

The Search for Community

K10.0060: First-Year Seminar

Fall 2008

Tue/Thu 3:30-4:45

Silver 412

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Office Hours: Tue + Thu 10:30-12, 2-3:30; Wed 2-6 and by appointment

Overview

The concept of community, one of the core ideas in social thought, conjures up many different images: small towns and residential neighborhoods ("Bronxville," "the Lower East Side"); work groups, professions and academic disciplines ("the medical community," "the community of scholars"); major institutions ("the university community," "the church"); racial and ethnic groups ("the African-American community"); and other interest groups ("the environmental community," "the business community"). Thinkers from Aristotle to John Winthrop to Robert Putnam have invoked the idea; so have social activists from Thomas Jefferson to Saul Alinsky. In the last 100 years or so, some social commentators have argued that community as a form of social life is disappearing; others find it surviving, even thriving, though often transformed.

This seminar will explore some of the meanings of the concept of community, approaching it from a number of disciplinary perspectives: sociology, anthropology, politics, philosophy. We will investigate the ways the term has been used, and consider the reasons why it shows up in so many discourses both inside and outside academia. As the title of the course suggests, many people over the generations have thought of the search for community as a *quest*, a moral and spiritual yearning, an attempt to recover some kind of connectedness among folks who share a history, or a bloodline, or an interest – or something. We will address such questions as:

- what do we actually *mean* by "community"? do the various forms of community have any central features in common, or is the term used so widely as to be meaningless?
- what are the conditions under which communities arise and flourish? when do they wither and die? when do they change in form and function?
- what impact does community (or the lack of it) have on the lives of individuals and groups? is that impact positive or negative, healthy or confining?
- has community actually disappeared from modern (or post-modern) life? if so, is that a good thing or a bad thing? has anything come to replace community?
- is the community a legitimate and productive foundation for political solidarity and action? does belonging to a community bestow *social capital* on its members? or does it lead to oppressive intrusions into the lives of individuals, tending toward fascism?

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Part of the function of this course, then, is the exploration of the concept of community. Another function, however, addresses students' development within Gallatin. We will be examining the community idea as an *example* of the process of *interdisciplinary studies*. Even if your individual interests have nothing to do with community, the course will help you understand what it means to explore a complex theme from a variety of perspectives. We will spend a good deal of time reflecting on that process: on the *logic* of inquiry across traditional disciplinary boundaries; on the assortment of *methods* appropriate to that sort of study (asking questions, collecting information, reaching conclusions); on *strategies* for defining and pursuing your own thematic concerns. The class may even help students construct an effective concentration in the future. We will also be spending some time exploring the general challenges of college study; class advisors may visit to discuss your understanding of the ways you can use Gallatin as a platform for your own education.

Process

Because of this dual character — because of our focus on both the *substance* of the community problem and the *process* of interdisciplinary study — this course will be highly *participatory*. That is, much of the specific work we do together (and individually) will emerge from the particular concerns of the members of the class. My strategy will be to prime the proverbial pump with some readings, and then to call on students for interpretations and analyses of the issues that matter to them most. I have structured the course around a series of general categories of questions:

- *approaches* to the study of community: what do various disciplines and schools of thought have to say about the phenomenon?;
- *forms* of and *factors* shaping community: case studies and theoretical works on communities held together by different kinds of factors (place, interest, race/ethnicity, communication, ideology, etc.);
- *action*: various kinds of activities and policies that are supposed to contribute to the quality of life, the solution of problems, or the building of capacity in communities.

Part of the course, though, will be structured as a true *seminar*, an opportunity for students to present their thoughts about concepts, issues and theories, and community-building activities. So after the two introductory sessions (during which we'll identify some of the core questions in the course, and articulate our specific interests), each of the segments of the syllabus will culminate in a series of student papers related to the unit's theme. These projects will entail both library (and online) research and investigations in "the community" (whatever that happens to be): finding sources beyond the required readings, interviewing or observing in community settings, collecting artifacts or anecdotes or narratives that flesh out an analysis.

Moreover, during about six of the classes, small groups of students will lead the discussions of readings and issues. They will do some extra readings, and will meet together and with the instructor to prepare questions, visuals, and so on.

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Writing Assignments

Students in the course will write four papers:

- one brief paper (1-2 pp.) describing the *issues* you are most interested in pursuing during the course, and/or some *examples* of community that you have experienced in your life and want to understand better (ungraded); due in class, Thursday, September 4;
- two short (6-8 pp.) papers identifying and analyzing issues or phenomena related to *two* of the units of the course; more details on these papers will be provided soon; due on dates indicated in this syllabus;
- one longer paper (14-16 pp.) representing an in-depth analysis of some issue, theory, phenomenon, experience or action related to one of the themes of the course; students will take an especially active role in the wrap-up session for the unit for which they write the longer paper;
- at least six *response papers*, short (<1 page) statements or questions about the readings, the discussions, or other activities; these will be handed in on the date when the specific reading is due, and may be posted on the Blackboard site for other students to read.

Expectations and standards

Students in this class will be expected to honor several principles that will make the enterprise more satisfying and substantial; your performance on these various dimensions will contribute to your final grade:

- *Attend class regularly and punctually.* Please be ready to start at 3:30, and to stay until 4:45; do not disrespect your classmates by arriving late and disrupting the conversation. Please let me know *in advance* if you are ill or have a serious conflict and cannot attend a session; please do not schedule medical or other appointments during class time.
- *Do the reading and writing assignments on time*, by the sessions when they will be discussed. Participation will be very difficult – and largely useless – unless you have completed the work.
- *Participate actively in class activities* – discussions (both in-class and online), small groups, etc. We need the input of everyone in the class to make this a rich experience. During discussions, show respect for your classmates: disagree and debate, but don't attack; contribute, but don't dominate. Make suggestions for process and content; give feedback at appropriate times. Participate effectively in small group activities: do your share of the work, support other members.

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- *Co-lead one of the sessions*: collaborate with two other members of the class to facilitate discussion of one set of issues and readings.

Grades will be based on the various aspects of students' work in the course. The *weight* of each factor may vary somewhat depending on the student's focus and style:

- regular and punctual attendance ($\pm 15\%$)
- contribution to discussions (in class, online)($\pm 15\%$)
- contribution to the seminar-facilitation group ($\pm 10\%$)
- quality of the papers: shorter ($\pm 15\%$ each); longer ($\pm 30\%$)

The *criteria* for the grades will focus on the student's effort and ability to go beyond the basic expectations of doing and understanding the assigned work:

- The student who earns an A will not only come regularly (that is, miss not more than one class) and participate actively, and demonstrate a solid understanding of the ideas, problems and theories discussed in class and in the readings; she will also contribute additional ideas based on other readings and on empirical work in one or more communities – that is, she will do independent work to flesh out and extend the common assignments, showing insight, creativity and extra effort;
- The student who earns a B will show a solid grasp of the materials and ideas, but not make an original contribution; she will also participate regularly and effectively in discussions;
- The student who participates inadequately (misses classes, doesn't take part in the online discussions, etc.) and who displays a shaky understanding of the basic themes and ideas of the course will receive a C or below.

Blackboard

In this course, we will use Blackboard, an online site that will do several things:

- contain updated versions of the *syllabus*;
- provide access to online versions of some of the *readings* (through .pdf files and through links to external sites);
- provide a vehicle for asynchronous *discussions* of class issues and ideas; post some students' response papers;
- offer a space for special *announcements*.

Be sure to check the Blackboard site regularly – at least before every class – so you can post and read reactions and questions, get access to resources, and find out about changes in the syllabus.

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Schedule/Themes

NB: This schedule is *tentative*, and may be changed depending on the issues class members identify as important to them.

| Session | Themes | Readings/Assignments |
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| 1. Tu 9/2 | <i>Introductory 1</i> : to the class, to members, to Gallatin | |
| 2. Th 9/4 | <i>Introductory 2</i> : The issues | Short paper |
| 3. Tu 9/9 | <i>Approaches 1</i> : Sociology - classics (typological, ecological) | Delanty, pp. 7-44, 50-56 <i>Optional</i> : Tonnies, Weber, Park & Burgess, Wirth (BB) |
| 4. Th 9/11 | <i>Approaches 2</i> : Sociology - mainstream (functionalist, interactionist) | Parsons, Kaufman, Lyon (BB) |
| 5. Tu 9/16 | * <i>Approaches 3</i> : Sociology - cultural | Bellah, Chaps 1, 2, 3 |
| 6. Th 9/18 | <i>Approaches 4</i> : Sociology - cultural | Bellah, Chaps 6,7 |
| 7. Tu 9/23 | * <i>Approaches 5</i> : Anthropology - symbolic | Cohen, Chaps 1 (esp. 11-21), 2 |
| 8. Th 9/25 | NSEE conference | Class Advisor session? |
| 9. Tu 9/30 | <i>Approaches 6</i> : Anthropology - symbolic | Cohen, Chaps 3, 4 |
| 10. Th 10/2 | <i>Approaches 7</i> : Politics - communitarianism | Delanty, Chap 4 <i>Optional</i> : Fowler, Chaps 4-6(BB) |
| 11. Tu 10/7 | * <i>Approaches 8</i> : Politics - social capital | Putnam, "Bowling alone" (link on BB) |
| 12. Th 10/9 | <i>Approaches 9</i> : Unit wrap | Unit paper due |
| 13. Tu 10/14 | Holiday: Fall Break | No class |
| 14. Th 10/16 | * <i>Forms and Factors 1</i> : Locality A (classics) | Bell & Newby (BB) Vidich & Bensman (BB) |

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| 15. Tu 10/21 | <i>Forms and Factors 2: Locality B (recent)</i> | Dawson, Gray (in Amit) (BB) |
| 16. Th 10/23 | * <i>Forms and Factors 3: Race/ Ethnicity A</i> | Bruhn, Chap. 3 (BB) Jackson, Chaps 1, 5 (BB) |
| 17. Tu 10/28 | <i>Forms and Factors 4: Race/ Ethnicity B</i> | Abrahamson, Chap. 5 (BB) Nee (BB) |
| 18. Th 10/30 | <i>Forms and Factors 5: Race/ Ethnicity C</i> | Davila, Chap. 2 (BB) <i>Optional</i> ; Abrahamson, Chap. 6 (BB) |
| 19. Tu 11/4 | <i>Forms and Factors 6: Communes</i> | Kanter (BB) |
| 20. Th 11/6 | * <i>Forms and Factors 7: Postmodern A - globalism, diaspora</i> | Howell, Olwig (in Amit) (BB) Delanty, Chaps 7, 8 |
| 21. Tu 11/11 | <i>Forms and Factors 8: Postmodern B - virtual community</i> | Rheingold, Chap 11 (BB) Delanty, Chap 9 |
| 22. Th 11/13 | <i>Forms and Factors 9: Unit wrap</i> | Unit paper due |
| 23. Tu 11/18 | * <i>Action 1: Community project examples A</i> | Putnam and Feldstein, Chs. 1, 5, 7 (BB) |
| 24. Th 11/20 | <i>Action 2: Community project examples B</i> | Medoff and Sklar, Intro, Chs. 2, 3 (BB) |
| 25. Tu 11/25 | <i>Action 3: Community project examples C</i> | M. Warren, Ch. 4 (BB) |
| 26. Th 11/27 | Holiday: Thanksgiving | No class |
| 27. Tu 12/2 | <i>Action 4: Community organizing and community action A</i> | Sen, <i>Stir It Up</i> (selections) <i>Optional</i> : Alinsky (BB) |
| 28. Th 12/4 | <i>Action 5: Community organizing and community action B</i> | MidWest Academy, Chs 1, 2 (BB) |
| 29. Tu 12/9 | <i>Action 6: Unit wrap</i> | Unit paper due |
| 30. Th 12/11 | <i>Course wrap-up</i> | |

* = student-led discussions (sign up during second session)

BB = text available on Blackboard site

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Books/Readings

Purchase these books (available at the NYU BookCenter; also available on Amazon.com or other online booksellers):

- Bellah, Robert N. *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart*.
- Cohen, Anthony, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*.
- Delanty, Gerard, *Community*.
- Sen, Rinku, *Stir It Up*

Other readings will be available on the course Blackboard site in .pdf format, under the Course Documents heading. Some might be made available through online links.

Links:

- Midwest Academy: <http://www.midwestacademy.com/index.html>
- Center for Third World Organizing: <http://www.ctwo.org/>
- Industrial Areas Foundation: <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>