

## The (in)justice of community-based initiatives

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In a variety of fields, pursuing different ends, forms of sociality that go under the English word “community” are seen as useful in journeying towards new economic, cultural, political, and environmental settlements. Prominently community has emerged as a form of eco-community: community used to respond to environmental challenges. This can be community as a social glue used by grassroots actors allowing them to increase agency. Or it could (potentially concurrently) be a form of top-down allocated community, used to guide and arrange populations. Importantly, almost all these forms of community, certainly all forms beyond the so-called “Dunbar Number” of around 250, are imagined, in the sense put forward by Benedict Anderson: Not everyone can know and have a direct relationship with all those supposedly in their community.

Wherever it comes from, and however it is used, the community that is put to use pursuing specific aims and objectives (whether environmental or not), is praised or critiqued. For example, Tim Jackson (2005) praises the “double dividend” of low carbon communities: a better life accompanying reduced consumption. Even the critical scholar J.K. Gibson-Graham fall prey to a regular pitfall, that community is somehow more ethical: “In all these [community-based] movements, economic decisions [...] are made in the light of ethical discussions” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 80). Community is a form of being together that regularly accompanies the assumption that ethical concerns are

more prominent than in other forms of sociality—whether society, workforce, citizenry or group. This idea that community somehow brings to the fore ethical concerns gives community economies their positive associations, and also attraction for those normatively attracted to alternative economic expressions, or critical of the status quo/mainstream (Taylor Aiken, 2018, p. 130). This ethic commonly held positively, Gibson-Graham state: “The shared ethic that underlies these community economic development programs privileges care of the local community and its environment” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 80). For example, Karen E. McNamara et al. found that the more community-based the initiative, the more likely it is to succeed, and also “perform better” (McNamara et al., 2020). While these terms—“success”, “perform”, even “community”—often provide more questions than answers, it points to a persuasive belief in the power of community, among practitioners, policy-makers, and academics, at least in the English-speaking world.

### **English-French disagreements: the weight of political philosophy and historical context**

As Claire Hancock (2016) draws attention to, the view of community as pertaining to a universalised understanding of human togetherness makes no sense from a French perspective. As we shall see, the universalising, unswervingly positive view of community does not even make sense on its own terms, within the Anglophone world. More critically, this form of community can actually be readily enrolled within a neoliberal agenda, in that it devolves responsibility downwards towards smaller scale social actors. The surrounding context to community’s environmental use is neoliberal (as outlined in Taylor Aiken et al., 2017). This is done through: (i) enacting a previous government task, such as managing urban greenspace, or trying to cut carbon emissions, at arm’s length, through delegated community organisations, and enacting this through an individuated, marker-mediated form; or (ii) cutting back the state provision of capabilities, or action plans to deal with environmental issues, assuming that individuals, the market and community will step in to fill this void. The first way is generally known as “rollout neoliberalism”, and the second one as “rollback neoliberalism”. Both rollout and rollback neoliberalism place a responsibility onto and assume an agency from groups of people acting together as a community, that can be unwarranted. Here we are referring to the responsibility and capability to act on environmental issues. Crucially, this dual assumption of community as rolling out neoliberal principles and covering the

rollback of the state is only possible because of “community’s” polysemy. That is, the function of the word “community” in English is positive, and lends itself towards multiple—at times contradictory—definitions.

Discussions of these processes often refer to the “responsibilitising” of communities; here used to capture the ways individuals and communities are made to feel responsible, and treated as if they are responsible for their own situation. For example, Nikolas Rose’s (1999) groundbreaking book *Powers of Freedom* demonstrates how this “responsibilitising” happens, where community, and the delegation of tasks and responsibilities is to groups and neighbourhoods and away from States and externalised from large corporations.

The term “community” has become key to British localist policies, particularly in the area of sustainable development or transition (Taylor Aiken, 2015), starting in the second half of the 1990s, through a policy of support for local Agenda 21s that differed from the rest of Europe by its community-based approach (Emelianoff, 2005). Meanwhile, in France, decentralization policies were implemented alongside the “territorialization” of public policies; the new paradigm of sustainable development and planning was supposed to strengthen the power of local authorities, not of communities (Wachter, 2002).

In the Anglo-American, Australian and New Zealand political contexts, “community” is increasingly mobilized to encourage the local involvement of the population, in a perspective of “self-government” and “resilience” that goes hand in hand with the rolling back of the state. The United Kingdom is the European country where this rolling back has gone furthest, with an assumption that other social entities, such as the community, will take over.

The outlook is very different in France, where the term “community” has taken on other meanings and serves as a repellent or scapegoat, which has limited its use in many scientific disciplines. From the 1990s onwards, media and political debates have increasingly used the term “*communautariste*”, a pejorative version of the word “*communautaire*”, associated with an essentialized and ethnic-religious conception of the community, considered as a threat to national unity (Dhume-Sonzogni, 2016). According to Fabrice Dhume-Sonzogni, this took place with the support of intellectual networks and created an anxiety which consolidates the power of dominant groups or their representatives, and dismisses the claims of minorities (2016). In addition, since the early 2000s, the government has derived part of its legitimacy from its function as a barrier to the far-right party, while at the same time competing

with it for a share electorate, by adopting its vocabulary. This political vying with the xenophobic extreme-right accounts for the political trashing of “community”.

The charge of “communitarianism” is used to disqualify social and political demands as well as scientific analyses, by waving the red rag of “fundamentalism”, however unfounded, at every opportunity. Thus, citizens included in a 2019-2020 national consultation about climate change mitigation, were sometimes branded as “fundamentalists” in public debate, and their propositions were rejected. This “Citizens’ Climate Convention” followed a mobilization against fuel taxation (the so-called “Yellow Vests” movement) which received broad public support. The French Minister for Higher Education, Research and Innovation, in 2020-2021, questioned the work of many French academics working in the field of decolonial studies or on discrimination, claiming it constituted a form of “Islamism” fostering communalist dissensions.

“*Communauté*” is, therefore, a negatively loaded term, whereas “community” tends to be positively so. In French, “community” does not often elide, as it often does in English, with locality, and the space that supports the community: a village, a neighborhood or a district, for example. It is a deterritorialized notion, which designates a mode of being together, based on a commonality that is not spatial or local. There is no assignation of social or cultural groups to particular spaces, as a result of a specific French political construction.

France has historical issues with local communities. The Republic, since the French Revolution, wanted to build a national community by freeing itself from communities anchored in a place, “identities”, loaded with “particularisms”. The basic principles of secularism, freedom and equality of all citizens promoted by a centralized state do not tolerate the existence of local communities in a Republic that has forged national unity by force. Furthermore, the assimilation of a social group to a territory refers in the collective unconscious to the fascism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia that bloodied the 20th century.

It is therefore difficult in France to approach the notion of community calmly, except when it concerns the national scale (Schnapper, 1994). Alternatively, community is redefined entirely, around a non-essentialized common, as reflexive, open, inclusive, hybrid or mixed community, also evolving, so many conditions for allowing “community politics” (Rancière and

Noudelman, 2003). The community must be able to welcome the strange, the nonconforming. But since it is not spatial, it is understood as based on affinities, and it is therefore difficult to attribute this political and ethical aim to groups that organize into political communities to defend a cause or a space.

### **Words in need of use and translation**

Francophone researchers tend to use the term “community” sparingly, when they do not simply avoid it. It can be flanked by a qualifier that neutralizes its negative charge: for example, the “linguistic community”, the “Maghrebi or Amerindian community” or a “community of practices”. To speak of “community(ies)” is to refer to a number of convictions, values, and worldviews that deviate from the mainstream, and keep the dominant political culture at a distance. But this culture has shaped language and connotations. Handling the term “community” as imported from Anglophone scholarship is difficult because it challenges the frameworks of political thought constructed and imposed in France in the past two centuries.

As a result, the term “community” frequently refers to a group of people living together for religious, affinity or ideological reasons, which are often described as “sectarian”; or to a cultural or ethnic minority considered as badly integrated into society, i.e., into the republican whole; or to an institutional level of territorial or international cooperation (the community of municipalities, the European Community, etc.). Once the term has been incorporated into the institutional frameworks and thus tamed, it loses all negative connotations.

Twenty years ago, Béatrice Collignon noted the lack of legitimacy of French work on community, which was suspected of fostering divisions rather than working to reduce them (Collignon, 2001). She also pointed out that this conception of the Republic left no room for an intermediate identity between the individual and the nation. In France, intermediary bodies are instituted, endowed with a legal personality and controlled, whether they are trade unions, professional chambers or citizens’ associations. Thus, communities in the Anglophone sense cannot exist because they lack legitimacy: unrecognized, unsupported, belittled, suspected of dissension or separatism, they have no official voice in political debate, particularly in socioecological transition.

“Community” can therefore only be translated in a very differentiated way, on a case-by-case basis, just like the many terms associated with it or existing in its vicinity, and which caused many translation difficulties, made

explicit in footnotes, in this double issue, especially since they are often central notions for the articles presented. "Community-led housing", for example, was translated as "participatory housing" ("*habitat participatif*"), adjusting to the empirical reality to which the author, Yael Arbell, was referring, i.e., group housing, housing cooperatives and solidarity land organizations. Other terms have not been translated because they do not make sense in the French cultural political context. "Safe space", which refers to places or configurations that offer protection to people who are oppressed and marginalized by dominant society, cannot be translated straightforwardly in French because it is difficult to think or admit that populations should be protected by distancing themselves from a public space that is harmful to them, or even unjust. In France, public space is assumed to be above suspicion, and in itself a guarantor of justice, unlike community, which is suspected of favoring its members to the detriment of those who are not part of it. The whole point of the notion of safe space is to challenge this viewpoint by describing situations where community protects against aggression in public space. We also sometimes had to rectify translations, because "commons-based", for example, cannot be translated as such. "Commoning", being and doing in common, and "commoners", those who do in common, were left in English in the translation of Melissa Harrison's text. The sports movement called "Mixed Ability", which proposes a reading of the abilities of people with and without disabilities, was not translated either. By shifting the focus from disability to ability, the basis of discrimination is challenged, by re-interrogating the boundaries that able-bodied people erect around other people categorized by their disability and not their abilities. Finally, more common words such as "race" have been translated as "ethnic group" ("*groupe ethnique*") or "racialized group" ("*groupe racisé*"), since the term is taboo in French.

These translation difficulties reveal blind spots in the systems of thought, forcing us to reconsider their construction, with the help of neologisms, quotation marks or paraphrases. They open up exciting areas of debate around words that do not translate, or whose migrations raise controversies and cause battles and games of influence between linguistic, social and cultural areas (Hancock, 2016). Which is not to say the words expressing the quest for justice are not exportable, and cannot be conveyed across languages. On the contrary, we believe that when they strike us as unusual or out of place, it is a sign we need to think about these discrepancies. Their strangeness in one language stimulates us to reflect on the unspeakable, on what the language resists. The importation of concepts forged in other cultural and political contexts, which

we often refrain from translating because language and/or tradition of thought resists, forces the door open and lifts a veil. The aim of this double issue is to participate in these welcome intrusions, to welcome the strangeness of untranslatable words. This helps us shift concepts—community, *communauté*—in order to better question or reconstruct them, with mutual criticism constitutive of science, as both provincial and hybridized.

### **Borrowings and reciprocal tensions**

Internationalizing “provincial” concepts and ideas, without decontextualization may seem perilous but it forces us to question a set of presuppositions. The resistance of Francophone critics towards concepts such as community fosters an international dialogue that sometimes pushes authors out of their comfort zone. Importing criticism from “French theory” can be useful for English-speaking authors to interrogate the effects of context in theoretical constructions, and also to visualize what the surrounding political culture has obscured. Thus, the work of Jacques Rancière, and in particular the notion of dissent (Rancière and Noudelmann, 2003) feeds reflections on community, as we see in Melissa Harrison’s article.

Anglophone literature on community helps unveil (at least) two phenomena: on the one hand, the fact that French institutional, political, and cultural frameworks conceal fragile but effective community processes, whether contentious or simply silent or invisibilized; on the other hand, the fact that French literature is not always aware of its own biases linked to social, professional, ethnic, gender characteristics, among others (Chivallon, 2001). Yet, ethnic, cultural, social, gender, validist (relating to a situation of disability) or even speciesist (due to belonging to a species) inequalities and discriminations are not easy to apprehend without mobilizing notions that Francophone scholarship often refrains from using, such as community, or without resorting to the tools developed in the English-speaking world. The notion of care is a striking example. A second major contribution of this Anglophone literature has to do with the spatial dimension of community, which goes against the grain of French political understandings that downplay the interfaces between citizen mobilizations and local environments, and thus erase the “ground” of mobilizations. In France, further reflection is needed on environmental political action carried out not by universal and abstract citizens, but by citizens embedded in an environment; we need to understand their mobilizations as based on concern for the preservation of their environment (Blanc and Estèbe,

2003). Work on civic environmentalism (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001) and the role of communities in the socioecological transition can be of use here.

These cross-fertilizations and contrasts should not obscure some common points to the work we present here. Almost all the authors of the dossier presented (numbers 16 and 17) are women. Beyond the differences in political and cultural contexts, and in the field of environmental studies, there remains a great divide between the work, often authored by men, on the Anthropocene or the right to the city, and that, rather authored by women, on communities, more associated with the space of practices, daily life and/or the ethics of care. If care "is a generic activity that includes everything we do to maintain, perpetuate and repair 'our world', so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto and Fischer, 1990), it appears this activity and this relationship to the world are still assigned to women.

## **Community and environment**

Turning now to the theme of this double issue, it is necessary to examine the way in which researchers have grasped the notion of community in the field of the environment. A first use of the term "community", in French literature, mobilizes the notion in a universalist sense, to designate a mode of being together motivated by political or ethical motives, in a space apprehended on a macro scale, be it the Earth, a society, a country or an encompassing social category. Philosophers such as Jacques Rancière or Hicham-Stéphane Afeissa refer to a community that extends to all living beings (Afeissa, 2010). Conversely, Bruno Latour, one of the most influential French thinkers in analyzing the articulation of humans and non-humans in politics, excludes the notion of community by contesting its existence (Astruc, undated), in contrast, for example, to North American feminist authors such as Joan C. Tronto (1993), who anchors the political practices that bring about renewal in the care of others, living and non-living included, within a community.

At the local level, a second use of the term "community" sees it as resistance to central power: a conflictual power relationship, analyzed in particular in work on the local geopolitics of land use planning (Subra, 2007). This relationship can also pit national or transnational actors against local communities, more commonly understood as "local collectives". The "zones to be defended" and the struggles against "major useless and imposed projects", which number in the dozens in France, bring together activists and inhabitants



who occupy space to oppose development projects (airports, shopping centers, dams, tunnels, high-speed rail lines, etc.). These struggles forge complex communities, which oppose the damage done to living environments and local populations, as well as the environmental injustice arising from facilities that generate strong nuisances or risks.

In this issue, Diane Robert's article describes the processes at work in southern Tunisia, where populations mobilized against industrial and oil pollution do not identify as a community and call themselves "citizen" groups in order not to delegitimize their struggle. The highly centralized state leaves little room for the expression of regional or local diversity in this country, and the criticism of "community" is internalized by the leaders of the mobilizations. Robert also explains that the nuisances threaten the places, the very basis of the community, its dignity and ultimately its recognition. The populations of the industrialized South of Tunisia feel discriminated against and the feeling of environmental injustice compounds this general sense of territorial injustice. Local mobilizations unfolded when the iron fist of the government loosened, after the fall of the Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali regime.

When in conflict with the state, the community can also be defeated by the political balance of power. Robert's article clearly shows how local communities are instrumentalized by the central government, which distributes unequal compensation to some, fanning rivalries and resentments between communities, and paralyzing action. Unity of local mobilizations could have brought about more environmental and social justice rather than inadequate compensations.

A third type of work on communities in France concerns alternative and non-confrontational communities. The embeddedness in place is strong but mostly comes after the establishment of the community. In the counterculture of the 1960s, neo-ruralism, which is experiencing a revival with degrowth movements and the COVID-19 crisis, and the "return to the land" have been documented. Some communities have been studied for their ecological (Mésini and Barthes, 2008), transitional initiatives (Semal, 2013). This work considers the political dimension of the experience of "community" rather than the latent discriminations in the way it includes or excludes.

Studies on the community as bearer of an alternative to the state and the market have recently flourished under the banner of the "commons", in many countries. The constitution of environmental commons, both intentional and political, has been studied in urban as well as in rural areas. The work is

rooted in the social ecology of Murray Bookchin, in the management of environmental resources as commons theorized by Elinor Ostrom, or in the neo-Marxist thinking of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, revived by Spanish reflections on the new municipalism (Rendueles and Subirats, 2019), the Italian school of territorialists (Magnaghi, 2004), or the peer-to-peer production movement (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2017). The emphasis is on the socioecological potential of communities of makers, cultivators of the urban, transitioners in reclaimed urban spaces, though the broader idea of a change in political regime remains present (Alix et al., 2018).

In this double issue, contributions by Damien Deville and Guga Nagib, and by Melissa Harrison refer to these urban commons. Whereas Deville and Nagib see them as spaces wrested from the neoliberal city, Harrison describes how community is constructed through forms of dissent in a process of openness to alterity.

Uses of the term “community” to refer to a political alternative are most frequent in French-language research on socioecological transition. Overall, the meaning most common in English, an ordinary community, attached to its living environment, is rarely found in French-language work, except in Quebec, more influenced by Anglo-American culture. There is however some work on “environmental communities” of residents capable of transforming their daily environment, possibly defending it against external assaults, in a movement of collective emancipation driven by a feeling of environmental injustice (Blanc and Emelianoff, 2008). In parallel to the American work on civic environmentalism (Sirianni and Friedman, 2001), but in a different framework, ordinary environmental mobilizations are studied. The invisibility or invisibilization of operations to transform living environments that do not involve conflict or struggle (Blanc and Paddeu, 2018) is a key feature of this understanding of the “living community”.

Among Anglophone authors in the environmental field, the political role of the community is understood in a variety of ways. Some are highly critical of the use of community to address more structural concerns. There is a persuasive view that what we call community is presumed to be a more reflective and conscious state of mind: community is ethical. However much writing on community reveals the opposite: community is associated with groupthink, unthinking social norms and hierarchies, or focusing on one’s immediate and seen social relations at the expense of distant and perhaps unseen social and economic relations (Taylor Aiken, 2018). Critiques also often run along the lines

of arguing that community either allows or encourages some form of “neoliberalism”: what Marie Anne MacLeod and Akwugo Emejulu (2014) call, in passing reference to environmental issues, “neoliberalism with a community face”. While these examples are inflected through an environmental lens, community is also used more widely and cross-cuttingly, as can be seen with its role in debates around localism, volunteering, third sector service provision, as much as around purposive activism.

While community has often been seen through these positive and negative lenses, here we wish to sidestep this judgement, instead focus on the context within which each community initiatives emerges. The main overarching and undermining context today is neoliberalism. This is not to say that community itself is always neoliberal, but that this in the context it emerges in, from, and either swims with or against. Neoliberalism as a context partly explains the rise of community movements for sustainability, who hold responsibility for action, and more recently where “capacity to adapt” is locally rooted. Historically, “sustainable communities” were considered as a lever to transform the whole society (Van der Ryn and Calthorpe, 1986; Sirianni and Friedman, 2001), in the line of the “civic movement” advocated by Patrick Geddes, rooted in anarchism (Geddes, 1915). The failure of this project or its limited results, with the growing embedding of community action by diverse institutions, led to more disenchanted visions. Nowadays “responses to environmental degradation [...] are located at the individual/community level and essentially amount to increasing the ‘resilience’ of the affected populations to ‘external’ shocks” (Felli and Castree, 2012, p. 2). This dovetailing of progressive movements for change, together with a coercive neoliberal worldview gives us cause to be wary wherever we claim that community movements or action can be seen as “just”.

Community, though, is not destined to be enrolled within a neoliberal agenda. In one of Doreen Massey’s last published pieces she, together with Michael Rustin, distinguishes between the emergence of the individualism Foucault traces in *Discipline and Punish*, and a more collective and normatively desirable “nurture, improve, and learn” (Rustin and Massey, 2015). Community initiatives provide an opportunity to resist, experiment, to model and forge alternative ways to be and become together. Thus, the social and spatial relations that can be found in community initiatives can still be useful tools in building a more just world.

However, for many of the papers in this issue, such assumptions are still open to question. Rather than naively promote community, as some research on community can do, the question asked here is what does community do on the ground? What is the heavy lifting carried out, and for whom, by this particular, contested, form of togetherness: community?

### **Language, community and (in)justice**

This issue of *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice* explores how the use of community in pursuing environmental, cultural, and social aims and objectives can be more or less just. We present papers that look to the potential for, or counterproductive uses of, community to achieve justice. Environmental community action is intended to serve not only its members but distant populations in the space and time, humans as well as non-humans, through CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, ecosystems or biodiversity protection, for example.

As we have seen, given the Anglo-French nature of the journal, one pleasing aspect of these papers is the addressing of the specificity, or provincialized character, of Anglo- or Francophone debates in these areas. Much of community theory, in the Anglophone social sciences, is built from English language examples. Thus, the idea of community is “overly wedded to Western, and particularly English-language understandings and applications of community” (Kumar and Taylor Aiken, 2020, p. 203). Placing theories of community in their English-language provinciality contextualises this “community”. In a language like, say, German, no direct translation to the English word and concept community exists. The famous distinction between “*Gemeinschaft*” and “*Gesellschaft*” in early sociological work on community, shows that “*Gemeinschaft*” forms one very particular and small-scale, level of social belonging. Distinct other words, whether “*Gemeinde*”, “*Öffentlichkeit*”, “*Kollektiv*”, even “*Sippe*”, are all bundled within the English word community. While other translations for each of these exist in English—say, “public”, “collectives”, “clans”—in English the various terms “Muslim community”, “scientific community”, “international community”, and “local community”, all of these are often folded within the one, catch-all, positively inflected shorthand: “community”. In English, “community” has a polysemic character that is capacious and an affectivity which both have a hold on the imagination, and reflects this general positivity. Can we then say that the same processes are underway in that context? Or does the ability to capture these processes under one word, “community”, also give them their own life and representation?

If community's definition(s) and pattern(s) of use emerge from English-language contexts, are these transferrable beyond this provincialized context? When we come to question the relationship of community-based initiatives to justice then, the very term itself (the word "community", and associated definitions) accompanies questions of (in)justice.

Here, we take community out of this safety net, and question it in many unfamiliar situations and contexts—from rugby fields in England, to indigenous gentrifying and greenifying neighbourhoods, beyond naturalized linguistic assumptions. Such a multilingual approach to "community" is helpful in moving community into closer conversation with justice. It is not simply to say that "community is good", or "community is bad", or a whole range of linked semantic meanings and values in between. Not only is it not this simple, it is actually unhelpful in answering the question of how just any given community is. As stated above community in English is never purely descriptive, calling on a host of other affectations and implications. In order to grasp just how just community is, we need to pay attention to what community does, not only what it means.

Many papers of the issue number 16 pay attention to the ambiguity surrounding these community initiatives as an idea or practice. Melissa Harrison provides a survey of how "urban commons" is a term without any fixed definition (albeit many definitions do exist) and pays close attention to their social and political scope. After a remarkable theoretical overview, she presents her ethnographic work conducted in a shared garden on wasteland in Berlin, and a disused and occupied municipal cafeteria now social and cultural center in Athens. The author shows how these urban commons, through the struggles that have constituted them, stand up to the neoliberal city while attempting to resist the processes of co-optation and closure of the community, in order to establish a just transformative sociospatial and political praxis. Issues of justice and politics structure this analysis, which focuses on the conditions by which processes of closure can be avoided through the deployment of transformative and counter-hegemonic ways of being, marked by care and the acquisition of political defensive capacities in the face of the market state. The urban commons foster a new sociality, which could gain ground through the extension and translocal networking of such initiatives.

The question of the closed or open character of community is analysed by Yael Arbell with a quite different perspective. The article outlines how two community-led housing initiatives can produce safe spaces to protect

themselves from a prevailing neoliberalism and that these initiatives ultimately suffer from the same weaknesses as other types of safe space since they can reproduce forms of oppression within themselves. It is this “both/and” quality to community initiatives that allows community to have an ambivalent relationship to meaning, in a strict sense. Community-led housing is neither valorised nor dismissed, but met on its own terms. Community-led housing initiatives can be exclusive. This form of exclusion need not be a source of injustice though, and could help create a protective safe space. In other cases, for example with regards to a more homogeneous ethnicity within some of these initiatives, this exclusion can become a source of injustice. Again, community itself, is not just or unjust, but by tracing what community does in particular instances, we can outline the relationship of community—in this case the ability to draw an in/out boundary—to exclusions and injustices. On a broader political perspective, this article reveals the growing context of insecurity linked with neoliberalism, changing, if we add the destabilization of environmental life conditions, the conception, the meaning and perhaps the scales of politics. Where politics lay in the 20th century in living together, we see nowadays a slip towards protecting togetherness, often with a narrower focus.

Breaking the boundaries of the community is a key point for the analysis of Jen Dyer, Lucie Middlemiss and Harriet Thew, who draw attention to much of the ways in which so-called, and self-regardingly “inclusive”, community initiatives, such as rugby teams, can instead propagate exclusivity. By extension, much academic work on how community responds to sustainability challenges is overly white, middle-class and able-bodied, in discourse, assumptions and participant make-up, as for the movement of nature conservation (Evans, 2002). This paper carefully traces the ways in which exclusion is realised and enacted both materially and symbolically, in ways that will be essential going forward if community is to firmly ally itself with a more just approach. The Mixed Ability initiative is an example of successful working and learning together to break the boundaries, overcome fears and prejudices.

## **Conclusion**

Carefully handling community’s relationship to political use is thus an emergent theme when paying attention to community’s context: whether the context of scholarship, the geographic context of each initiative, or the political, economic, and historical context each community finds itself in. In this

collection of writing on community and justice, we have focused on what community actually does, rather than being caught up over what community might mean. This is because the word “community” covers a lot of ground, including a top-down “allocation”—containing people in a neighbourhood, identity, or characteristic. This restrictive view of community exists alongside others which involve opening up and getting involved with others, increasing agency and forging solidarities across any given differences.

To describe a situation or arrangement as a community is to call on a host of related values of collectives, similarity, and, in English language at least, praiseworthiness, the French language tending to be more depreciative. It is this evaluative baggage community brings with it that lies at the heart of conflicts over community’s meaning and use. These positive or negative charges reveal divergences in political analyses, political philosophies and hopes, from eco-anarchism, eco-feminism to old or new republicanism, for example. But the political meaning of community is context-dependent, and one that is held together through social arrangements, or “community norms” (Barnett, 2017). “Community” (as a word) is therefore held together by community (as a context). The task then is to be alive to these contexts, rather than establish precise and “neutral” definitions. As feminist scholars and others remind us, the establishment of a single encompassing definition is never a neutral process, but one embedded with power relations where some meanings, practices, and actors are recognised while others are not (Young, 1990).

Consequently, what community means should remain open, and that there is not any one aspect that community should mean. From geographer’s eyes, it seems to be an old truth. It is not only what community means that is important, still less what it should mean, but why and how community comes to mean what it means that matters, and how and why community can be repurposed to pursuit different political ends. Seeing community as ethnographically emergent (Barnett, 2017) is not to place ethnography as the only methodology capable of properly getting to grips with community. Instead it sees that the meaning and the power of community are revealed in community’s embedded extensions in various situations, contexts and objects, and that interpreting community’s variable meanings and political scopes requires “a sensitivity to contextual thickness” (Barnett, 2017, p. 72). It is this sensitivity to context that is required to approach a just evaluation of how community is used environmentally.

## To quote this article

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