

BEYTULHIKME
An International Journal of Philosophy
Volume 2 Issue 2 December 2012

The Ambiguity of the Community as an Ideal and Practise: A Philosophical Approach

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Abstract: In this article, the main focus is to delve into the different and contentious meanings of community as a distinguished mode of social organization by appealing to two distinguished thinkers: Ferdinand Tönnies and John Dewey. The idea of community can be read as a resistance point against the dissolution of communal life answering the loss of our sense of connectedness, but it maintains the oppression of the individual for the sake of community as well. In order to grasp these various aspects of community, at first, I will turn back to the idea of community as it is explained in Tönnies's work *Community and Society*, in relation to Dewey's *Public and Its Problems* and then I will ask if the utopian communities failed as Marx proposed or they have still something to tell us. In conclusion, I will take up utopian experiments and the contribution of Afro-Americans' experiences to the idea of community. In doing so, I aim at pointing out whether we find a historical ground for Dewey's identification of community with democracy. For he is reluctant to give us a ready-made prescription.

Keywords: Community, society, utopian communities, Afro-Americans' experience of community, Tönnies, Dewey, Marx.

İdeal ve Uygulama Olarak Cemaat Kavramının Müphemliği: Felsefî Bir Yaklaşım Denemesi

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Özet: Bu çalışmanın temel konusu özgün bir toplumsal örgütlenme biçimi olarak cemaatin farklı ve tartışmalı anlamlarının Ferdinand Tönnies ve John Dewey gibi iki özgün düşünüre başvurarak incelenmesidir. Cemaat nosyonu müşterek yaşam biçimlerinin çözülmesi karşısında kaybolan aidiyet duygusuna karşı bir direnç noktası olarak okunabilir. Diğer taraftan, bireyin cemaat değerleri uğruna baskı altına alınmasının da sebebi olabilir. Cemaat kavramının bu farklı veçhelerini kavramak için, ilk olarak, Tönnies'in *Community and Society* yapıtına Dewey'in *Public and its Problems* ile ilişkisi içerisinde değinilecek, sonra ütopyacı cemaatlerin Marx'ın iddia ettiği gibi başarızlıkla sonuçlanıp sonuçlanmadığı ya da bu deneyimlerin hala bize hitap edecek bir şeyleri olup olmadığı tartışılacak, ardından ütopyacı cemaatler ve Afro-Amerikalıların kölelik deneyiminin cemaat nosyonuna katkıları incelenecektir. Bununla niyet edilen, kendisi hazır bir reçete vermediğinden, cemaat deneyimini demokrasi ile özdeşleştiren Dewey'in savının tarihsel olarak temellendirilip temellendirilemeyeceği sorusuna bir yanıt aramaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cemaat, toplum, ütopyacı cemaatler, Afro-Amerikalıların cemaat deneyimi, Tönnies, Dewey, Marx

Introduction

The modern crisis of social organization brings the idea of community to the fore since it represents the most intimate and integrated mode of social organization in its very own nature. In order to make sense of this claim we first need to deal with this distinctive nature of a community. Can it be created or is it a natural unity? If not be created, then, we should ask if it is just an abstract concept or a theoretical criterion to understand the modern crisis of the lost meaning of being together. To put it another words, is community mere nostalgia that gives rise to the sentences beginning with "once upon a time, the family, friendship, and neighborhood has been meaning a lot to people." Or, are its roots planted well enough to turn to green once again?

The more the modern society becomes disintegrated, the more the phantom of the community haunts us. From these considerations there arises the ambiguity of community. On the one hand, it is an originative form of social organization: natural and organic in its essence, in any case does the idea of community resist to vanishing and is capable of giving rise to the new beginnings by means of shared experiences, language, religion, and so on. On the other hand, its conservative and authoritarian characteristics mark the intolerance in communal life, which is more likely to result in the suppression of the individual differences.

Community, then, is always extant and capable to a new growth, but the direction of it is not one-sided. It can be read as a resistance point against the dissolution of communal life answering the loss of our sense of connectedness, but it maintains the oppression of the individual for the sake of community as well. In order to grasp these various aspects of community, at first, I will turn back to the idea of community as it is explained in Tönnies's work, *Community and Society*, in relation to Dewey's *Public and its Problems* and then I will ask if the utopian communities failed as Marx proposed or they have still something to tell us. Next, I will take into consideration Marx's emphasis on the necessity of a revolutionary rupture from bourgeois society that claims not to be a peaceful transition but a violent rupture. I will take up utopian experiments and the contribution of Afro-

Americans' slavery experiences to the re-creation and maintenance of idea of community. In doing so, I aim at pointing out whether we find a historical ground for Dewey's identification of community with democracy. For he is reluctant to give us a ready-made prescription.

Afro-Americans went through a multilayered opression, but even in the extreme hardships and lack of not only freedom of speech but also that of freedom altogether, they found a way out to survive. Let alone right to have private property, they suffered from the basic conditions of human dignity such as right to life, maintain a family, equality, and so on. Nonetheless, this experience essentially shows us how a deserted world could be transformed into green once again by means of re-organization of the communal life in terms of mutual respect and recognition.

1. Tönnies: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

Even if it did not put the need of theory out of sight, the advent of anthropology, at least, held in abeyance the hypothetical assumptions of political philosophy about the state of nature preceding the civilized society. Nevertheless, there is a great gap between the hypothetical assumptions that are merely based on speculation and the theoretical approaches that arise from or supported by the findings of anthropology. Henry J. S. Maine's *Ancient Law* is a milestone of the political anthropology. In this work he genuinely expresses the importance of community in its relation to social formations and revolutions. As Maine writes;

> The history of political ideas begins, in fact, with the assumption that kinship in blood is the sole possible ground of community in political functions; nor is there any of those subversions of feeling, which we term emphatically revolutions, so startling and so complete as the change which is accomplished when some other principle -such as that, for instance, of local contiguity- establishes itself for the first time as the basis of common political action (1906: 137).

Max Scheler (1973), however, acknowledges Tönnies having "first established the difference between life-community and society as essential forms of human

togetherness," he also criticizes Tönnies since he "does not sufficiently separate a priori and historical" (p. 528).

For Tönnies (2002), *Community and Society* distinction grounded on "ideal types" in search for a "standard" to analyze the social reality (p. 248). What Tönnies then strives to do is not to offer a model for social change. He does not search for a way to turn back to communal life as in the way utopist communitarians endeavored, that is, isolated from the rest of the world. Nor does he proclaim a radical revolutionary rupture from *burgerliche Gesellschaft* like Marx. For Tönnies (2002), this distinction is derived from two distinct forms of human will: Natural Will/Wesenwille and Rational Will/Kürwille. Nevertheless, Tönnies states that "These two distinct concepts of will have in *common* the fact that they are conceived as the causes for or the tendencies toward *action*" (2002: 103)[1]

Well then, let us turn to Tönnies's account of community and society developed in the *Community and Society*. As to Tönnies, community, or Gemeinschaft, is a "living organism" (2002: 35). Thus it is not "mere coexistence of people independently of each other" like Gesellschaft, or society (p. 34). Tönnies (2002) takes up the Gemeinshaft under three fundamental types: *Gemeinschaft of Blood* (Kinship), *Place* (Neighborhood), and *Mind* (Friendship). The family is "the prototype of all unions of Gemeinschaft..." (p. 192). Indeed, the family is tied together with invisible metaphysical bonds by means of three forms of Natural Will: the liking, memory, and habit. These three features of the natural will sustain the shared experience of community and secure the cross-generational characteristic of community. The relationships in the family can be expressed between a) mother and child, b) husband and wife, and c) brothers and sisters. These threefold division of the relationships in community is based on *paternal authority*. Although Tönnies defines the authority in terms of protection, assistance, and guidance, its gerontoctaric and sexist aspects are open to question.[2] All the same, it seems there is no

[1] Emphasis added.

[2] Considering the eastern part of Turkey and most of the Middle Eastern countries where community relations are still effective, it can easily be seen that the weakest parts of community, women and children, are the victims of this "paternal authority." The execution of women who are accused of antenuptial intercourse or adultery and condemned to death by

room for individual in the realm of organic unity of community. In community, as a living organism, the relation of parts to the whole is determined by shared experiences and collective memories. As Tönnies (2002) asserts that "... pleasure or pain for the whole must be pleasure or pain for the parts, inasmuch as they express a totality" (p. 139). Conversely, society turns upside down this intrinsic relation since it is determined by individual profit. Tönnies writes,

> In Gesellschaft every person strives for that which is to his own advantage and he affirms the actions of others only in so far as and as long as they can further his interest... The loss of one is the profit of the other (2002: 77).

Society, for Tönnies (2002), is like a masked ball and "the person[3] or the ego of rational will is a mechanical unity" (p. 173). In this sense, it seems there is a room for individuality in Gemeinschaft insofar as it is uderstood in terms of isolated atoms. Such an individuality is a distinct product of the disintegration of community, that of Gesellschaft. This disintegration marks the loss of the idea of belonging which is a significant aspect of the formation of the identity of an individual.

2. Dewey: Great Community as a Solid Ground for Democracy

In one sense, community, a natural unity, is analogous to an organism as regards its formation. This analogy of organism explains the relation of the member of community in terms of parts and whole. It seems that parts are subordinated by whole and they only have meaning insofar as they function in harmony with the whole. The analogy of organism explains the essential characteristic of the communal life, but it also points out the intolerance of the community toward differences that does not fall under the unwritten rules of this organic unity. Community and society distinction, considered as an ideal type, could provide us a theoretical instrument to analyze and understand the disintegration of communal life in its present formation. Yet, thought of being a model to reconstitute the meaning of being together, the traditional organization of community needs to be reconsidered. In

their family council is usually performed by their youngest brother or son since they do not have criminal discretion. Being a gay, too, can be a reason to be killed.

[3] Mask or role, as it is implied in the Latin origin of the word (persona).



this context, in its authentic relation to the idea of democracy, Dewey's reconsideration of community offers us a new and genuine perspective.

Dewey (1927) begins with distinguishing two modes of social form; the Great Society and the Great Community. The former delineates the present state of society that is disintegrated and needs to be reconstructed. The latter is an ideal and intellectual problem through which this reconstruction would be achieved in the light of local community. Dewey (1927) holds that "The Great Society created by steam and electricity may be a society, but it is no community. The invasion of community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of modern life" (p. 98). Dewey claims that the Great Community cannot reach all features of the local community. If so, what is the relation between them? Dewey (1927) writes, "It [the Great Community] will do its final work in ordering the relations and enriching the experience of local associations" (p. 211).

Let us take a look at Dewey's conception of local community in comparison with that of Tönnies. Unlike Tönnies, for Dewey being a member of a community is not inborn. We become a member of community. As Dewey (1927) writes, "We are born organic beings associated with others, but we are not born members of a community" (p. 154). First, from the point of Dewey's explanation of habit, as a processor of becoming a member of a community by learning and practice, and then that of communication, as a *prerequisite* of community this difference could be construed inessential. The line of thought that Dewey follows seems parallel to Tönnies'. Dewey writes,

> The influence of habit is decisive because all distinctively human action has to be learned, and the very heart, blood and sinews of learning is creation of habitudes. Habits bind us to orderly and established ways of action because they generate ease, skill and interest in things to which we have grown used... (Dewey, 1927: 160).

The second point that carries on the parallelism is the role of language in the community. Language, *symbols* and *signs*, are "are the means of communication

by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained." (Dewey, 1927, p. 218). Habits and language being the essential features of the community furnish human actions and form the basis of the mutual relation between a member of community and community itself. In this reciprocity, community life appears to be as a never-ending translation. Furthermore, in community face to face/mouth to mouth communication precedes the other forms of communication.

According to Tönnies, as it was aforementioned, being a member of a community is defined by being a part of a whole and is explained by an analogy to organism. Dewey makes distinction between associated life and communal life. The latter is *moral* rather than organic. Dewey's originality and his contrast to Tönnies lie in his understanding of the relation of a member to her community. Dissimilar to Tönnies's account of invisible and inflexible metaphysical bonds of community, Dewey treats the membership as depending on democratic participation. It is not one-sided relationship coming out of from paternal authority. The idea of democracy and the community are so interwoven. Turning back to the idea of democracy is not the same as utopian models of democracy. As he writes, the idea of democracy "is the idea of community life itself" (Dewey, 1927: 148). In fact, Dewey's account of community does not spring from the unity of unequal human beings as such in Tönnies's account. As to Dewey, equality, fraternity, and liberty find their true expression in the communal life. Thought of under the idea of democracy, community liberates the potentialities of individual and therewith the individual partakes in the shared experience and values of the community.

3. Utopianism and The Experience of Afro-Americans

Although Dewey's depiction of the relation between democracy and community is considerably explicit, he is precautious not to offer a panacea prescription for all times and conditions. Therefore, in order to grasp this relation deeply we need to turn back to the utopian experiences and Afro-Americans experiences of community. Yet it is serviceable for our discussion to invoke Marx's critiques on the idea of utopian communities based on his revolutionary ideas about social changes.

As a sign of twentieth century's characteristics, Arendt's endeavor carries on the tension between politics and philosophy that stands before philosophers. Changing the world is still a claim worthy to think and act about it, but the extremities of the century turns philosophers' attention to the means of changes. Unlike Marx's claim that offers a revolutionary rupture from the capitalist society by means of agency of the proletariat that represents all sorts of oppressions in it, Arendt is not persuaded about the role of violence as a medium of social change. Arendt (1970) accepts the role of violence to change the world but she asserts that "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (p. 80).

Marx (1964), in the *Class Struggles in France*, asserts that "revolutions are the locomotives of history." Arendt (1963) criticizes and expresses her doubt on Marx's *generalization* about revolution and, as to her, revolution is "the outcome of specific deeds and events" (p. 259). Revolution, for Marx, is a necessity to surpass the disintegration, or to put it in his words, multilayered alienation of human being (as it is defined in his late writings; working class, or a more technical term, proletariat).[4] The dissolution of community is closely related to the raise of capitalism. Nevertheless, capitalism did not uproot all social organizations and institutions, but this *concrete* and *particular* mode of production added a new dimension to them. To illustrate, Marx writes,

> Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only *particular* modes of production, and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of *private property* at the appropriation of *human* life is, therefore, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his *human*, i.e., *social* mode of existence (Marx, 1988: 103).

Then, the question is not only to overthrow capitalist mode of production, but also to annihilate all the residues of it. To illustrate, for Marx, the family in bourgeois society loses its intimate meaning and reflects its fundamental characteristic: it is based on "capital, private gain." Capitalism is a total *devaluation of man*.

[4] The distinction between Marx's early and late writings must be taken into consideration.

Thus, the question for Marx is not a peaceful transition from capitalist society to a communist one. Then, from this assumption there arises Marx's critique of utopian attempts. Although he acknowledges utopian ideas' revolutionary aspects, he thinks that establishing isolated communities without changing the whole system of oppression is mere fantasy, illusory. They are necessarily doomed to fail, because their attempts fails to grasp the essential agent of this social change and yet they do not take into consideration the lack of *material conditions* for this kind of revolutionary rupture. Furthermore, as Marx (1988) writes, "they deaden the class struggle and to reconcile the class antagonisms" (p. 241). Well, Marx's critique of utopian attempts is not groundless and it is justified by later historical events. In particular, as Engels quoted from Marx (1988), Paris Commune manifested that "the working class cannot lay simply hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes" (p. 207).

Utopian communities' escape from the social organization of their own time gave rise to new questions about social change. As Marx (1988) said communitarian experiments were in principle reactionary and the idea of community was conservative in its nature. Nevertheless, the revolutionary characteristics of utopian experience of community are undeniable and worthy to think over, even though they are not revolutionary as much Marxian way. Holloway's work, *Utopian Communities in America* (1966), shows us how the utopian experiments, even religious ones, could be more revolutionary and how their experiments lead them to the democratization of their daily and political life. To illustrate, he emphasizes the conditions of children and women in those communal experiments: children are *well-educated* and women have *equal rights*. Furthermore, the utopian experiences give a new meaning to the word *work*. Holloway writes that

> These communities include communists, socialists, anarchists, Catholics and men and women of other faiths, all of whom work together harmoniously. The first community in Valence, like its successors, was grouped about the place of work, in this case a factory. The work-place is also used as a communal center for recreation and assemblies of all kinds. Members live in their own houses anywhere in the town; and the family, rather than the individual, is the basic



> unit... Work includes all activities that benefit the community, and payment is made for a week of about forty-seven hours, of which eight are devoted to 'obligatory sport, education, and philosophic enquiry' (1966: 231-2).

These particular experiments and, in Holloway's word, their positive contribution to the idea of utopian community cannot escape Marx's critique about not offering a complete solution to the fundamental class antagonism and being blind to the total emancipation of all the oppressed. Nevertheless, regarding our initial question that seeks for an answer to the relation between community and democracy, these experiences extends our horizon beyond particular experiences. As Holloway (1966) indicates that the Shaker community which is a religious one "outlived many secular communities" (p. 78). Yet the question is not the duration of a particular utopian community, but the values they succeed through their collective experiences. For the Shaker community, Holloway sorts these revolutionary values as *absolute equality* between men and women and *tolerance of race and colour*.[5]

Besides utopian experiments, Afro-Americans' experience of community shed more lights on the ambiguity of the idea of community. Their experiences show that it is not only conservative, but also revolutionary. Here we are not interested in the depiction of the cruel experience of slavery but by what means Afro-Americans survived that cruel conditions of oppression. Race, family, and religion are the most important features that bond them together to reconstruct a community in spite of unstable and violent conditions of slavery. Huggins (1990) states that slavery is a *condition of race,* therefore individual emancipation, either by will of their master or buying their own freedom, does not give them to enjoy their privileges. It must be added that when Afro-Americans arrived in their new *land* they were torn from their own communities and as Huggins (1990) emphasizes that they *seasoned* with others that even they could not communicate. The center of the community life, the family was not stable because of slave market. It was under the menaces of being torn apart again since they were considered commodities. Thus, as Huggins (1990) writes that "the reestablishment in America of forms of African

[5] Holloway also signifies that "they were the only people of their time to include both Jews and Negros in their settlements" (1966: 78).

community were thwarted from the beginning" (p. 155). Nevertheless, Huggins (1990) holds that Afro-Americans found their way out to *transcend the role of victim* by means of reconstructing their community in a revolutionary way. Their experiences are, then, very important for our discussion about community in respect of its revolutionary aspects besides conservative ones. The slave family is distinguished from the white family by its insistence upon collective identity instead of individuality. The slave family was *defensive* and *protective* since it was under the threats of breakups caused by slave trade. As Huggins (1990) states that "the traditional family in Africa extended itself beyond the nuclear group" (p. 162). Furthermore, Huggins adds that

> Slaves, despite obstacles, managed to build their family structures and honor them wherever conditions made it possible... They maintained a strong sense of bond to kinfolk, even those distanced by death or by sale to other parts of the country. They remembered grandparents and parents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, in the names they chose for their children (1990: 163).

The family was one of the most important features of slave community that kept them together even in the absence of conditions being together as a *family*. Another significant aspect of slave community is the values about women. Compared to slave men, slave women were not privileged or considered to be *fragile*. However, contrary to white women, virginity or widowhood did not cause them to be treated badly.

Afro-Americans' conversion to Christianity is a significant example of the innovative aspect of community. Being a Christian, "the giving of themselves the deities of their masters," was at first "a means of distinguishing oneself from other slaves," but the slaveholders were suspicious about this process of conversion in apprehension of *conspiracies, provocations,* and *disorders* (Huggins, 1990, p. 173). They were not wrong about their fears. Although they follow now same religious faith, their understanding and practice of Christianity were different. While masters saw in it the justification of the slavery, slaves found in it the appreciation of life and the joy of being together. Therefore, it must be said that, as Huggins writes,



> Christianity was converted to their [Afro-Americans'] needs as much as they were converted to its doctrine... Their religion would be their principal defense against the multiple attacks on the slave personality, and it would be the chief means of community among slaves, compromising shared experiences and shared values (1990: 174).

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Dewey takes one step forward from Tönnies by including the idea of democracy to the idea of community and vice versa. In doing so, it can be said that Dewey's account of community is aware of the risks of community such as racism and sexism, though he does not offer a definite solution.[6] His critics about the modern means of communication make him closer Tönnies. Dewey, in searching for great community, turns back to local community and takes its original mode of communication, *dialogue-mouth to mouth*, *face to face* communication as a model. Considering the house and *neighborly community* as the epitome of national and international democracy, Dewey revitalizes both the idea of democracy and community in their very interdependence. Dewey's identification of the idea of community to democracy goes beyond the traditional conception of the community thought of under blood relationship, physical and emotional proximity. Democratic participation secures the individual differences and underlies the mutual development of community and individual. It is a process of liberation, not of suppression of the weakest parts of community. The experiments of utopian communities and the experiences of Afro-Americans give Dewey's endeavor a firm ground. Not only in theory but also in practice, the idea of community is rich enough to be considered as a model to reconstruct our disintegrated society on the basis of mutual relationship of communitarian values and democracy.

[6] For the sake of brevity I did not discuss the feminist interpretations of Dewey's conception of community such as Erin McKenna and Iris Marion Young. In her work, *The Task of Utopia*, McKenna takes up the intolerance of the community towards the differences as a question before us when we try to understand Dewey's position.

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