5. Public Voice

The discussion up to this point focused on responsive communitarianism as a social philosophy, its social science propositions and ethical implications. Responsive communitarians also have been playing a considerable public role. They are best understood as a new environmental movement, one concerned with the well-being of society rather than nature. Like environmentalism, communitarianism appeals to audiences across the political spectrum. The record shows that their influence extends from the moderate social democratic left (especially Tony Blair and Bill and Hillary Clinton) to the moderate Tory right (including public figures such as Kurt Biedenkopf in Germany and David Willetts in the UK). Green parties are also among those who often embrace communitarian concepts.

Communitarian terms have become part of the public vocabulary in the 1990s, especially references to assuming social responsibilities to match individual rights, while the term 'communitarianism' itself is used much less often. The number of articles about communitarian thinking in the popular press, increased twelvefold during the last decade of the twentieth century.

See also: Civic Culture; Civil Religion; Civil Society, Concept and History of; Communalism; Communitarianism: Political Theory; Individualism versus Collectivism: Philosophical Aspects; Liberalism; Republicanism: Impact on Social Thought; Republicanism: Philosophical Aspects

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A. Etzioni

Communities of Practice

The term 'community of practice' is of relatively recent coinage, even though the phenomenon it refers to is age-old and social scientists have talked about it under various guises. In a nutshell, a community of practice is a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavor and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them: a tribe, a garage band, a group of engineers working on similar problems.

1. Definition

Not everything called a community is a community of practice. A neighborhood for instance, is often called a community, but is usually not a community of practice. Three characteristics are crucial.

1.1 The Domain

Since a community of practice is focused on a domain of shared interest, it is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. Membership therefore implies a minimum level of knowledge of that domain—a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. (You could belong to the same network as someone and never know it.) The domain is not necessarily something recognized as 'expertise' outside the community. A youth gang may have developed all sorts of ways of dealing with their domain: surviving on the street and maintaining some kind of identity they can live with.

1.2 The Community

In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. That is how they form a community around their domain and build relationships. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. The claims processors in a large insurance company or the students in American high schools may have much in common, but unless they interact, they do not form a community of practice. The Impressionists, for instance, used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they usually painted alone.

1.3 The Practice

A community of practice is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for

instance. Members of a community of practice develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes interactions over time. A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. The development of a shared practice may be more or less self-conscious. The 'windshield wipers' community of practice at an auto manufacturer makes a concerted effort to collect and document the tricks and lessons they have learned into a knowledge base. By contrast, nurses who meet regularly for lunch in a hospital cafeteria may not realize that their lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to care for patients, even though in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories and cases that become a shared repertoire for them to think about and discuss new cases.

1.4 A Familiar Experience

We all belong to communities of practice. They have been around for as long as human beings have learned together. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies, we belong to several communities of practice at any given time. And the communities of practice to which we belong change over the course of our lives. In fact, communities of practice are everywhere.

Theoreticians often wonder whether the concept of community of practice is an analytical category, whether it exists only in the theoretician's mind, or whether it refers to actual social structures in the world. The answer is that it is both:

(a) The extent to which any social structure is a community of practice is not something that can be determined in the abstract. Is a family a community of practice? What about a group of workers? A sports team? An orchestra? A classroom? This is always an empirical question that can only be resolved by analyzing the way the group operates. In this sense, the concept is an analytical category.

(b) Yet, you can go into the world and actually see communities of practice at work. Moreover, these communities are not beyond the awareness of those who belong to them, even though participants may not use this language to describe their experience. Members can usually discuss what their communities of practice are about, who else belongs, and what competence is required to qualify as a member.

Communities of practice are a familiar experience, so familiar perhaps that it escapes our attention. Yet when it is given a name and brought into focus, it helps us understand the world better. In particular, it allows us to see the social world as structured by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it, rather than more obvious formal structures such as institutional boundaries.

2. Theoretical Applications

Why have many social scientists found the concept of community of practice to be a useful unit of analysis? Well, if you want to understand broad issues such as culture, identity, and learning in terms of the processes by which people create systems of meanings, then it is useful to consider a unit of analysis where these processes involve a direct experience of engagement for participants.

Communities of practice break down the traditional dichotomy in social theory between perspectives that give primacy to structure (history, culture, myths, or class, of which moments of life are mere instantiations) and perspectives that give primacy to immediate experience (local interactions, of which broader structures are an emergent property). A community of practice is a mid-level unit of analysis that combines both elements. It is neither an abstract structure nor a passing experience. Unlike a culture, it is within the reach of individual participants. Members of a community of practice contribute to the development of the practice through direct engagement in their community. Unlike momentary interactions, however, a community of practice has an enduring character as a social structure. It can therefore accumulate collective cultural resources over time. It is an elementary structure that has all the characteristics of social life—the 'cell' of cultural production and reproduction.

Social scientists have used the concept of community of practice for a variety of analytical purposes, but the primary use of the concept has been in learning theory. The concept originated in studies of apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger 1991). People usually think of apprenticeship as a relationship between a student and a master, but studies of apprenticeship reveal a more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place—with journeymen and more advanced apprentices. The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Then researchers started to see these communities everywhere, even when no formal apprenticeship system existed.

As a basis for a general social learning theory, however, the learning processes of a community of practice are not limited to training novices. The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone. The shared competence defined by the community is always in interplay with the experience of members. Sometimes, as in the case of apprenticeship, it is the competence of the community that pulls the experience of the novice until the novice has a full experience of competence. Sometimes, members bring new ideas and insights: it is their experience that pulls the competence of the community along. One can think of learning as a tension between competence and experience (Wenger

1998). Whenever either starts pulling the other, learning takes place. Learning so defined is a dynamic, two-way relationship between people and their communities. It combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures.

While the concept of community of practice has been most widely used to analyze learning and the social organization of knowledge, it has also been useful for investigating other aspects of the social world: the construction of subcultures as a form of institutional resistance (Eckert 1989); the reproduction of social classes (Willis 1977); the formation of identities as trajectories through communities of practice and multimembership combining the simultaneous influence of multiple communities (Wenger 1998); local meanings and linguistic change through engagement in shared practice (Eckert and Mc-Connell-Ginet 1992).

It is often useful to look at a social entity—a culture, a linguistic group, a 'social world' (Strauss 1978), an organization—as a constellation of communities of practice. Such social entities are best understood, not as a uniform group, but as a complex set of interconnected communities of practice, each with its own local 'mini-culture' as it were. Such a perspective makes it possible to understand local differences as well as the processes by which broad patterns are recreated in practice. The overarching entity then is the emerging property of interactions within and among local practices (Wenger 1998, Brown and Duguid 2000).

3. Practical Applications

Beyond social theory, the concept of community of practice has found a number of practical applications in business, organizational design, education, and civic life.

3.1 Business Organizations

The concept has been adopted most readily by people in business because of the increasing need to focus explicitly on knowledge (Wenger et al. 2002). Initial efforts had focused on information systems with disappointing results. Communities of practice provided a new approach, focused on the social structures that could best assume ownership for complex and dynamic knowledge with substantial tacit components. A number of characteristics make communities of practice a natural fit:

(a) Unlike training or research departments, they are not separate units. Rather they pervade the organization, since people belong to communities of practice at the same time as they belong to their business units or teams.

(b) Communities of practice address the informal and tacit aspects of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects.

(c) They allow a much closer connection between learning and doing, while still providing structures where learning can accumulate.

(d) In a time of globalization and disaggregation, they create connections among people across institutional boundaries and potentially across the globe.

From this perspective, the knowledge of an organization lives in a constellation of communities of practice each taking care of a specific aspect of the competence that the organization needs. However, the very characteristics that make communities of practice a good fit for stewarding knowledge—autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries—are also characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organizations. How this challenge is going to affect these organizations remains to be seen.

3.2 Education

In business, focusing on communities of practice adds a layer of complexity to the organization—a kind of orthogonal structure focused on knowledge, while the core structure of the organization still focuses on business processes and results. But they do not imply a restructuring the whole system. Schools have been a bit slower at adopting the concept of communities of practice because sharing knowledge is already their main activity, and adopting communities of practice as a basic organizing principle implies a deeper rethinking of their structure. In educational circles, the hope is that communities of practice could bring the experience of schooling closer to everyday life along three dimensions.

(a) *Internally*. How to ground school learning experiences in practice through participation in communities around subject matters?

(b) *Externally*. How to connect the experience of students to actual practice through peripheral forms of participation in broader communities beyond the walls of the school?

(c) *Over the lifetime of students*. How to serve the lifelong learning needs of students by organizing communities of practice focused on topics of continuing interest to students beyond the schooling period?

From this perspective, the school is not the privileged locus of learning. It is not a self-contained, closed world in which students acquire knowledge to be applied outside, but a part of a broader learning system. The class is not the primary learning event. It is life itself that is the main learning event. Schools, classrooms, and training sessions still have a role to play in this vision, but they have to be in the service of the learning that happens in the world.

More generally, the concept of community of practice has promise in suggesting ways to organize

societies around issues and functions. The US government and the World Bank are experimenting with these approaches by connecting people across cities and countries with practice-based communities that complement place-based communities. New technologies such as the Internet have extended the reach of our interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities, but the increasing flow of information does not obviate the need for community. In fact, it expands the possibilities for community and calls for new kinds of communities based on shared practice.

See also: Action Theory: Psychological; Community, Expression of; Community, Social Contexts of; Community/Society: History of the Concept; Community Sociology; Cooperation and Competition, Psychology of; Cooperation: Sociological Aspects; Group Processes in Organizations; Interest Groups

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E. Wenger

Community Aesthetics

Just as politics was significant in the definition of modernity, aesthetics might well become the mark of postmodernity. Aesthetics is understood, of course, in its etymological sense: that we all 'feel.' Such aesthetics is the foundation of the community, the foundation of what once was called the postmodern 'tribe' (Maffesoli 1996a).

Aesthetics implies an impulse to live that cannot but offend fixed minds, which are only able to witness and analyze average thoughts and average ways of life. But aesthetics reminds us that our being is an event, or even advent. To return to the opposition between modernity and postmodernity, one can say that in the case of the former, history follows its course, whereas in the case of the latter, the event emerges. It intrudes. It forces its way and it does violence. Hence its irrevocably brutal, unexpected, and constantly astonishing characteristics. Here again, one is confronted by the difference between the tonality of drama or dialectic which postulate a possible solution or synthesis, and the tonality of the tragic that is intrinsically *aporic*.

The advent is singular. But its singularity is rooted in an archaic timeless substratum. The 'archaisms' in question are, of course, rethought according to the present, they are experienced in a specific way, but with the origins always kept in mind. Event–advent? For sure, what is qualitatively, intensely experienced, works to bring out what has always been present within our being, be it individual or collective. We can refer to Heidegger on this point, and to the attention he paid to a postmetaphysical thought, applying himself to bringing out the most 'simple' that serves as a substratum to human existence. But we can also refer to Leibnitz who, in his 'principle of indiscernible,' works to find a balance between absolute difference and repetitive identity (Vattimo 1990, p. 21). Between the two, the romanticism or the philosophy of life enhances the tragic aspect of the present, along with its demand, its impulse to live, and the sense of urgency it exudes.

Is this not characteristic of the astonishing contemporary attitudes, based on aesthetics, caring little or not at all about the consequences of their acts? Plural families, and successive and transient love affairs are proof of such behavior in the domain of emotion. Political changeability or ideological variations exemplify it as far as public life is concerned; the acceptance of the anarchical laws of production and, at the same time, the extraordinary suspicion towards them, attest to it in what can be called the economical disorder. An atmosphere of unconcern pervades the whole thing, not furthering the worry about the future but, on the contrary, an urge to live in the present according to a way of being that, during the ages, has developed progressively.

If we try to define this kind of aesthetic environment, we can compare it to an eternal paganism. A paganism that works to grab hold of life, grasps what it offers, anything that turns up. A pagan exuberance devoting itself to using the delights of the present, leading a daring, bold life; a life penetrated by the freshness of the fleeting, precarious, and, therefore, intense instant. In his analysis of Machiavelli's opposition to Christianity, Fichte speaks of his 'general impiety' Fichte 1981, p. 48). It seems that we can extrapolate what he says from his paganism. For it is clearly the essence of Christianity that we find again in the political sphere, in the economical conception of existence, or in the