CHAPTER 2

Symbolism, Tradition, Ritual, and the Deep Structure of Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Community life rests on underlying shared values and agreements that are often unstated and barely recognized. They are shaped by religious and cultural traditions or by the exigencies of a group's living situation that have created ways of doing things that powerfully shape organizational patterns, willingness to volunteer and participate, feelings of legitimacy in government, and safety in the face of authority. Social activities that Talcott Parsons (1965, p. 963) called "latent pattern maintenance" are the topic here: religious practices, civic rituals, and the development of the symbolism of community. The goal of this chapter is to bring to the surface data, arguments, and concepts about how these factors shape community structure.

Although social scientists often refer to "traditional communities" in the United States, the reality is that most American communities were intentional ones. Unlike other countries, where collectivities were deeply rooted in ethnic identity and place, from colonial times onward, immigration—whether transatlantic or internal—offered Americans opportunities to make choices about the kinds of communities in which they wanted to live.

This capacity of choice was not only a product of place, but of historical moment. From the seventeenth century on, as philosophers, jurists, and theologians challenged (or defended) the feudal order, concerns about the nature of political, social, and religious communities moved to the forefront of interest. The opportunity for colonization of new lands shifted this interest from the domain of theory to the domain of practical experiments in creating new kinds of communities.

The extent to which religious belief moved people to migrate and to form new collectivities gave the question of community a particular urgency. As John Winthrop's remarkable homily to the Massachusetts Bay colonists, while still on board the ship that had carried through the perils of the Atlantic, suggests, the nature of the new community the little band intended to create, the extent to which it would embody their beliefs, and its place in God's ultimate plan for mankind, was at the forefront of their concerns.
For groups moved by religious belief, scripture and theology were the source not only for defining man’s place in the cosmos, but for spelling out the nature of community, the kinds of obligations believers had to one another and to unbelievers, the character of family life, as well as aspects of everyday life, including food ways, parenting, and sexual practices.

The intentionality of early American communities is evident from the beginning. Most settlements were based on charter documents. Some were corporate charters, such as those of the Massachusetts Bay Company or Virginia Company. Others, such as the Connecticut Charter, created colony leaders as a body politic and empowered them to delegate property and political authority in specified ways. Still others, such as the charter awarding Pennsylvania to William Penn, set forth the nature and extent of the proprietor’s powers. In virtually every case, colonials settled the character of local communities.

Although nearly all the settlers of the east coast of North America were English Protestants and the charters on which their settlements were based were products of English law, there was remarkable variation in the kinds of communities the colonists created. Some of this variation was due to preferences stemming from the settlers’ origins: because most of Massachusetts’s leaders came from manorial villages, the township was adopted as the basic unit of political organization. Because Virginia’s leaders came from England’s land-owning gentry, the plantation and the county became the basic units of organization. Because Virginia’s leaders came from England’s land-owning gentry, the plantation and the county became the basic units of organization.

Other variations stemmed from economic differences. Parts of the South that favored the growth of commodity agriculture also favored the plantation agriculture. The climate, soil, and topography of New England, on the other hand, favored subsistence agriculture, small-scale farming, and, on the coast, such sea-faring occupations as fishing and trade.

Religious differences introduced additional variations. In colonies with established churches (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, New York, Virginia), church, clergy, and worship were central to social and political life of communities. In colonies like Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, which tolerated religious diversity, the social and political centrality and influence of the church depended on the preferences of local communities.

How long did it take for the relatively free intentionality of colonial settlements to become institutionalized and embedded in established and authoritative practices? Certainly the colonies’ isolation from England during and after the Puritan Revolution (1640–1660), as well as the isolation of internal settlements due to inferior infrastructure, helped to give originally chosen practices the aura of authority. The consolidation of political, economic, and religious leadership in the hands of leading families also played a role. By the end of the seventeenth century, the same names begin to appear year after year, decade after decade, as members of legislatures, courts, and town councils. The standing of families was enshrined in how worshippers were seated in church and listed on college catalogues.

At the same time, these communities remained far from traditional in the European sense. Founded in law rather than in kinship and loyalty, fundamental social arrangements were vulnerable to challenge. The colonial economy also threatened permanence and stability. British efforts to reintegrate the colonies into the mother country’s trading system disrupted legal and political arrangements (the suspension of colonial charters and the appointment of new cadres of royal officials with authority over local leaders). Mercantilism created new economic opportunities. By the early decades of the eighteenth century, the hegemony of landed wealth was threatened by challenges from new men whose wealth was derived from trade and royal favor.

Religion contained disruptive potential. Indigenous and imported evangelicalism threatened religious establishments and clerical authority beginning in the 1730s. And in settings where religion was established by law, religious conflicts were inevitably political in character.