Constructing and Contesting Community Research Proposal

Call for Papers
Workshop Doctoral Program Global Studies

Workshop Contents

The recent upsurge of identitarian movements, right-wing populist parties, and nationalist state politics reflects a growing discomfort about the processes of migration and globalization. In this context, "community" has (re-)gained ground in political and academic debates. However, the supposed naturalness and stability of community has recently been questioned, and the phenomena of online or event communities reflects a shifting sense of the concept. Therefore, Ferdinand Tönnies' classical sociological differentiation between the authentic and emotionally bound "Gemeinschaft" ("community") and the abstract and rationally knit "Gesellschaft" ("society") has become problematic. The research proposal "Constructing and Contesting Community" engages a debate on the way community is or can be constructed today, following an interdisciplinary perspective that combines theoretical and empirical approaches.

Theoretical Approaches to Community

From an analytical perspective, community is not a given, but must be understood as a historically contingent concept that raises crucial questions about the ethical, social, political, and legal foundations of contemporary and historical collectivities. Can new forms of community, characterized by transregional mobility and entanglement, still be understood by applying classical conceptions of the communal and the societal (Durkheim 1893, Tönnies 1912)? How do we (re-)define related terms and concepts like group, unity, social contract, belonging, identity, culture, Heimat, space, etc.? How do strategies of exclusion or immunization (Esposito 2010, 2011) relate to the construction of community? Can communities be reduced to the individual attitudes of the members toward the group, for instance to the "subjective feeling of the parties … that they belong together" (Weber 1976)? Alternatively, should we consider, with Durkheim (Durkheim 2007), that a social group transcends the sum of its members?

Discourses and Practices of Community

Current theoretical approaches, from locality studies to philosophies of cosmopolitanism, discuss the way community is or can be constructed today. How does globalization, and the tension between mobility and belonging, effect traditional notions of community? How are new communities created? How are existing communities maintained? Under what conditions are communities contested or come to an end? These questions can be tackled from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view. From a theoretical point of view, the research proposal draws attention to the plurality of approaches insisting on the role of communication (Knoblauch 2017), emotions (Collins 2004, Walthert 2013), embodiment (Sachs Norris 2001), aesthetic experiences (Meyer 2009), etc. for the creation and maintenance of a community. From an empirical point of view, we focus on different ways in which community is constructed and practiced. We also ask for the recent emergence of new forms of communalization (Vergemeinschaftung) such as "event communities" (Gebhardt 2010, Gauthier 2014), "post-traditional communities" (Hitzler 1998, Hitzler, Honer, and Pfadenhauer 2008) or "online communities" (Hutchings 2017). Are these new social forms the "future" of all communities or are they just marginal phenomena that, as such, attract the interest of social scientists?

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The Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Community

The problem of the permanence and transformation of communities under the conditions of globalization prompts the question of the spatial and temporal dimensions of communities. Can we think community beyond traditional notions of locality and durability? The progressive disembedding (Giddens 1990) of the social life from local contexts is often considered a core characteristic of late modernity. Nonetheless, contemporary diaspora communities combine local and translocal spatial imaginaries and practices. In this respect, Benedict Anderson's (1983) theory on the origin of the national state provides a tool to think about communities beyond the limits of face-to-face interactions. The concept of imagined communities, however, is often quoted uncritically to describe various types of translocal communities. After more than 30 years, is this concept still a valid analytical tool? The research proposal would like to elaborate on this question and discuss alternative approaches to the conceptualization of translocal communities, for instance in light of the increasing role of new communication media (Couldry and Hepp 2017). The concept of entangled history (Conrad and Randeria 2002) could also call into question the dichotomy of local and translocal.

The Politics of Community

In its classical opposition to society, community is associated with ideas/feelings of warmth and coziness (Gebhardt 1999). For this reason, community has been interpreted as a utopian horizon to escape the cold of the postmodern age (Bauman 2001). The current identitarian movements, right-wing populist parties, and nationalist governments can be analyzed from this perspective. On the one hand, nation-state oriented identity politics are contesting the concepts of "cosmopolitism" or "world society" that have emerged in the wake of migration and globalization. On the other hand, national identity politics face the aspiration of so-called "minorities" of becoming a "community," or its claim of being a "community," with the desire of seeing a certain group identity recognized (Brubaker 2005). The research proposal would like to discuss the use of the concept of community to assert certain privileges and compare different theoretical approaches and empirical case studies with regard to the construction of identities and the definition group rights of communities (Rawls 1993, Taylor 1994, Kymlicka 2001).

Contributions

Doctoral students of the Graduate School of the Humanities are invited to contribute to the above-mentioned topics and perspectives. Please send a title and an abstract (approx. 1 page) of your proposal to Andrea Müller, (andrea.mueller@cgs.unibe.ch) by the 1st of March 2019.

Keynote Speakers

Vered Amit

Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University in Montreal. Her research interests are the workings of and intersections between different forms of transnational mobility. She is working on projects that explore reconceptualizations of sociality with a particular emphasis on concepts of community.

Bruce Robbins

Old Dominion Foundation Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. His research interests are 19th and 20th century fiction, transnational literature, literary and cultural theory and cosmopolitanism.

Frank Hindriks

Professor in Ethics, Social and Political Philosophy at the University of Groningen. His research interests are Moral Philosophy, Experimental Ethics, Social Ontology and Political Philosophy. He is working on projects that investigate collective agency and collective obligations.

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