CHAPTER 6
THE PRIVATIZATION OF COMMUNITY:
FROM PUBLIC GROUPS TO UNBOUNDED NETWORKS?

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Life is a Network

Sociology, until the 1960s, was full of concern about the supposed loss of community in newly-developing suburbs and "decaying" inner cities. Indeed, politicians and pundits continue to assert this, although now cyberspace has replaced suburbia as a community-destroyer. Yet these fears about the loss of community did not fit with what I had experienced growing up in New York City during the 1950s. I *knew* from New York that community life was abundant and vibrant. And I also knew that the neighborhood-centered discussions of urban sociology made only limited sense. My family's supportive ties with friends and relatives sprawled all over the five New York boroughs, beyond and behind. Fortunately, social network analysis came of age in the 1960s while I was at Harvard graduate school. The essence of social network analysis is that it does not assume that the world is always composed of normatively-guided individuals aggregated into bounded groups. Rather, it starts with a set of *nodes* (which could be persons, organizations, states, etc.) and a set of *ties* that connect some or all of these nodes. Social network analysis conceives of social structure as the patterned organization of these network members and their relationships. Social network analysts work at describing underlying patterns of social structure, explaining the impact of such patterns on behavior and attitudes (Wellman 1988).

The social network approach provides ways for analysts to think about social relationships that are neither groups nor isolated duets. Indeed, a group is really a special form of a social network that is *densely-knit* (most nodes are directly connected) and *tightly-bounded* (most relations stay within the same subset of nodes). Instead of an either/or distinction between group membership and social isolation, researchers can bring to bear in their analysis a set of structural variables, such as the density and clustering of a network, how tightly it is bounded, and whether it is diversified or constricted in its size and heterogeneity, how narrowly specialized or broadly multiplex are its relationships, and how indirect connections and positions in social networks affect behavior.

Although all studies have to start somewhere with some populations, many social network analyses do not treat formal group boundaries as truly social boundaries. Instead they trace the social relationships of the units they are studying, wherever these relationships go, and whomever they are with. Only then do network analysts look to see if such relationships actually cross group boundaries. In this way, formal boundaries become important analytic variables, rather than a priori analytic constraints. To be sure, there are many densely-knit, tightly-bounded work groups and community groups. Yet there are other kinds of work and community networks whose relationships are sparsely-knit, with only a minority of members of the workplace or community directly connected with each other. These relationships tend to ramify out in many directions like an expanding spider's web rather than curling back on themselves into a densely-knit tangle.

For example, people who hang out together — at work, in a café or on an Internet discussion group — can be studied as either a group or a social network. Those who study them as groups assume the membership and boundaries of the groups. They might ask how important each group is to its members, how the groups are governed and make decisions, and how the groups control members. Yet in all but laboratory situations researchers will be faced with the real-world problem that members are entering and leaving a group over time. By contrast, those who study such entities as social networks can treat their membership and boundaries as open questions. For example, frequent participation in a friendship circle might be treated as the basis for membership but so might be the indirect connections (and resource flows) that friends provide to others outside the circle. The patterns of relationships becomes a research question rather than a given (see Wellman 1988, 1998 for further discussion).

Once you adopt this perspective, then it is clear that communities, organizations and world-systems are social networks. Analysts have shown that life is full of networks, and tools such as UCINet (Borgatti, Everett and Freeman, 1994) have made it almost as easy to play with networks as it is for SPSS users to play with surveys of individuals. Although network analysts have often done sheer documentation — demonstrating the existence of networks — much of their research has been more than mere documentation. It has shown social scientists ways to shift away from thinking of social structure as nested in little boxes and away from seeing relationships as being the product of internalized norms.

The social network approach does not preclude finding that communities are urban villages where everyone knows each other and provides abundant, broadly-based support, what Tönnies (1887) called Gemeinschaft. Nor does it preclude discovering that organizations really function as Weberian hierarchical bureaucracies. But the social network approach allows the discovery of other forms of community — perhaps sparsely-knit and spatially-

dispersed — and other forms of organization — perhaps loosely-coupled or virtual (Weick 1976). Indeed, it was through using the social network approach that analysts discovered that community had not disappeared. Rather, it had moved out of its traditional neighborhood base as the constraints of space weakened.

This essay discusses the nature of contemporary communities in North America and the implications of their nature for the privatization, specialization and loose coupling of community and organizations. Seven propositions about the network nature of contemporary community are set forth. Where examples are called for, I draw upon our research group's thirty years of experience in studying community and organizational networks in Toronto.

Community Ties are Narrow, Specialized Relationships, and Not Broadly Supportive.

Both scholars and the public have traditionally thought of communities as composed of broadly-based relationships in which each community member felt securely able to obtain a wide variety of help. In Toronto, by contrast, we have found that most ties in personal communities are specialized, with active personal community members usually supplying only a few dimensions of social support (Wellman, Carrington and Hall 1988, Wellman and Wortley 1989, 1990). Parents and adult children provide the widest range of support although they rarely supply sociable companionship. Accessible ties — people living or working nearby, or otherwise in frequent in-person or telecommunications contact — provide important goods and services. The strength of ties is important, with socially-close voluntary and multiple-role ties providing high levels of support. Yet Granovetter (1973, 1982) has cogently argued the importance of weak ties for linking sparsely-knit communities and providing people with a wider range of information.

This means that people must maintain differentiated portfolios of ties to obtain a wide variety of resources. They can no longer assume that any or all of their relationships will help them, no matter what is the problem. In market terms, they must shop at specialized boutiques for needed resources instead of casually dropping in at a general store. They search for support in relationships which they work hard to maintain. We need to know what are the consequences for people of having such insecure sources of supply.

People Are Not Wrapped Up In Traditional Densely-knit, Tightly-bounded Communities but are Floating In Sparsely-knit, Loosely-bounded, Frequently-changing Networks.

Scholars and the public have traditionally seen communities as densely-knit solidarities with tight boundaries so that relationships largely stay within the

communities. Dense knit and tight boundaries make it easy for communities to control their members and coordinate their behavior. In reality, communities tend to be sparsely knit and loosely bounded (Wellman 1993; Wellman 1979; Wellman and Leighton 1979; Fischer 1982).Variation in the composition and structure of these community networks is more complex than the traditional Tönniesian dichotomy of communal versus contractual organization (Wellman and Potter 1998).

The complex and specialized nature of personal communities means that these are fragmented networks. People must actively maintain each supportive relationship rather than relying on solitary communities to do their maintenance work. Thus the kinship system does not supply much social support — extended kin rarely are supportive — but a more restricted set of ties with parents, children and siblings. The fragmentation, specialization and low density suggest that tie characteristics may be more important than network characteristics in the provision of social support. Yet the characteristics of community networks do have some effect, with the size, heterogeneity and density of networks related to the kinds of resources that flow through them (Wellman and Gulia 1998). Emergent properties are alive and well and living in Toronto.

The population of community networks is not stable. Only 28% of Torontonians' intimate ties were still intimate a decade later. Thirty-six percent of the once-intimate ties became less active over a decade, while the rest became very weak or disappeared. Although kinship is more stable, only 34% of intimate kinship ties remained intimate a decade later while another 28% continued as active, but not intimate, relationships (Wellman et al. 1997).

It is not that people's communities are disintegrating, but that they are in flux. Rather than being locked into one social circle, each person has about 1,000 ties that ramify across changing, fragmented communities to connect them to the diverse resources of multiple social arenas (Kochen 1989). Indeed Stanley Milgram's (1967) and Harrison White's (1970) observations that the entire world is linked by paths of five or fewer indirect ties is the basis for a recent play and movie, Six Degrees of Separation (Guare 1993). With sparsely-knit, loosely-bounded communities, it is possible to reach many people through even shorter paths. One consequence is that people must actively search their ramifying ties in unbounded networks to deal with their affairs instead of having to depend on the goodwill of a single, bounded community.

Communities Have Moved Out of Neighborhoods to be Dispersed Networks that Continue to be Supportive and Sociable.

Contemporary communities are not only sparsely-knit and loosely-bounded, but are no longer only local. The residents of developed societies usually know few neighbors, and most members of their personal communities live outside of their neighborhoods (Wellman 1990, 1992b). People maintain far-flung relationships by telecommunications (with telephones recently being joined by faxes, electronic mail and the Web) and transportation (based on cars, expressways and airplanes). In Toronto, being within an hour's drive or the local telephone zone is more important than being within a neighborhood's walking distance as the boundary for where face-to-face contact and social support start decreasing. A large minority of relationships stretch even farther than the metropolitan area. This lack of local ties and the presence of community members living elsewhere weakens local commitment and encourages people to leave when conditions are bad rather than staying to improve things.

This is not to say that communities have totally cut their domestic roots. Even the most spatially liberated person cannot avoid neighbors. Local relationships are necessary for domestic safety, controlling actual land-use, and quickly getting goods and services, as Jane Jacobs (1961) has pointed out for contemporary North America, Vicente Espinoza for impoverished Chileans (1992, 1998) and Charles Tilly for pre-industrial Europe (1973).

In saying that communities are not as local as they used to be, we need to avoid committing the pastoralist fallacy of thinking our cities and suburbs are inferior to the villages or pestilent cities of yore, with their diseases, crime and insecurity. Moreover, pre-industrial communities may never have been as locally-bounded as tradition has maintained. Whenever scholars have looked for non-local ties, they have found far-ranging networks. For example, radioactive analyses of obsidian have found Neolithic spear points and choppers over one thousand miles from their origin (Dixon, Cann and Renfrew 1968). In historic times, Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie (1975) has used Inquisition data to describe the far-flung relationships of Pyrenean villagers. These shepherds were always moving about, following the flocks or going off to war. Consider too, the protagonist of the Return of Martin Guerre (Davis 1983), a soldier returning from distant medieval wars. The wanderings continue: LeRoy Ladurie (1997) shows the long journeys of the 16th century Swiss family Platter around Europe (Eastern as well as Western), while Scherzer (1992) describes the long distances traveled by many guests to mid-19th century New York weddings. Such scholars show that fluid networks and much social and spatial mobility are not only 20th century phenomena (Wellman and Wetherell 1996).

Private Intimacy has Replaced Public Sociability.

Rather than operating out of public neighborhood spaces, North American communities of sociability usually operate out of private homes. Until well into this century, men customarily gathered in communal, quasi-public milieus, such as pubs, cafés, parks and village greens. More accessible than private homes, such places drew their clienteles from fluid networks of regular habitués (Roche 1981). The high density of the city meant that they were likely to find others to talk with. This density, combined with the permeability of the public spaces, provided men with many chance encounters with friends of their friends, and gave them opportunities to form new bonds. Although the men generally went out to enjoy themselves, they also used these public communities to organize politically, to accomplish collective tasks, and to deal with larger organizations. In colonial New England, "neighbors assumed not only the right but the duty to supervise one another's lives" (Wall 1990). This public community was largely a man's game. A woman who went alone to a Parisian wine shop risked being mistaken for a prostitute (Garrioch 1986).

Much of this community has now moved into private homes. The separation of work from residential localities means that co-workers are more apt to commute from different neighborhoods and no longer come home from work in solidary sociable groups. While men now spend more time at home, the feminization of paid work means that women spend less time. Husbands and wives are in no mood to go out together after their weary trip home from work. In any event, zoning regulations in North America ensure that commercial areas are far from home. Domestic pursuits dominate, with husbands and wives spending evenings and weekends together instead of the men going off to pubs and street corners (for more details, see Wellman, 1992a). Workaholics bring their computer disks home; couch potatoes rent videos.

Rather than being accessible to others in public places, many adults now overcome their isolation by getting together in each other's homes or by the private media of the telephone and electronic mail. Members of Torontonians' personal communities live a median distance of 9 miles apart (Wellman, Carrington and Hall 1988). Yet the easy accessibility of local relationships makes them continue to be significant. Although neighbors living within one mile of home comprise only 22% of the Torontonians' active ties, these neighbors engage in fully 42% of all interactions with active network members (Wellman 1996).

Thus the neo-conservative privatization of Western societies — the withering of collective public services for general well-being — is reflected in the movement indoors of community life. Where North Americans a generation ago often spent Saturday night going out for a movie and pizza, they now invite a few friends over to their homes to watch videos and order a pizza to be delivered. People are watching videos at home an average of thirty times per

year but are going out for entertainment only three or four times a year (Film Canada 1990; Strike 1990). As Toronto pundit Marshall McLuhan observed (1973), North Americans go out to be private — in streets where no one greets another — but they stay in to be public — to meet their friends and relatives.

Public spaces have become residual places to pass through or to shop in. Rather than participating in clubs or organizations, when they do go out, North Americans tend to go out alone, in couples or in small, informal groups (Putnam 1995). North American church attendance is declining, and Canadian movie attendance declined from 18 times per year in 1952 to three times per year in 1993. The public community of the pub is dying out. The 1989 Canadian National Alcohol Survey showed that only 10% of adult Canadians go to a pub once a week or more. Suburban shopping malls have become residual agoras — for consumption purposes only but not for discussion. Their cafés use tiny tables and uncomfortable chairs to discourage lingering sociability. There is little possibility for casual contact or for the expansion of networks.

As community has become private, people continue to feel responsible for their relatively strong relationships but not for the many acquaintances and strangers with whom they rub shoulders but are not connected. Private contact with familiar friends and relatives has replaced public gregariousness so that people pass each other unsmiling on streets. This privatization may be responsible for the lack of informal help for strangers who are in trouble in public spaces (Latané and Darley 1976). One consequence of this privatization of community in a world of strangers is that people feel that they lack friends even when their personal communities are abundantly supportive (Lofland 1973).

Communities Have Become Domesticated and Feminized

Home is now the base for relationships that are more voluntary and selective than the public communities of the past. Personal communities now contain high proportions of people who enjoy each other and low proportions of people who are forced to interact with each other because they are juxtaposed in the same neighborhood, kinship group, organization or workplace (Feld 1981; Wellman 1992a). This voluntary selectivity means that personal communities have become homogeneous networks of people with similar attitudes and life-styles.

Where once-public communities were essentially men's worlds, home-based personal communities often bring husbands and wives together. Men's community ties are now tucked away in homes just as women's ties usually have been. As community has moved into the home, homes have become less private. Previous generations of the middle and upper classes had confined visitors to ground-floor parlors and dining rooms, but visiting community

members now roam all floors. In their domestic headquarters, Toronto couples operate their networks jointly (Wellman and Wellman 1992), a far different scene from the segregated networks that Elizabeth Bott (1957) described in the 1950s for England. To a great extent it is the household, rather than the person, that exchanges support: for example, our research shows in-laws to be as supportive as blood relatives (Wellman and Wortley 1989). By contrast to the specialized support that community members exchange, spouses supply each other with almost all types of social support. Hence unmarried adults obtain much less social support domestically and do not have access to the networks (and their resources) that accompany spouses to marriage.

In the current situation, married women not only participate in community, they dominate the practice of it in their households. Women have historically been the "kinkeepers" of western society: mothers and sisters keeping relatives connected for themselves, their husbands and their children. They continue to be the preeminent suppliers of emotional support in community networks as well as the major suppliers of domestic services to households (Wellman 1992a; Wright 1989). With the privatization and domestication of community, community-keeping has become an extension of kinkeeping, with both linked to domestic management. No longer do husbands and wives have many separate friendships. As men now usually stay at home during their leisure time, the informal ties of their wives form the basis for relations between married couples. Women bear the "triple-load" of paid work, domestic work, and net work.

Thus the privatization and domestication of relationships has transformed the nature of community. Because communities interact in private homes, they are more likely to focus on household concerns and they provide less opportunity for casual encounters with friends of friends. Women's ties, which dominate personal communities, provide important support for dealing with domestic work. Community members help with daily hassles and crises, neighbors mind each other's children; sisters and friends provide emotional support for child, husband and elder care. Because women are the community-keepers and are pressed for time caring for homes and doing paid work, men have become even more cut off from male friendship groups (Wellman 1992a). North American men rarely use their community ties to accomplish collective projects of work, politics or leisure. Their relationships have largely become sociable ties, either as part of the relationship between two married couples or as disconnected relations with a few male "buddies".

This domestication helps explain the contemporary intellectual shift to seeing community and friendship as something that women do better than men. Just as husbands and wives are more involved with each other at home, the focus of couples and male friends is on private, domestic relations. Men's community ties have come to be defined as women's have been: relations of emotional support, companionship, and domestic aid. Thus the nature and

success of community is now being defined in domestic, women's terms. Concurrently, the growing dominance of the service sector in the economy means that the manipulation of people and ideas has acquired more cultural importance than the industrial and resource-extraction sectors' manipulation of material goods. With developed economies having more managers and professionals than blue-collar workers, many workplaces share the emphasis on social relationships that women have traditionally practiced at home. At the same time, the material comfort of most North Americans means that they no longer need to rely on maintaining good relations with community members to get the necessities for material survival. Their community ties have become ends in themselves, to be enjoyed in their own right and used for emotional adjustment. This resonates with contemporary celebrations of women as being more qualified in the socioemotional skills that are the basis of contemporary communities — and the downgrading of the allegedly masculine qualities of instrumentalism and materialism.

Hence contemporary discussions of community often reverse the traditional sexist discourse that has seen women as inadequate men. Now it is men who are seen as unable to sustain meaningful community relationships, especially when such relationships are defined only in terms of socioemotional support. This socioemotional definition has almost totally replaced the traditional definition of community as also including instrumental aid. Patriarchical arguments for male superiority in getting things done are being replaced by the celebration of female superiority in knitting together social networks (Bly 1990).

Political, Economic and Social Milieus Affect the Nature of Communities

Although the assertion that women have greater capacity for community has raised much consciousness, it is an idea that is time bound, culture bound, and empirically unsound. It ignores the thousands of years during which men's bonds largely defined community in public discourse. By reducing the definition of community to socioemotional support, it assumes that the world is as materially comfortable as that of North American intellectuals.

In less comfortable parts of the world, community members do more for each other than being privately sociable and emotionally supportive. Consider how Eastern Europeans use friends for economic, political and social survival: Greek men argue and plan projects in cafés, poor Chileans help barrio neighbors to survive and find jobs for kin (Espinoza 1992, 1998), and Hungarians help each other build new homes (Sik 1988; Sik and Wellman 1998). Even in more affluent Britain, people value getting services and information from community members as much as they value getting esteem and affection (Argyle 1990). To put matters more broadly, communities do not function in isolation but within the context of political, economic and social milieus that affect their composition, structure and operations. The nature of

different societies strongly affects the opportunities and insecurities with which individuals and households must deal, the supportive resources they seek, and the ways in which markets, institutions and networks structure access to these resources.

Communities are not just ways in which people spend some of their leisure time but key mechanisms by which people and households get resources. Yet most North American research has ignored the broader implications of community ties and looked only at "social support", the effects of community ties on maintaining physical and mental health. A broader view would see community as an essential component of society. For example, as French Revolutionaries proclaimed, "fraternity" (i.e., community) is one of five principal ways by which people gain access to resources:

- *Market Exchanges* (as purchases, barter or informal exchanges). Seeing this as the only means of access to resources is in line with the neo-conservative belief in the loss of community. *[Liberty]*

- *Institutional Distributions* (by the state or other bureaucracies as citizenship rights, organizational benefits or charitable aid). Such access to resources is in line with those who have traditionally seen society as a moral community writ large, as in the current American debate as to whether health care is a community obligation or a market decision. However, the use of the term "community" to describe such institutional distributions can be a subterfuge for bureaucratic privilege, as was the case in socialist eastern Europe *[Equality]*

- *Community Exchanges*. If informal, interpersonal access to resources occurs within neighborhood or kinship solidarities, then it fits those who believe in traditional community. If the exchanges are less-bounded (and hence less normatively-enforceable), then it fits the ramified community networks that have been described here. *[Fraternity]*

- *Coercive Appropriations*. Direct predatory behavior by interpersonal (robbery) or institutional bullies (expropriation). Current involuntary appropriations usually occur under the legitimating guise of imbalanced market exchanges or state extractions for unequal institutional distributions (as in governments forcing farmers to sell produce to urbanites at low prices [Tilly 1975]). More extreme instances of the loss of community are common in societies where institutional and communal mechanisms of social control have broken down. *[Robbery]*

- *Self-Provisioning*. Making and growing things in one's household. Self-provisioning is used even in market societies (see Pahl's [1984] discussion of growing food in England) and in socialist-institutional ones (see Sik's [1988] discussion of Hungarian home building). Such self-provisioning rests on an infrastructure of market and community exchanges that provide advice, skills and materials. *[Yeomanry]*

Although all types of resource access can be found in all societies, market exchanges are especially characteristic of western societies, institutional distributions are characteristic of centrally-planned statist societies, and community exchanges are characteristic of third-world societies with weak states and few formal organizations (Wolf 1966). While personal communities are important in western, statist and third-world societies, communities are differently composed, structured and used in each type of society. For example, the insecurities of members of western societies largely come from the emotional, interpersonal and domestic insecurities in their lives. Hence, people seek support from community members for such problems, but they look to markets and institutions to deal with their economic and political problems.

The comparatively low importance of economic and political concerns in western societies distinguishes the communities in them from those in societies which are less economically or politically secure. Most westerners rely on market exchanges for almost all of their production and much of their consumption. Institutional benefits such as schooling and medical care are abundantly available as citizenship rights. Westerners do not pay as much attention as do the inhabitants of statist societies (such as the former East European socialist states) to having community members who can make and fix things (such as home building) or who have connections to strategic institutional circles.

Cyberspace Supports "Globalized" Communities

It is a direct progression to go from analyzing network communities — linked by phones, planes and cars — to analyzing virtual communities, linked by computer-mediated communication media such as electronic mail and video conferencing. After all, a computer network is a social network when it connects people and organizations. Computer-mediated communication affects work and community, supporting shifts from densely-knit, tightly-bounded workgroups (in offices and factories) to loosely-coupled organizations, with fluctuating roles, collaborations and reporting structures. The experiences of workers in tightly-bounded, densely-knit, open-office fishbowls are similar to those in traditional village communities. Yet many workers and recreational e-mail users move among a variety of situations and social networks. They function in multiple, ramifying networks, switching among a diversified set of relationships to accomplish their tasks (for more details, see Garton and Wellman 1995; Wellman, et al. 1996; Wellman 1998; Wellman and Gulia 1998).

Although scholars once feared that computer-mediated communication could not sustain subtle, ambiguous or intimate conversations, research has shown that almost everything that can be done offline is being done online.

Computer networks are useful for supporting weak (as well as strong) ties, for expanding the size of people's active networks, for forming direct ties with friends of friends, and for fostering ties based on shared interests rather than on similar demographic characteristics.

Some scholars have been fascinated with virtual communities that function almost entirely online (e.g., Rheingold 1993). Such communities can be as densely-knit and all-consuming as traditional urban villages. Yet, although virtual communities are imageable, in fact most people make only partial commitments to online relationships. They may interact online in specialized communities, or their interactions online may be interwoven with in-person and telephone interactions with the same persons. Two persons living or working nearby might use the Internet to arrange a meeting (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1998; Salaff, et al. 1998), or two persons living apart may sustain a relationship online until their rare in-person meeting.

The Loosely-Coupled World

With the Internet able to leap large oceans at a single bound, there is the possibility that community and work will become "globalized". On the one hand, the cost of maintaining a computer-mediated relationship will be almost as low across the ocean as it is across the state. Moreover, the ability of media such as the Web or the Internet to store and forward communication will lessen the constraints of community or organizational members functioning on the same schedule. On the other hand, these same media can keep virtual communers and teleworkers bound to their home desktops for work and play, an extreme form of localization. In such situations, loosely-coupled global networks will intersect with tightly-bounded, densely-network domestic networks.

"Little boxes" was the way that folksinger Malvina Reynolds characterized American society in the 1960s. In the 1990s, we are less likely to live in a world of bounded work and residential units, hieratically linked in cities and organizations. As social relations in the developed world become more loosely-coupled, time and space constraints matter less. People work and commune with multiple others, switching frequently between roles and tasks, opportunities and constraints. The result is that people no longer know to which few units they belong, be it their community or their job. They need to cope with multidimensional networking in a loosely-bounded world.

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