
The (in)justice of community-based initiatives

Cyria Emelianoff | Gerald Taylor Aiken

Cyria Emelianoff: Le Mans Université, laboratoire Espaces et Sociétés (ESO), UMR 6590 CNRS

Email address: Cyria.Emelianoff@univ-lemans.fr

Gerald Taylor Aiken: Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER), ORCID 0000-0002-0798-495X

Email address: Gerald.Aiken@liser.lu

Part two of this special issue on the ways in which community is enveloped within issues of justice focuses on community initiatives and their associations and compromises with power, policy and the pursuit of change, transition, and transformation.

Community here sits within a broader intellectual tradition which can be more or less positive about the potential changes community can affect. There is a long and strong tradition that notes community as a form of retreat from wider, more structural and systematic, transformations (Schmid, Smith and Taylor Aiken, 2021). Ernesto Laclau, for example, talks about a trend towards a “spatialisation of politics” (Laclau, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In this, he is critical of the ways in which politics makes a retreat from a more progressive or utopian direction. That politics becomes enclosed, and put in its place, rather than with a wider, more universal, ambition. Politics that makes a claim on the future is rejected in favour of a smaller, more manageable but ultimately incidental form of change. The community politics of this is that any community initiative, or community-led pursuit of justice forms a restricted, circumscribed function. Community is seen as less ambitious than, and also a distraction from, willing a larger, more transformative change.

Spatialisation of community is usually associated with the elision of community with local, although as we outlined in the introduction to the first tranche of papers, this plays out differently in both the English and French-speaking realms (Emelianoff and Taylor Aiken, 2021). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004) discuss

“territorialization” as a process by which power relations become fixed. Deterritorialisation, by contrast, is the way in which power relations are mobilised and put to use in affecting change. The link between community and place, settling down, growing roots, is associated with a less progressive deferral of justice—settling for injustice now, in the hope of a better world. So far, so critical. Yet, as these papers show, while this critical approach is still needed today, community also continues to be a site, form, and context for various efforts to pursue justice.

In the eyes of Damien Deville and Gustavo Nagib, who study shared gardens in Paris and allotment gardens in Alès, urban agriculture is one of the places of resistance to neoliberalism and of affirmation of a “right to the city”. These gardening practices produce spaces for nonmarket exchanges and citizen reappropriation of the city, but also more ecological forms of food production, a means of self-subsistence in Alès, and spaces for reconnection to nature. The gardens, which mix the public in Paris and are more homogeneous in Alès because they are heirs to a working-class tradition, constitute a sphere of self-determination for the gardening residents, which, according to the authors, conveys a right to the city.

The other three papers focus their political and ethical reflexion on different forms and contexts of instrumentalisation of the community. Svenja Meyerricks and Ewan Mackenzie interrogate “resilience” as a term tracing its neoliberal application and co-optation. Usefully they move beyond differentiating between “bad” (diversity without equity) and “good” (critical) forms of resilience. Rather than holding fast to this dichotomy, though, they propose moving towards a more liminal understanding. For example, the act of “empowering” individual freedoms” might take place also in order to engage in acts of “opposition to the politics of austerity”. Stated differently, there are cases when “individual resilience” is part of “critical resilience”, that is a political and collective form of resilience able to set up radically new forms of organisations, and able to fight adaptation inequalities. The authors undertake an interesting and diverse walk through the so-called political and social aspects of work and local employment opportunities, emerging within the Scottish Government’s Climate Challenge Fund. Using a critical resilience analytical lens, they also make a reference to degrowth as a theoretical base. Like Melissa Harrison (2021, previous issue), Meyerricks and Mackenzie trace how the fluidity, or ambiguity of community’s meanings, and how community is allied with other terms—community resilience, or community-based communing—accompanies a politics, which can be more or less inclusive, more or less just.

Zénaïde Dervieux and Camille Noûs show community’s instrumentalisation by international organisations enacted through the State and associated state effects to

be more or less just. In Nepal and Zimbabwe, community is imposed on villagers in the name of new "participatory" and management approaches to the conservation of natural areas. This imposed community destabilises preestablished communities, the legitimacy of their members, hierarchies and social ties. These policies, which are supposed to help villagers and enable green practices, benefit either the most educated populations in connection with state and international actors, as in Nepal, or, conversely, ethnic groups that are dominated and categorised as indigenous, as in Zimbabwe. The realities on the ground are complex, but community management reinforces State interference in rural areas, inequalities in access to natural resources in Nepal, and the financial withdrawal of the state in Zimbabwe. This administratively created community serves populations that are somehow aligned with conservation programs, to the detriment of other populations, and also promotes a "global ecological front" that is an international ecological view of the proper use of natural resources, which dispossesses villagers of their living environment.

Another form of the instrumentalisation of community can be found in Astrid Holzinger and Wendy Wuyts' article, who based their study in the Kaka'ako neighbourhood, in Hawai'i. The paper tackles the question of gentrification, branding and "greenification", building on longstanding awareness that these processes have uneven and unjust side effects. The gentrification and displacement of a settled community is accompanied by the selective enhancement and reinterpretation of precolonial cultural elements. Kaka'ako now promotes an "indigenous" identity, in the name of culturally driven sustainable development serves tourism and residential marketing. This borrows from an implicit and at times explicit identification of Native Hawaiian culture being closer to Nature, that actually dispossesses local people of their living environment and history. The "cultural renaissance movement" pretends to integrate the ecology of the local island and traditional practices into the everyday lives but this identity appropriation leads to a double injustice without alleviating any environmental pressures: spatial injustice and eviction, with the multiplication of homeless people around the neighbourhood, and cultural alienation due to this merchandising of a precolonial culture.

To quote this article

Emelianoff Cyria, **Taylor Aiken** Gerald, « (In)justice des initiatives communautaires » ["The (in)justice of community-based initiatives"], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, n° 17, 2022 (<http://www.jssj.org/article/injustice-des-initiatives-communautaires2>).

References

Deleuze Gilles, **Guattari** Félix, *Anti-Œdipus*, London - New York, Continuum, 2004 [1972].

Emelianoff Cyria, **Taylor Aiken** Gerald, « (In)justice des initiatives communautaires » [The (in)justice of community-based initiatives"], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, n° 16, 2021 (http://www.jssj.org/article/in_justice-desinitiatives-communautaires/).

Laclau Ernesto, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, London, Verso, 1990.

Laclau Ernesto, **Mouffe** Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985.

Schmid Benedikt, **Smith**, Tom, **Taylor Aiken** Gerald, "Governing through community: Transformative geographies from the bottom up", *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 2021, vol. 31, n° 3, p. 155-158.