourished. Community practitioners face an enormous challenge of using the cross-fertilisation of different ethical systems and principles to answer the question, 'how are we to live?'. In this context, the work of Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson (1996) and Habermas (1999) on *deliberative democracy* and the need to pursue pluralist ethical truth through public debate becomes highly relevant. The process fostered by the *Australian Republic Convention* is a case in point.
- Feminist scholars, including bell hooks (1984), Phillips (1987) and Pettman (1992), have had a profound impact on how women's and ethnic organisations view truth claims and diversity within their respective sectors. According to these and many other women writers, a focus on class identity is wholly inadequate for understanding the forms of struggle taking place within nation states. The spotlight as we enter the 21st century is on the work-family relationship which is riddled with tensions, due to working conditions, hours and arrangements that are dissonant with other accepted social goals, such as the value of family life. Chapter 13 on the *maternity leave campaign* illustrates the enactment of a perspective where class and gender intersect.
- Etzioni (2000) has been influential in Third Way thinking (a mix of doctrines from social democracy and liberal economics, championed by the Blair and Clinton administrations). Etzioni argues that Western democracies have become preoccupied with the state-market polarity, with little consideration for the fate of communities. He urges governments to adopt pro-community public policies, and in the case of the United Kingdom has proposed a ministry dedicated to community development (Demos 2000).

## The rise of social capital

Recent interest in the community's role in social life has been invigorated through the concept of social capital (Young 2001; Macgregor and Cary 2002). Robert Putnam's work is credited by many as launching the current academic interest in social capital, popularised in Australia by Eva Cox in her 1995 Boyer Lectures. (See also, Winter 2000). In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Putnam (1993) ignited broad interest in the decline of associational life in Western democracies. He argued that participation in civic life not only conferred health and well-being advantages to participants, but increased the wealth of communities in which trust and civic engagement were present. In a short space of time, and in response to the crises in Western welfare states, interest in the components of social capital - trust, civic engagement and networks - has provided a new discourse for governments of all political persuasions. Governments and the World Bank now claim to focus on the interrelationships between social, economic and human capital.

Putnam's work prompts numerous responses. Some are concerned that the idea reduces all aspects of life to a concept found in the economic sphere, while others respond that social capital makes

considerations of 'the social' respectable at a time when economic rationalism dominates public policy. A third response is appropriate: we are seeing the 'emperor's new clothes', re-visiting and dressing up the concept of 'social development'.<sup>1</sup>

The more serious charge is that while debates on social capital have renewed a focus on the social and economic aspects of community life, they overlook the political dimension evident in earlier accounts of the state-civil society relationship. Invoking the contribution of World Bank economist Robert Woolcock, Simon Szreter (2002) broadens the debate by arguing for consideration of the mutually constitutive relations between associations in civil society and the institutions of the state and other organisations 'external' to civil society, including aid agencies and foreign firms. According to Szreter (2002:587) '[t]his focuses our theoretical and practical attention directly on questions to do with the management of discourses and exchanges within and between bodies with manifestly different and unequal resources of both symbolic and material power'. In particular, Szreter believes it important to acknowledge Putnam's distinctions between bonding capital (networks formed from shared identity) and bridging capital (networks of participants from different backgrounds/interests) and to introduce Woolcock's idea of 'linking capital', (networks and institutionalised arrangements among unequal agents involved in a mutually agreed beneficial goal based on mutual respect, trust and equality of status). Using numerous examples, including the settlement house movement of the late 19th century, he shows how different forms of social capital, linked to class position, can be supported and encouraged by state institutions and subsequently transformed in ways that increase the overall vitality of civil society. Szreter (2002:602) refuses to accept the argument that social capital flourishes in the context of a crisis of state legitimacy: '[w]hen citizens are disillusioned with government they engage predominantly in defensive, self-interested bonding social capital only; when they have faith in the state and in the subsidiary levels of government, they are more likely to participate in bridging and linking social capital'.

The implications for community practitioners of Szreter's arguments are two fold. First, the symbolic and material actions of the state influence the conditions in which trust, networks and social capital flourish. In other words, to ignore the state's influence on civil society is naïve. Second, the concept of linking capital provides a powerful rationale for partnerships, networks and alliances that traverse different class and other interests. (See also Edgar 2001).

## **The rise of networks**

The concept of 'networks' is not simply fundamental to discourses of social capital, but arises in more general debates of social engagement and in critiques of community discourse. For some, it is anachronistic to talk about 'community' in the context of globalisation, fragmentation of social institutions, privatisation of 'the commons', rampant individualism and the centrality of identity politics, defined as the recognition of a range of subject positions based on socio-cultural identification. (See discussion by Philips 1997 and Young 1997).

The eclipse of older forms of associational solidarity based in workplaces and neighbourhoods has encouraged the idea that other social actors can have political efficacy. For many commentators, networks incorporate a range of elements that accommodate the realities of current social, economic and cultural life: horizontal relationships, flexibility, capacity for fleeting attachment and ability to be sustained in an impersonal manner, often via electronic communication. According to Thompson (1992:171), '[i]n contrast to either hierarchy or market, networks coordinate through less formal, more egalitarian and cooperative means'. Whether this definition is generally applicable is debatable, given how many networks exist within the confines of contracts with governments, are formalised and involuntary structures with prescribed role demarcations and accountability procedures, and have defined time-space operations. In his critique of the Third Way's treatment of community, Scanlon (2000:73) argues that the network is a way of dissolving 'long-standing oppositions between different forms of social life'.

It is not clear whether networks are a worthy replacement to communities, or whether they are complementary social actors, appropriate to the changed conditions of modernity. They are however an increasingly dominant form of describing social engagement, wherever identity politics, action-at-a-distance and disembedded social relations prevail (see Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994). In some accounts, civil society is equated with a 'network of civil associations' (Robson 2001:229), arguably making the concept of community redundant. It is perhaps more useful for community workers to identify when local or other bounded communities are the focus of practice, and, alternatively, when national or inter-national networks are potential participants, and a focus for action.

## Contemporary Australian usages of community

Given these debates, how is 'community' to be understood? The major conceptions, many of which are complementary, include the following.

Community can be thought of as

- social structure: a form of association based on 'common understanding' 'coming naturally', following Tonnies (1887) (quoted in Bauman 2001:10). Or, following Jordan (2002:253), '[c]ommunities are formed when people are able to construct a "we" or common identity out of the routines, home-lives and habits of the everyday'.
- a form of social organisation in which people can describe with ease who belongs and who does not. Tonnies' theory of *gemeinschaft* (which refers to face-to-face relations, based on tradition, social status and mutuality) and *gesellschaft* (which refers to impersonal relationships and contractual obligations forged in more complex societies), written in the 19th century, continues to resonate.
- ethical public good: for example, Little (2002:3) comments 'community exists where virtues such as friendship, voluntarism and care are exhibited'.
- a symbol of civil society at work, involving citizen participation, social inclusion, altruism, strong social capital, thriving networks of association.
- a manifestation of shared identity and a source of identity. For Bauman (2001:15), identity 'is a surrogate of community' and has arisen as community collapses. Within communities of identity, there is a desire for recognition on the basis of shared traits, beliefs or practices that are not necessarily based on the group's position in economic space.
- a recognised and distinctive geographic territory/space/place in which there is an interdependency and interactions are based upon mutual advantage.
- an administrative unit and platform/pivot for state policies, including risk management plans, social and economic development and capacity building.

According to Selznick (1992:358-359) communities exist wherever there are bonds 'that establish a common faith or fate, a personal identity, a sense of belonging, and a supportive structure of activities and relationships'. Obviously, the quality and quantity of these bonds vary and how they are experienced – as liberating or oppressive – will differ for numerous reasons. Selznick reminds us that communities are complex forms of association, best understood as the outcome of interacting variables, including historicity, identity, mutuality, plurality, autonomy, participation and integration brought about by supportive institutions. What he fails to acknowledge is the way in which these variables are shaped by actors and processes external to the associations. He also underplays how community identity is forged through the process of marginalizing or excluding some and not others. Community studies reveal that integration and exclusion are two sides of the same coin. With so

many competing appreciations of what community *feels* like, it is not surprising that many commentators agree that community is an elusive state of being or goal.

## Community practices and social change

Despite the conceptual difficulties, the ideal of community has been mobilised in various ways across the 20th century. States have used community as a site of civic education, a basis for encouraging the growth of human talents and the production of economic and social resources, as an administrative unit for distributing welfare, as a basis for promoting an ideology of social cohesion and an hegemonic construct standing for 'all is well in the world'. Simultaneously, civic or community associations have been pursuing their own community idyll as a site of solidarity, source of social support and services, barrier to 'foreign' ideas and people, focus for resisting the state and market, and a reference point for cultural pursuits.

The current sense of pronounced social and economic change - whether attributed to fin de siècle, globalisation or more recently, terrorism - explains the renewed attraction to the concept of 'civil society'. In this context, community is considered to contain the seeds of social order because it is the element of civil society most closely identified with providing an antidote to the impulses of individualism. According to Kumar, 'civil society' is enjoying a renaissance as a result of the confrontations of workers' and other voluntary organisations with the states of Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1970s and 1980s. He reasoned that: '[t]he example of the Solidarity movement in Poland suggested a model of opposition and regeneration that avoided the suicidal confrontation with the state by building up the institutions of civil society as a "parallel society"... To many intellectuals it carried the promise of a privileged route to the post-communist, pluralist society' (Kumar 1994:76).

In his summary to *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, Mosher (2002) suggests that within the framework of a lawful state, two alternative views of civil society prevail: first, a transmission belt for singular ethical traditions or value-sets and, second, what he terms the 'entrenchment model' built upon diverse values. In the 'transmission model', civil society draws its legitimacy from a 'virtuous' state, as, for example, the way community development thrived under the 1970s Whitlam Labor Government's vision of a social democratic Australian society. In the 'entrenchment model, 'virtuous' groups act as a barrier against concentrations of power, especially state power, such as was seen in the people's protest against the Vietnam War or the authoritarian regime in Victoria under Kennett in the 1990s. 'Thick consensus' is the aim of the former, and 'subjective freedom' is pursued through the value pluralism of the latter. 'Subjective freedom' refers to the ability 'to use and develop ... essentially human capacities' (Macpherson 1973:40). These contrasting views of civil society provide community practitioners with alternative routes to social change: routes that are heavily circumscribed by state power.

Left unresolved, however, is the question of building solidarity in an economic and political system built on autonomous individuals. Bauman puts the conundrum thus: '[w]e cannot be human without both security and freedom: but we cannot have both at the same time and both in quantities which we find fully satisfactory' (Bauman 2001:5). Reconciling the dilemma of individual freedom subordinated to, or co-existing with, security and other manifestations of a shared experience is one of many challenges facing community practitioners. Robson (2001) argues that 'the search for civil society is important if [viewed] as a form of ideal state'. However as Anthony Giddens (1994) suggests there is more to a revitalised civil society than the search for 'communities of memory'. As the case studies in this book reveal, transnational campaigns, local coalitions, state-civil society partnerships and neighbourhood development together coalesce and contradict one another in a messy tapestry that provides civil society with its dynamism, legitimacy and authority.

## Conclusion

We contend that community practitioners, especially those committed to working towards social change that benefits the poorest and most marginal, need to be familiar with political and social theory. Understanding political processes is important for:

- strategic considerations (matching means to ends)
- personal change purposes (aligning the personal and political), and
- maximising the potential of professional practice to meet community, and not practitioner, needs.<sup>ii</sup>

Chapter 4 is organised to take up the challenge of articulating the range of practices that follow from actors in the state and civil society negotiating the achievement of their respective interests.

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<sup>i</sup> Social development was a term popularised by the United Nations after the Second World War to encourage the integration of social programs with economic planning (See Midgley 1995).

<sup>ii</sup> The importance of being a reflective practitioner is encapsulated in texts by Schon (1983) and Fook (1996).

Sample pages