On Roots and Routes
The Quest for Community in Times of Diversity and Inequality

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Introduction

A friend recently invited me to a brunch to celebrate her birthday with a few other college-educated and affluent white women. We talked about the burn-out of another, absent woman, who had a demanding job that brought her to various countries every few years, resulting in her now grown children being “very international”. But “naturally”, went the tenor of the conversation, she was a candidate for burn-out as she no longer had any “rootedness”. I was struck, as I have been before, by this idea of roots as a concept linked to stability and being in one place, and its connection to well-being: long stable residence in one place still seems to define home, and we live well and fare well if and when this sense of home and community can be maintained. “We” here may have been highly educated affluent women, but this is by no means the only category where such an understanding of place, home and roots prevails. In fact, society transforms, but people “continue to place a high value on what they call communities” (Charles & Davies 2005: 672). Having often moved over the years, where routes brought me to places where I temporarily spent years in community with others and then moved on, I have started to compare such a sense of place and community with the sense of place and community of some of my friends through whose lives I passed, who lived where either they expressed their roots to be or they believed they had “rooted” over time and could not imagine leaving – or would prefer not to. My efforts to further theorise the connection between place and community, a journey I had originally started in Urban Bonds (2003), resulted in a new small book, Community as Urban Practice (2017), on which I draw for this chapter.

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Notwithstanding globalisation and time/space compression, the quest for community has not faded from public discourse and imaginations, or birthday party conversations. This chapter discusses the quest for community in times of diversity and inequality. These are times in which *routes* and not *roots*, or *mobility* and not *stability*, have become features of daily life that more and more urbanites share. In contrast to ideas sometimes vented in sociology and urban studies, that community as a concept has lost its relevance, this chapter enquires how narratives of place and performance of (temporary) local identity construct community, albeit not in one singular way but in a wide variety of ways: it argues that both roots and routes matter to such understandings of community.

One may, of course, wonder whether we should indeed talk about community again. An argument against doing so is that community is inherently conservative. Its connotation evokes nostalgia for a Lost Past of solidarity and mutual support, destroyed by sweeps of rationalisation, bureaucratisation or other aspects of the modern project or, for lamenters of today, by the bad vibes of neoliberalism. Quests for community can so easily be linked to a normative idea of a village-like setting where all are thought to share norms and values that it can easily express xenophobia, too. It may be patriotic, racist, or homophobic. In short, to plead for discussing community as a useful sociological concept and to claim that it has critical theory potential is nowadays not exactly common. I argue that it is nevertheless important. First, in many instances, people living under increasingly insecure, fragmented and global conditions express an urge to define their communities and find ways to establish themselves in a world that is increasingly different, as Lemert (1995) has described. Lifestyle groups, sometimes with esoteric beliefs, orientations towards nature or other elements that help people turn away from a “mainstream”, may be seen (among other things) as such attempts. Populism and right-wing movements that spread a belief in a nationalist or regional identity as the one and only source of cohesion through processes of Othering may also be partly understood as such attempts. While community, both as a desire and as a lived everyday reality, continues to have relevance, the concept also has strong currency in social policy and politics on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum.

Yet in sociology, the concept has lost its main attraction, especially at the costs of concepts like belonging, home and identity. As I will argue, the community concept is worth working with. In contrast to the academic discussions on belonging (Savage et al. 2005), it helps us to avoid a narrowing down of the question of community to a question of where individuals feel they belong to and why and how this is the case. Whereas, I maintain, such questions are interesting too, urban sociology still needs a theorising of what holds us together and how and why in the increasingly hyper-diverse and global city – not just one on how we manage to belong.