Community Studies and Action

Syllabus
CORE-GG 2015-001
Spring 2013
Tuesdays, 6:20-8:50
1 Washington Place, room 401

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Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2-4, preferably by appointment; other times available

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 social institutions (the university, the church); racial and ethnic groups (African Americans, the Hmong); and other interest groups (environmentalists, business people). 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 threatened and even disappearing; others find it surviving, even thriving, though perhaps in a transformed condition.

This proseminar will serve several purposes in your graduate career. First, we will explore some of the ways the phenomenon of community has been studied, explained, and investigated in various academic disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, politics, psychology). Even within those disciplines, and certainly between them, we will discover a variety of schools of thought or theoretical stances about the problem. We will address such questions as:

$ What do we actually mean when we use 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 how do they die? When, how, and in what sense do they change? 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?
$ 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?
To look at this inquiry from a meta-perspective, we will be pursuing higher-level questions about the nature of social phenomena more generally. What kind of thing is community? For that matter, what kinds of things do social scientists study? In what kinds of terms, based on what kinds of assumptions, do they try to make sense of those phenomena? We will be thinking about such different approaches as positivism, interpretivism, constructionism, structuralism, and post-structuralism, considering the things each of those perspectives is good for—or not.

Second, we will look at the community (or, more accurately, communities) 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 use this opportunity to examine a variety of approaches to social change, political action, and professional practice. We will look at questions like these:

- 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?
- What lessons can be teased out of community activism for the practice of other professions: design, the arts, business, education, and so on?
- What processes best engage the professional in serious and productive reflection on her or his practice?

Part of the function of this course, then, is the exploration of the concept of community and of modes of inquiry and action in the social sciences and professions. 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 clarifying and pursuing your concentration, and even begin to think about the nature of a possible thesis.

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 your 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 with the instructor. Finally, the class aims at building a community among its members. Get to know your classmates, their concentrations, plans, and assets. They will be one of your strongest resources in the program.
Process and structure

Because of this tripartite character—because of our focus on the substance of the community problem, on the nature of perspectives on inquiry and action, and on the process of interdisciplinary study in Gallatin—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. That means that I count on you to express your core interests, to raise important questions, to lend yourself to the course. It would even be great if you could suggest appropriate readings for the class.

The structure of the course—which could change, if enough people make a solid proposal—has a few elements. The basic structure, between the Introduction and the Wrap-up, is organized around investigations of three loosely defined types of community: the community of locality (the neighborhood, town, etc.); the community of interest (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, activity, etc.); and postmodern community (a term we’ll get to know better). Those themes define the three major sections of the course. Within each thematic unit, we will do several things: read and discuss theories and studies related to the community type; talk about modes of action in each domain; and hear presentations from students on work they are doing.

Much 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 formal papers, two informal introductory essays, and a number of commentaries in response to readings and discussions:

$ 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 Classes Monday, February 10, by 3 pm (post each essay under the appropriate heading; bring a copy to class).

$ For one of the three substantive units of the course, a longer (ca. 15-20 pp.) paper reflecting your analysis of a concept, theory, issue, research method, or practice related to the unit theme. This paper will be an elaborated version of your presentation to the class. You will sign up for these presentations during the second meeting of the course; you will hand in a written proposal for the presentation no less than ten days before you give
it. The due date for the paper will be the Saturday following the presentation, at noon, by email.

Two shorter papers (ca. 7-8 pages) analyzing a concept, theory, issue, research method, or practice related to the unit theme in the other two sections of the course. Each paper will be due at 5 pm on the day of the presentations for that unit.

Here is a recap of the due dates for papers:
*Paper #1 – 3 pm on 2/10, on Classes;
*Paper #2 – 5 pm on 3/5 for short version, noon on 3/9 for long version, both by email;
*Paper #3 – 5 pm on 4/9 for short version, noon on 4/13 for long version, both by email;
*Paper #4 – 5 pm on 5/7 for short version, noon on 5/11 for long version, both by email.

Finally, you will also be expected to write response papers on the Classes site. This medium will provide us a platform for an ongoing conversation between classes. On six to eight occasions, I will post guiding questions about the readings, the presentations, the discussions, and so on; you will post responses to those questions, given your readings and thoughts, by noon on the Monday before the related class session.

**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 the end of class; 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 emergency and cannot attend a session; do not schedule medical or other appointments during class time. If your employer frequently claims your time during this slot, you may not be able to take the course; I am totally sympathetic to the reality of work demands, but cannot accommodate repeated absences because of them.

*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 effectively in class activities*—discussions (both in-class and online), small groups, presentations. 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 productively in small group activities: do your share of the work, support other members.

Electronic devices policy: During class, you may use a laptop, iPad, or other electronic device for taking notes, pulling up readings or other class resources, or, on rare occasions, looking up information online at my request, but not for surfing the internet, checking your email, playing games, or other non-class activities. (I can tell the difference!) Please turn off and put away your cellphones for the duration of the class; you may not make or take calls or texts; don’t distract yourself or other members of the class by checking your device.

Grades will be based on the various aspects of students’ work in the course. The approximate weight of each factor may vary somewhat depending on your focus and style, but here are some rough estimates for the different elements:

- Regular and punctual attendance: ∀25%
- Participation in and contribution to discussions (in class, online): ∀25%
- Quality of the papers: shorter ( ∀20% ); longer + presentation ( ∀30% )

The criteria for the grade will focus on your effort and ability to go beyond the basic expectations of doing and understanding the assigned work (NB: Early in the term, I will distribute rubrics describing the standards for the papers/presentations and participation, and we will discuss those standards in class):

- The student who earns an A will not only come regularly (that is, miss not more than one class), participate actively and constructively, and demonstrate in her writing 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/or 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; merely using ideas and materials from the syllabus and the classes will not warrant an A;
- The student who earns a B will show a solid grasp of the materials and ideas, but not make an original contribution or draw on sources beyond the syllabus; 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.

NYU Classes

As you probably know, NYU has dropped Blackboard and instituted Classes for course-related functions. We will be using Classes for several purposes:

- to post the latest version of the syllabus (which may change as interests crystallize);
- to provide access to online versions of many of the readings (through .pdf files and through links to external sites);
to serve as a vehicle for asynchronous discussions of class issues and ideas; to post students’ response papers; to offer a space for special announcements.

Be sure to check the Classes 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 purchase and other readings**

You will need to purchase the following text 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 Classes site. Be sure to acquire all these materials early enough so that you have time to complete the readings before the related discussions.


**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 ([http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)) for a full description of the academic integrity policy. You are responsible for knowing and following these standards; ignorance is not an excuse.
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<tr>
<th>Session/Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Assignment/Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Jan 29</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Preconceptions of community</td>
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| 2. Feb 5     | Review of literature; research | Guest: Marnie Brady, writing specialist  
* **Paper #1** due Sunday, Feb 10, noon, *on Classes*

| 3. Feb 12    | Part 1a: Conceptualizing community; communities of locality  
Traditional, positivist  
Functionalist |  
* Delanty, Chs. 1, 2, 3  
* Poplin, pp. 3-25  
* Warren, Ch. 2  
* McMillan & Chavis, pp. 1-19 |

| 4. Feb 19    | Part 1b: Communities of locality  
Interpretivist/constructionist  
Symbolic  
Postmodern |  
* Anderson, *Streetwise*  
* Cohen, *The symbolic construction*  
* Jackson, *HarlemWorld* |

| 5. Feb 26    | Part 1c: Communities of locality  
Action: organizing local communities |  
* Alinsky, *Rules for radicals*  
* Sen, *Stir it up*  
* Bobo et al., *Organizing for social change*  
* DeFilippis, *Contesting community*  
* Putnam, *Better together* |

| 6. Mar 5     | Part 1d: Communities of locality | **Presentations**  
* **Paper #2** due: short (5 p today); long (noon 3/9) |

| 7. Mar 12    | Part 2a: Communities of interest  
Race, ethnicity, class, sexuality |  
* Delanty, Chs. 4, 5, 6  
* Jodhka, *Community and identities*  
* Joseph, *Against the romance of...*  
* Valentine, *Imagining transgender* |

| 8. Mar 19    | No class: Spring Break | |

| 9. Mar 26    | Part 2b: Communities of interest  
Work, professions, institutions |  
* Wenger, *Communities of practice*  
* Options: on the school as a community; on the discipline as a community, etc.* |

| 10. Apr 2    | Part 2c: Communities of interest  
Action: organizing communities of interest | TBA: arts activism; social entrepreneurship; union organizing, etc.* |
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<tr>
<td>11. Apr 9</td>
<td>Part 2d: Communities of interest</td>
<td>* Paper #3 due: short (5 p today); long (noon 4/13)</td>
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<td>12. Apr 16</td>
<td>Part 3a: Postmodern communities</td>
<td>* Delanty, Chs. 7, 8 &lt;br&gt; * Options: Nancy, Blanchot, Lyotard, Bauman, Maffesoli &lt;br&gt; * Jodhka, Amit</td>
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<td>Philosophies</td>
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<td>Diasporas</td>
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<td>13. Apr 23</td>
<td>Part 3b: Postmodern communities</td>
<td>* Delanty, Ch. 9 &lt;br&gt; * Rheingold, Shirky, Turkle &lt;br&gt; * Kadushin, Field, Watts &lt;br&gt; * Ross, <em>The Celebration chronicle</em></td>
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<td>Internet; virtual community</td>
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<td>Social networks</td>
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<td>Planned communities</td>
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<td>14. Apr 30</td>
<td>Part 3c: Postmodern communities</td>
<td>TBA: Occupy; post-disaster communities; social action on the internet, etc.</td>
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<td>Action: organizing postmodern</td>
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<td>communities; Occupy, disasters</td>
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<td>15. May 7</td>
<td>Part 3d: Postmodern communities</td>
<td>* Paper #4 due: short (5 p today); long (noon 5/11)</td>
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<td>16. May 14</td>
<td>Wrap-up</td>
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NB: All items except Delanty available on Classes site. Some specific items to be decided depending on student interests.