Syllabus

MA Proseminar: Community Studies and Action
CORE-GG 2015-001
Fall 2011
Tue 6:20-8:20
Silver 506

David Moore, instructor
Gallatin School, New York University
Office: 1 Washington Place, #408
212-998-7328
david.moore@nyu.edu
Office hours: Tue + Thu 2-5, Wed 2-4, preferably by appointment

Overview

The concept of community, one of the core ideas in social thought, conjures up many different images: towns and residential neighborhoods (“Bronxville,” “the Lower East Side”); work groups, professions and academic disciplines (“the claims team,” “the medical community”); major institutions (“the university community,” “the church”); racial and ethnic groups (“the African American community,” “Basques”); and other interest groups (“the environmental community,” “the business community”). Thinkers from Aristotle to John Winthrop to Robert Bellah have invoked the idea; so have social activists from Thomas Jefferson to Saul Alinsky and Cesar Chavez (not to mention Barack Obama!). In the last hundred 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 perhaps in a transformed condition.

This proseminar will explore the phenomenon of community from several perspectives and for several purposes. First, we will examine some of the ways the concept has been studied and explained in various academic disciplines: e.g., sociology, anthropology, politics, and philosophy. Even within those disciplines, and certainly between them, we will discover a variety of schools of thought about the problem. Second, we will look at the community as an arena for practice, a site for acting in and changing the world. We will investigate the ways the term has been used in these different contexts, and consider the reasons why it shows up in so many discourses both inside and outside academia. We will address such questions as:

* what do we actually mean by the term “community”? do the various forms of community have core features in common, or is the term used to refer to very different phenomena?

* what are the conditions under which communities arise and flourish? when do they wither and die? when, how and in what sense do they change substantially? 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?
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* 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?
* is the community a legitimate and productive foundation for political solidarity and *action*? how have various activists worked to change and improve the community? what political commitments and theoretical assumptions are embedded in the different approaches? which ones have been most effective?

Part of the function of this course, then, is the exploration of the concept of community. Another function, however, addresses your development within Gallatin. We will be examining the community idea as an example of the process of *interdisciplinary studies* at the graduate level. Even if your individual concentration has nothing to do with community, the course will help you understand what it means to explore a complex theme from a variety of perspectives and to consider its implications for *action* or *practice*. 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; on *strategies* for defining and pursuing your own thematic concerns. The class may help you construct an effective plan for pursuing your concentration, and even begin to think about the nature of the thesis.

We will also meet with several members of the Gallatin faculty to hear about how the concept of community enters into their own scholarly and professional work, to discuss the methods and theories related to community that they use. These sessions will more generally expose students to the kinds of work done by Gallatin faculty, which often cross disciplinary boundaries and draw on a variety of methods. The following faculty will visit us for conversations:

- **Ritty Lukose**, a cultural anthropologist, explores politics, gender, globalization and nation within the context of colonial, postcolonial and diasporic modernities, especially as they affect South Asia; part of her research has focused on communities of fishers in Kerala, India.
- **Louise Harpman** is an award-winning architect who teaches courses on urban design, habitation, and mapping; as a faculty member at the University of Texas, she led a project in which students collaborated with community members in designing and building site-specific facilities.
- **Steve Duncombe**, a media sociologist and cultural studies scholar with an interest in mass and alternative media, has a long history as a political activist and community organizer; he is the co-founder and director of the Center for Creative Activism.

Finally, as the third function of the course, we will be discussing elements of the graduate program itself, and your strategies for moving toward the degree. In a sense, the class will become an auxiliary advising device, an opportunity to understand the demands and resources of the program: how to construct a useful booklist and put it in shape for the review of literature, how to begin organizing ideas and theories that will undergird your thesis, and how to start formulating a strategy and method for that final project. We will spend a good deal of time talking about students’ own work, regardless of its connection to the idea of community – sometimes as a whole class, sometimes in smaller interest groups, sometimes in solo meetings.
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with the instructor.

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 a set of general readings about the idea of community, 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 issues or phenomena: theories of community; studies of particular kinds of communities; modes of action around community. Within each, we will read and discuss certain materials and issues.

Part of the course, moreover, will be structured as a true seminar, an opportunity for students to present their thoughts about concepts, issues and theories. You will offer critiques of the readings; you will identify and pursue lines of inquiry relevant to your own concerns; you may collaborate with other students on projects and investigations. The class will succeed on the foundation of your active participation.

Writing Assignments

Students in the course will write three papers:

- one brief paper (2-3 pp.) in two parts: (a) offering your own initial definition or conception of the idea of community, and 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 (b) describing your own Gallatin concentration, the disciplines and professions you intend to draw on, and the state of your thinking about a thesis (ungraded); due on Blackboard, Tuesday, September 13, by 3 pm (post the two sections under the appropriate heading); bring a copy to class.

- a critique (interpretation, comparison, analysis, synthesis, review) of two or more of the schools of thought we have addressed (or perhaps some we haven’t, like the psychological sense of community, or the economics of community); and/or a discussion of two or more theoretical perspectives or issues in your own concentration; 6-8 pp; due as an email attachment (david.moore@nyu.edu), Tuesday, November 8, 3 pm.

- one longer paper presenting a case study of a particular form or instance of community or of community action; ca. 15 pp.; due as email attachment, Tuesday, December 14, 3pm.

Each student will present thoughts about one or another approach to community during one of the debriefing session; you will sign up for these presentations during the second meeting.
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Finally, you will also be expected to participate regularly and actively in the chatroom on the course’s Blackboard site; we will conduct an ongoing conversation between classes. There is no specific requirement for the number of comments you post, but they should be spread out across the semester, not backloaded, and they should be real contributions to our collective thinking.

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 6:20, and to stay until 8:20; do not disrupt the conversation by arriving late or leaving early. If you miss sessions (in whole or in part), you obviously cannot learn from them. Please let me know in advance if you have a serious conflict and cannot attend a session; 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.

- **Do a presentation** to the class on some aspect of the issues and ideas we are studying and/or the work you are doing: ‘debriefs’ on weeks 7, 10, 14. You will sign up for these presentations early in the semester; they may be done individually or in groups.

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 (±20%)
- contribution to discussions (in class, online, in presentations)(±30%)
- quality of the papers: shorter (±20%); longer (±30%)

The criteria for the grade 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
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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 face-to-face or 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 the latest version 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.

Book purchases and other readings

You will need to purchase the following texts at the NYU Bookstore on Broadway (or through amazon.com, bn.com or another bookseller). The other required readings will be available in .pdf format or through links on the course Blackboard site. Be sure to acquire all these materials early enough so that you have time to complete the readings before the related discussions.

• Gerard Delanty, Community
• Robert N. Bellah, et al., Habits of the Heart
• Anthony P. Cohen, The Symbolic Construction of Community
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Academic Integrity

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

Schedule/Themes/Assignments

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<tr>
<th>Session/Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. 9/6</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>* on ‘community’: (a) critical incident exercise; (b) list of possible communities; (c) tries at definitions * on student programs: descriptions and discussions * on the course</td>
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<td>2. 9/13</td>
<td>Perspectives 1: Sociology A Issues and ideas, perspectives and problems; philosophy, history</td>
<td>Delany, Chs. 1, 2, 3 Poplin, pp. 3-25 (BB) (Optional: Gusfield, pp. 1-52)(BB) Paper 1: due on Blackboard</td>
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<td>3. 9/20</td>
<td>Perspectives 2: Sociology B Cultural sociology</td>
<td>Bellah et al., Chs 1, 2, 3, 6, 7</td>
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<td>4. 9/27</td>
<td>Perspectives 3: Anthropology A Symbolic construction of community</td>
<td>Cohen, all</td>
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<td>5. 10/4</td>
<td>Perspectives 4: Anthropology B Guest: Professor Ritty Lukose</td>
<td>TBA</td>
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<td>6. 10/11</td>
<td>No class</td>
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<td>7. 10/18</td>
<td>Debrief on sociological and anthropological perspectives</td>
<td>Student presentations</td>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<th>Reading/Notes</th>
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| 8. 10/25 | Perspectives 6: Political science: communitarianism and social capital | Delanty, Chs. 4, 5  
Putnam, “Bowling alone” (BB) |
| 9. 11/1   | Perspectives 7: Space/Place/Design  
Guest: Professor Louise Harpman | TBA                                     |
| 10. 11/8  | Debrief on political and spatial perspectives | Student presentations                |
| 11. 11/15 | Action 1: Approaches and examples          | Sen, selections (BB)  
Alinsky, Prologue, Ch. 1 (BB)     |
| 12. 11/22 | Action 2: Models of action                 | Putnam and Feldstein, Ch. 1, 5 (BB)  
Bornstein, Ch. 9, 11, 15 (BB)     |
| 13. 11/29 | Action 3: Cultural activism  
Guest: Professor Steve Duncombe | TBA                                     |
| 14. 12/6  | Action 4: Action inside or outside community | Student presentations                |
| 15. 12/14 | Wrap-up                                    | final papers due                      |

NB: BB = available on Blackboard site