Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance.

Does “community” exist? Is it an important level of analysis for those who study organizing and organization? Organizational scholars have had a long-standing interest in the concept of community. As Djelic and Quack note, community has often been infused with a nostalgic positive glow: close bonds arising from geographic proximity and shared history that facilitate trust and cooperation. Social capital theorists built on this sense of community, creating a surge of interest in the concept in the late 1990s. Population ecologists, in contrast, have conceptualized community using a biological metaphor positing both symbiotic relations and the potential for intense competition for limited resources. Portes (1998) turned a more critical eye on the concept of community, considering how close ties can be associated with intense social control and xenophobia. The past decade, however, has seen a decline of interest in community among organizational scholars. Djelic and Quack’s book makes a persuasive argument for putting community back in the picture, and they make a particularly compelling argument that the concept of transnational community must be considered if we are interested in understanding the more global social space in which organizing now occurs.

Community is a deceptively simple concept. We all think we know what it is; however, capturing the phenomenon of community empirically has been much more challenging. Theoretical clarity has also been fraught with challenges. What are the differences among community, field, network, market, social movement, profession, or industry? How can the seemingly old-fashioned concept of community be reconceptualized to respond to social constructivist sensibilities? Critics of community, particularly positivist critics, have challenged whether there is any “there, there” (to paraphrase Gertrude Stein).

To their credit, the editors of this collection of primarily qualitative, empirical work confront these questions directly in their introduction, offering definitions and delineating the historical trajectory and debates regarding the concept of community. Djelic and Quack’s chapters (introductory and concluding) offer those who are wondering if the concept of community is still relevant a well-thought-out and wide-ranging response. The literature review itself makes the book worth reading. Djelic and Quack’s review takes us back over one hundred years to the original uses of the term and across multiple disciplines, ranging from anthropology, economics, and political science to sociology. Djelic and Quack go much beyond a review of the past literature; their introduction highlights how the concept of community is reemerging as a crucial concept for theorizing, analyzing, and understanding current, consequential social processes. Bringing together the concepts of community of practice (Wenger, 1998), epistemic communities (Hass, 1992), and “imagined communities” (Anderson, 2006) with concepts such as capital, regulation, and social movements, Djelic and Quack, and Renate Mayntz
in her powerful chapter, outline why and how communities continue to be an important focus of study in a globalizing world. An important achievement of these introductory chapters is to connect recent use of the concept of community to the less positivist readings of early European social theorists.

These introductory chapters provide the bulk of the theorizing in the book, which otherwise focuses on empirical work, primarily case studies. The individual empirical pieces vary widely not only in empirical foci but also in the extent to which they seem to make a substantial contribution to a discussion of community. Varying from qualitative depictions of emerging and changing markets to social movements and virtual communities, each of the chapters offers a rich and interesting depiction of a different social context. The case studies introduced me to a seemingly endlessly diverse universe of social contexts ranging geographically from China to Europe to the USA and beyond into on-line communities and including temperance activists in the 1800s, software activists organizing in virtual space, and accountants, investment bankers, and trade unionists. One of my few reservations in reading this collection was the way in which some of the authors used case studies to make claims that seemed to extend beyond the reach of their data. It was also challenging in many of the chapters to see how the data reflected the phenomenon of community. While the chapters capture uniformly interesting social spaces, a few stood out for me: Ramirez describes the emergence of a transnational professional community as accounting firms have gone global; Harvey and Maclean compare the boards of directors in France and Britain, illustrating the tensions between local traditions and global pressures; and Bartley and Smith examine how certification regimes were originally constructed by communities of organic farmers and peace activists. The diversity of cases makes for interesting reading, but the sheer variety also inclines the reader to wonder again whether the often temporary, peripheral relations depicted warrant the term “community.” Again, to their credit, the editors address this question directly in their conclusion: “Therefore, it is both methodologically and substantively difficult to isolate precisely the impact of transnational communities per se in the complex ecology of transnational governance. Still, as this volume has demonstrated, this is far from meaning that transnational communities do not make a difference. We have argued and provided illustrative evidence that they do! This volume, though, is only the beginning of the journey” (p. 408). I think this volume has much to offer organizational scholars, and I think most will come away convinced that Djelic and Quack’s call for increased attention to transnational communities is a worthy endeavor.

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