



Rob Berkeley

OUT OF PLACE, AGAIN

'Place-based' systems, community and those who have never fit in

Community as a topic is where the institutional 'bad faith' of academia shines through in its shameful glory. It is the 'othered', the monarch's mad cousin, the one who cannot be paraded nor unfortunately, ever entirely dispensed with, for after all, our claim is to be *social* scientists ...

the term 'community', operates as an empty stage upon which imposed abstraction can be played out, both theoretically and in practice; as if sociality and communal being-ness had no other value than to serve as the forum of the enactment of personal fantasies, state-driven programmes or funding applications. It is characteristic for these attempts to engage with communal being-ness without any apparent need for micro-evidence to bolster their investigations.

Studdert, D., & Walkerdine, V. (2016). *Being in Community: Re-Visioning Sociology. The Sociological Review*, 64(4), 613–621

Given a lack of consensus about how social scientists understand 'community', it is unsurprising that decision-makers and policy professionals have felt licence to either impose a definition that is incomplete, but administratively convenient, or to avoid defining it altogether. Failing to be clear in defining fundamental concepts when seeking to deliver policy may well be expedient; papering over the cracks may create the impression of unanimity and simplicity that may ease a policy's birth. It doesn't, however, mean that that policy will be effective. Policy 'fudges' tend to lead to conservative implementation; when in doubt, our public services and civil society organisations can lean towards 'business as usual', adopt majoritarian solutions, or resort to 'common-sense' and therefore value-laden, rather than evidence-based interpretations of our world. This is bad news for all of us, but particularly so for those for whom business as usual means continued injustice, inequality and marginalisation.

Why 'place' and why now?

The social, health and economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, came on the tail of a period of political polarisation and upheaval in the UK, fuelled by Brexit. The inconclusive debate and political stand-off about membership of the EU, had also enabled an extended period of deliberate under-funding of public services in the name of *austerity*. A swathe of increasingly evidence-resistant¹ policy that privileged geography over other, now-made-inconvenient, identities and solidarities that were sacrificed in favour of 'moving on' – of turning the 48-52 into 52-48, whatever the cost. A hollowing out of civic space, driven by efficiency-led, third sector procurement, had the bonus of limiting dissent and creating a volunteer force² willing to deliver increasingly authoritarian policies. Public and third sector employees were used to extend the reach of state surveillance of Black and brown people from border to classroom, ward, and

¹ Farage argues his immigration concern is not about numbers – Andrew Neil interviews Nigel Farage 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gA80i3FNAts>

² Secret plan to use charities to help deport rough sleepers 6 July 2019 The Observer
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/06/home-office-secret-plan-charities-deport-rough-sleepers>



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workplace; and at the same time from act to intention³ - eroding trust and increasing distance between those services and 'service users'.

System-thinking, the public service reform buzzword in this current period, lionises improved coordination between clusters of institutions; agreeing protocols for sharing data in the hope that they may also share responsibility at some time in the future. These institutional clusters more often than not gathered around geographical proximity. 'Place-based systems thinking' has increasingly been adopted in the UK, inspired by models of civic administration from around the world. Some even went as far as to claim that places *are* systems. While, as a thought exercise or management tool, this approach may lead to fewer (or at least more porous) bureaucratic silos, it is an approach that too-often, and too-readily omits humans or transforms them into abstracted 'ideal-types'. Engaging the expertise of game theorists and economic modellers has, along with important new insights, carried over the less helpful economists' habit of seeking to 'write-in' or write-out variables⁴ - *ceteris paribus*; making human diversity a complexity to be simplified, in effect creating systems that would operate more effectively 'if it wasn't for those pesky humans'

Viewing this moment from the perspective of the Black men that BlackOut UK works to support, it was perhaps inevitable that the performance of a 'hostile environment for immigrants', for the benefit of the melancholic⁵ 'worried well'⁶ of the UKIP eastern fringe, should lead to the humiliation and denial of a place in British society for a number of vulnerable Black people - detained, 'repatriated', or rendered stateless. It was poignant that those treated in this manner should be from the same group of Black Britons who bore the brunt of racialised resentment at the hands of exclusionary public services, those who faced the threat of random violence on the streets of our cities in the 1970s and 80s; streets which they were thought at the time to 'rather swamp'⁷. Some were hounded to their death, by a set of immigration institutions that to the Windrush generation seemed to operate pretty effectively as a system. If the 'hostile environment' was an introduction to systems thinking, it was far from a positive one for some.

The campaign that brought the plight of the Windrush generation to public attention, was mounted by organisations that were themselves finding it difficult to locate the resources to continue their work; shrinking, while struggling to make themselves heard by funders whose attention had turned to place-based models, or to making up for the gaps exposed in the fabric of the welfare state by austerity. These organisations, unwilling or unable to deliver government contracts, found themselves increasingly ignored by government, dismissed as 'experts'⁸. Fortunately, they had the longevity to have built effective relationships with the journalists who were instrumental in putting pressure on government. Runnymede and JCWI, focused on racial justice and immigration respectively, would not be viewed as relevant community organisations

³ Ragazzi, F (2016) 'Suspect community or suspect category? The impact of counter-terrorism as "policed multiculturalism"', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 42(5): 724–741.

⁴ *Economics Rules; The rights and wrongs of the dismal science* Dani Roderick New York: W.W. Norton; 2015.

⁵ *Post-colonial Melancholia (2004)* Paul Gilroy, Columbia Press 'to deny the ongoing effect of colonialism and imperialism on contemporary political life, the death knell for a multicultural society has been sounded

⁶ If migration is what makes Britons 'sick' then anxiety about falling ill is greater in areas where there are fewer migrants <http://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-how-areas-with-low-immigration-voted-mainly-for-brexit-62138>.

⁷ 'by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in'

1978 Jan 27 PM Margaret Thatcher, World In Action, Granada

⁸ 'I think the people of this country have had enough of experts with organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong' **Rt Hon Michael Gove, Lord Chancellor Sky News Interview 2 June 2016**



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for the current place-based definition. Indeed, Runnymede had long been vocal about the dangers of the government's localism agenda for equality, joining with other equality organisations and the TUC in 2012 to highlight the issues that would likely be missed in a policy turn to greater primacy for localised decision-making⁹. The organisations named school exclusions, insufficient provision of Gypsy/Traveller sites, stop and search, youth work, and women's access to refuge from violence, as issues that were likely to suffer as a result. Eight years on, I'm sure that none of the organisations draw much solace from having been proved right. They also predicted that existing safeguards such as legal aid that enabled citizens to challenge decision-makers, and a proactive and vigilant equality watchdog could be as easily weakened by budget cuts as civil society's backbone. Despite hearing these prescient warnings, having fewer levers to safeguard against the exclusion of minoritised or marginalised people, and experiencing another decade of failure by the voluntary sector to get its house in order in terms of the equitable involvement of minority ethnic talent in leadership roles, funders (who have themselves been challenged over the lack of ethnic diversity among decision-makers) have increasingly joined and/or accelerated the pivot to place-based approaches.

An influential group of charitable foundations¹⁰ came together with researchers from IVAR in 2015 to 'identify learning about the pitfalls and successes of these approaches.'¹¹ While the report of their deliberations remains unpublished, the framework derived from it focuses on 'helping funders to consider key questions about place-based approaches' and names the desire to engage in systems thinking, respond to austerity, get better at measurement of impact, and improve equity via localism as drivers of the funders' decision to opt for place-based approaches. The framework does not, however, identify inequality within places as a key question, challenge the assumption that need is evenly distributed across the land mass, or consider whether communities exist that may define themselves beyond where they live.

If not 'place', then what?

If, in contrast to IVAR's conflation of place as community, sociality and 'communal being-ness' is about more than physical proximity and the borders of street, hamlet, neighbourhood, village, town, city, city region, or sub-nation i.e. more than place, (and definitely more than the 'empty stage' for our pet theories that Studdert and Walkerdine identify), what more could it be?

I admit to being particularly sensitive to the ways in which 'community' has been used as a form of social control. Personally, it is a sensitivity derived from identifying as a Black gay man, against whom essentialist readings of community have been employed in order to exclude, silence and constrain¹². BlackOut UK's London focused research¹³ suggests a lack of connection to local civil society organisations among Black bi/gay/trans men, suggesting that communities defined by neighbourhood are less relevant to other members of this group too. Professionally, in my roles at the Runnymede Trust, I was closely involved as the government shaped a response to the race riots/disturbances in northern mill towns that erupted between April and July 2001.¹⁴ The then

⁹ Localism: threat or opportunity? Perspectives on the Localism Act for union and community organisers and activists <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/TUCLocalismGuide-2012.pdf>

¹⁰ Association of Charitable Foundations (ACF), Big Lottery Fund, City Bridge Trust, Comic Relief, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Lankelly Chase Foundation, Tudor Trust, UK Community Foundations

¹¹ Working in Place A framework for place-based approaches (2016) Institute for Voluntary Action Research

¹² *Black and Gay in the UK - An Anthology* (2014) eds. John R. Gordon, Rikki Beadle-Blair

¹³ *In The Picture?* (2020) Rob Berkeley, BlackOut UK (forthcoming)

¹⁴ Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team (The Cantle Report), <http://tedcandle.co.uk/pdf/communitycohesion%20cantlereport.pdf>



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government's deliberately opaque, 'commonsense' definition of community cohesion was viewed as 'motherhood and apple pie' for most, but at the same time worked as an essentialising tool. The cohesion agenda was used to justify increasing state surveillance of citizens, it was very quickly employed in 'othering' on the basis of irrelevant social markers, it required some minoritised Black and brown Britons to provide evidence that they approved of motherhood and enjoyed eating apple pie.¹⁵ I also had the pleasure of working with the many-layered political institutions and organisations representing minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland to write the first comprehensive race equality strategy for the six counties/province/country. An illuminating exercise during which I got used to the same phenomena having diametrically opposing interpretations depending on the side of the street you saw it from. I used language like 'peace wall' and 'Derry/Londonderry', without pause or recourse to Orwell, and no longer balked at asking Hindus whether they were Catholic Hindus or Protestant ones. Three years after the Good Friday Agreement, 'community' carried more meaning than any word deserved, it was contingent, negotiable, both curse and honour; and nonetheless crucial – at times life or death.

the 'who' we are, our being-ness, is the outcome of constant sociality enacted in common and created and sustained in common through the inter-relational linking of action, materiality, subjectivity, speech and the world of accepted meanings

This definition by Studdert and Walkerdine, including relationships, collective sense-making, reciprocity, and commitment rather than simply geographical proximity. For me it is suitably complex, as it needs to be to capture more (if not all) of the essence of as important a foundational concept as 'community'.

While this more capacious definition of community has a greater chance of capturing the social reality, enumerators, auditors and bureaucrats will struggle to measure communities, identities or affinity imagined this way. A relational definition of community creates space for imagination, for individual and collective human agency. It opens the door to the possibility of resistance, negotiation, and choice, i.e. for community as a process, linked to and defined by people rather than institutions or organisations – community linked to what people do rather than what they 'are' or are ascribed to be – whether by postcode or census category. A dynamic rather than a static phenomenon that is meaningfully verifiable only through personal identification.

This definition enables us to understand, and directly address power and its imbalances. However, it is a definition that does little to allay *that* niggling worry that haunts trusts, foundations, and evaluators; the lack of incontrovertible evidence that doing good actually does good.

Community as relationships

This relational definition challenges a place-based lens that, from the perspective of the marginalised (with lived experience), leaves individuals at the mercy of the place-based gender politics/racial injustice/class prejudices as they play-out in the places in which they live. Those places can be incredibly lonely without access to the resources to verify, analyse or resist those forces. A relational definition of communal being-ness does not assume (without verification) that a commitment to community entails a similar commitment to equality. Unfortunately, we can recall too many instances where the opposite can be said to be true.

¹⁵ Identity, Ethnic Diversity and Community Cohesion (2007) Ed. Margaret Wetherell, Michelynn Lafleche, and Rob Berkeley Sage: London

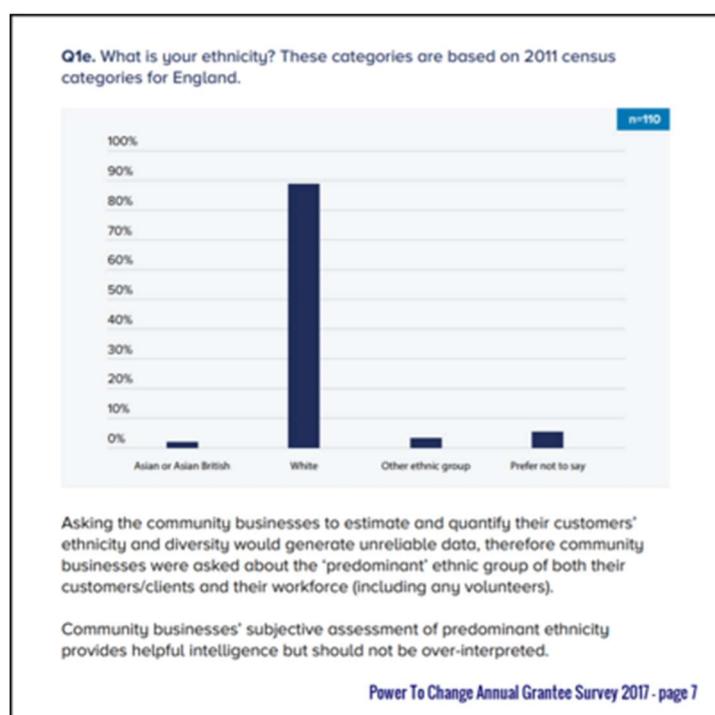


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People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior. **James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time**

While all politics are ultimately local and all experiences are located *somewhere*, for those who identify/are identified as a belonging to a marginalised minority group, principles of subsidiarity (that issues should be dealt with at the most local level consistent with their resolution) may require further consideration in order to access the collective support and voice in order to find resolution. In the case of Black queer men, the City region may be the smallest viable boundary in which to organise, but this excludes their voices from, and contribution to communities of place at neighbourhood, town or borough level. It cannot be enough to simply wish discrimination away, nor to simply transfer the work to local organisations by themselves to solve the intersection of white supremacy and patriarchal manhood that leads to the exclusion experienced by Black queer men or to offer meaningful support to them in building their resilience to it. It may be that place-based approaches on a scale smaller than city region will inevitably exclude some groups. If this is the case, then viewing place-based approaches as part of an ecology rather than the entire picture (as systems-thinking would suggest), means taking a different approach and considering how those approaches can relate to each other in order to enable place-based work to be both diverse in leadership and inclusive in process and outcome.

This may explain in part why movements for asset-based community development (community land trusts, community anchor organisations, community right to buy etc) that have often been



the focus for place-based interventions, remain overwhelmingly white in their leadership, and in their assessment of who they serve (see graph) Or why, even as Power To Change¹⁶ passes the halfway point in its 10 year mission, and after £80 million spent, it hasn't published any research on ethnic minority engagement, has not funded a disabled user-led organisation to lead the development of a community asset on behalf of their neighbourhood, nor has it, despite stimulating 135% growth in the number of community pubs in the midst of a noisy and active debate among LGBTQ+ people about the decline in pubs/social spaces over recent years¹⁷, seen fit to support a single LGBTQ+ pub or venue. Power

To Change have been able to intervene in supporting women in community leadership. Their 2018 grantee survey noted that 'The vast majority of respondents (92%) were aged 45 or older.

¹⁶ In 2015, Power to Change was set up as an independent trust to support community businesses, endowed by the National Lottery Community Fund <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/>

¹⁷ Queer today, gone tomorrow: the fight to save LGBT nightlife, David Shariatmadari 3/4/2019 *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/apr/03/queer-spaces-london-lost-gay-clubs-lgbt-nightlife-gentrification>



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The proportion of female community business leaders was 13 percentage points higher than male community business leaders. Age and gender equality may be better suited to place-based interventions, as geographical distribution is less of a barrier in terms of critical mass and the potential for mutual support.

Different relationships to 'place' may well be a factor in why minority ethnic citizens have felt the need to create over 11 000 minority-ethnic led voluntary/community organisations, spaces where they can set the agenda rather than seek 'crumbs from the table'.¹⁸ The indefatigable efforts of The Ubele Initiative¹⁹, led by Yvonne Field, have sought to map existing community assets that Black communities own/lead and turn attention to the potential of Black-led community assets in closing the wealth and opportunity gaps that people of African descent face in the UK. The influence of The Ubele Initiative can be felt in the 2018 report of the *Commission on The Future of Localism*²⁰, that was led by retired Cabinet Secretary, Sir Bob Kerslake, and initiated by Locality²¹. Alongside calls for capacity building and targeted approaches, the Commissioners concluded that relational approaches that centred people rather than institutions or systems, were vital to the success of a reinvigorated, post-Brexit localism. They quote Charlotte Aldritt's²² observation that *"In order to have legitimacy, localism must have people shaped parameters."*

Foregrounding an understanding of community as relational, as it appears advocates for a reformed localism are starting to do, may hold some promising insights in terms of reframing place-based approaches in ways that re-centre people. Community viewed through a relational lens demands that process becomes as (and sometimes more) important than the outcomes a funder may want to achieve within a set timeframe. People engaging with the process potentially becomes the legacy that lasts beyond the project. For people who are part of groups that are typically marginalised/minoritised the value of self-determination/actualisation can be a key element in that process, and a fillip to engagement with and leadership of groups that are not necessarily identity based.

As the IVAR convened charitable foundations, key sector influencers such as New Philanthropy Capital, RSA, Centre for Progressive Policy, government departments following the lead provided by MHCLG, NDPBs; NHS, PHE, Arts Council, and many other funders move from an issues, or a national lens, to join the already-populous space of funding linked to geography, they have reinforced the privileging of place-based approaches, and narrowed the understanding of community and the validation they can benefit from through receiving funding. While now much better versed in systems-thinking, in pursuit of greater certainty regarding impact, foundations risk unintentionally disrupting a fragile, if imperfect ecology that has emerged in response to people's needs - communities that are tied, sometimes imperceptibly, by relationships, and their dreams of a better, shared future, rather than by the measurable mundanity of a postcode. Like

¹⁸ Big Society, Race Equality and the Active Citizen (2012) Rob Berkeley in 'The Big Society, The Big Divide' eds. Madeleine Sophie-Abbas and Ratna Lachman

¹⁹ [A Place To Call Home](https://www.ubele.org/) The Ubele Initiative (2015) <https://www.ubele.org/>

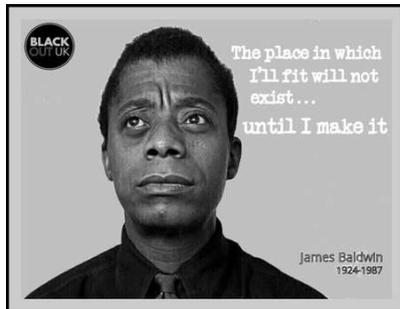
²⁰ Report of the Commission on The Future of Localism (2018) <https://locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/localism-devolution/the-localism-commission/>

²¹ Locality is the national membership organisation network supporting local community organisations to be strong and successful <https://locality.org.uk/>

²² On giving evidence to the Commission, [Charlotte Aldritt](#) was leading the RSA's work on Communities, and now leads the Centre for Progressive Policy, who are focused on what they term '*Inclusive Growth*'



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us all, far better at removing others' splinters than their own mote, they play fast and loose with the 'c'-word, which (as is true in most instances) could benefit from being used more sparingly. It is worthwhile reflecting that despite the conveniences of measurement and distribution that place provides, these approaches will always be partial. Transformative action to address inequality and build resilience may, at times be better served by investing in relationships that will last, adapt, inspire, and importantly,

address where power resides, whether the connections that make up that community are in walking distance, require a train journey, or depend on a fast broadband connection.

As Avtar Brah²³ notes there is the potential for significant difficulty when press-ganging commonly used terms into precision analysis of social phenomena;

... by the time a word becomes part of what Gramsci calls our 'common-sense', it has already been refracted through multiple mediations, and is not 'transparently' knowable. . . a significant implication of this for scholars and policymakers is that we try as far as possible to clearly indicate the precise sense in which a concept is being used

This discipline is particularly important when, as noted above, common-sense uses of language in the policy arena can have the effect of ossifying patterns of inequality and injustice. Attempts to reverse engineer are always likely to be more resource intensive and have a lower chance of succeeding.

There is little doubt (it's been measured) that place-based approaches have delivered much for many groups, individual and citizens, long may they continue. While they set out to assess and then share examples of 'success' (however defined) more equitably between different places, through finding out what works and then scaling (those *ceteris paribus* wielding economists again), they appear to be less well-placed (sic.) to generate that 'success' for all people within the chosen locale. While it might fit a dispassionate system, in which there were few costs incurred in doing so, to wait and see who those left behind are, what is at stake are people's lives. Especially given what we know of systems such as white supremacy, patriarchal masculinity, predatory capitalism inter alia, that are more pernicious in their design and invasive in terms of impact, this option is not realistically open to us.

Community is not an ideal; it is people. It is you and I. In community we are called to love people just as they are with their wounds and their gifts, not as we want them to be. **Jean Vanier**

Perhaps an asset-based approach requires work with the grain of people's favoured forms of association, in spite of geographical inconvenience, the risks of presentational disorderliness, or the stubborn defiance of friendships, networks and emotional ties to quantification by 'objective' measure. A little less worry about the bases on which communities are founded and more on their worth in delivering change from funders, a little less worry that we will waste their money, and a little more trust and even faith that with the right support, people, rather than places, will create a future that is better for all of us.

--ENDS--

²³ Avtar Brah (2007) *Non-binarized Identities of Similarity and Difference* in *Identity, Ethnic Diversity and Community Cohesion* Eds. Margaret Wetherell, Michelynn Lafleche and Rob Berkeley Sage:London