Social inclusion, social movements, and the characteristics of late modernity

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Abstract

In discussing the ideology of social inclusion, this paper demonstrates that the composition of community groups in a period of late modernity is worthy of consideration. Although it would appear, on the surface at least, that previously stable community institutions, such as family, organised religion, trade unions, occupational workplaces, residential neighbourhoods, and so on, are being challenged by a broad rejection of the once powerful tool of tradition, society’s attachment to a belief in the symbolic value of community remains strong. In an environment however, in which the interaction and interdependence of human activity is subject to continual re-evaluation as the current processes of industrialisation and globalisation unfold, the template of what constitutes ‘community’ may need to be re-defined. It is to this end that the present is concerned, in that it seeks to identify new community formations. Of particular interest, is the rise and reach of modern day ‘social movements’, and why, when analysing the subject from a macro-sociological perspective, they have come to assume such a pivotal role in occupying community spaces left vacant by the demise of traditional social institutions. The paper is exploratory in its focus, using relevant literature to posit some broad theoretical themes, with the aim of presenting such themes to encourage a shift in community debates away from traditional concerns about ‘who’ and ‘how many’, towards questions of ‘why’ new community forms are emerging.
Introduction

Before the rubble and dust had time to settle after the terrorist attack on New York’s symbolic twin towers of liberal democracy, capitalism, and American economic supremacy, a belligerent United States President left no one in any doubt that their would be severe consequences from acts of aggression against the world’s most powerful nation. By taking on, and from some perspectives, defeating the military and intelligence might of the United States, a relatively small group of terrorists had succeeded in either confirming or reinforcing, the vulnerability which exists for both citizens and states which participate willingly or otherwise in the global network. Remnants of steel and cement, and of course civilian life, were not the only casualties of al Qaeda’s self declared assault on western hegemony. As the infrastructure crumbled, so did previously held convictions of western ideological invincibility. As has been stated before, to many observers the new millennium did not begin until the dawning of September 11, 2001. Almost two years on, those ramifications are still being keenly felt in a variety of areas, be they economic, military, humanitarian, or social. The consequences stemming from the collapse of the World Trade Centre have not however, been limited to a unilateral flow of physical and ideological retribution initiating and streaming outwards from America’s political inner sanctum. Acts of reprisal, as events in the Middle East continually remind us, are multi directional. The processes of globalisation make it possible for those supposedly on the outer to observe and make judgement on foreign spheres of activity. From the outset, it was highly probable that there would be global ramifications resulting from America’s response to terrorist activity.

Room for revolution?

With the memory of over 3000 casualties remaining in the mindset of not only the American President, but also civilian populations, it became evident that a public scalp in retaliation to September 11 was required. With Osama bin Laden unaccounted for, North Korea possessing a sophisticated military deterrent, and Iran for the moment remaining somewhat of an unknown quantity, subsequent to the partially successful bombing campaign in Afghanistan, the next flashpoint to appear on America’s radar directed at protecting the national interest was Iraq and Saddam Hussein. The rest of the story, for the purposes of this particular paper at least, is history. Proving of interest here, however, is that as
political leaders were endeavouring to establish a military ‘Coalition of the Willing’, a coalition which should be said would ultimately be constituted by predominantly American and British resources and personnel, an array of rival coalitions were taking their own first operational steps. In response to the imminent invasion of Iraq by Coalition of the Willing forces, without endorsement from the United Nations Security Council, citizens from around the world began to unite in opposition to any unilateral attack. Citizens across the world were inspired, many for the first time, to become peace and political activists. Although in many cases their unity was temporary, a genuine global social movement had been born. The culmination of peace activists’ efforts came on the weekend of 14-16 February 2003, when a range of demonstrations on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War took place in over 600 towns and cities across the corners of the globe. Some estimates put the number of demonstrators as high as 10 million. By any account it was a protest and demonstration of civilian mobilisation on a massive scale.

Australians proved to be enthusiastic anti war activists. Over that particular weekend in February, about 500,000 Australians congregated or marched in cities and towns across the nation in opposition to the pending war in Iraq. A peace rally in Melbourne on Friday the 14th February attracted approximately 150,000 participants. Of course, events of such magnitude do not just happen. A high degree of planning and preparation is required. In Victoria, much of the responsibility for organising the various anti war activities operating throughout the state, including the mass protest in Melbourne, was taken on by the Victorian Peace Network (VPN). Established in the second half of 2002, the VPN is an intriguing and complex non-government, non-corporate, community organisation comprising various affiliates from divergent backgrounds. Responding to the likelihood of military action in Iraq, affiliates of the VPN adhere to general principles advocating the demilitarisation of the Middle East, removal of foreign bases from the region, conflict resolved in a just and peaceful manner with the participation of all nations, and the end of racism and the racist stereotyping of any part of the Australian community. (VPN 2003) It is however, not so much the policies and general principles of the VPN that is of interest, but rather the diverse ensemble of organisations which have pledged affiliation. The VPN is a network of ethnic, religious, political, environmental, humanitarian and labour groups, which have somehow come together in period that this paper will argue is most appropriately defined as ‘late-modernity’. And while acknowledging that the VPN includes its share of predictable,
almost perennial protest organisations, the network is far from being dominated by the ‘Old Left’. On the contrary, the network is noteworthy for its cross-sectional links within the community. Visions of representatives from the Australian Jewish Democratic Society, Islamic Council of Australia, Australian Conservation Foundation, International Socialist Organisation, Oxfam CAA, Refugee Action Collective, Victorian Trades Hall Council, Psychologists for Promotion of World Peace, to name a few, seated together discussing the merits and possibilities for collective action, or further still, marching side by side, triggered a number of questions; what possibilities exist for collective forms of association in these times, how do we understand these times, and what does an investigation into the VPN tell us about these times?

The cynic might reasonably ask, what is not about social inclusion given the magnitude of its theoretical possibilities? Comparable accusations are often levied at similarly expansive titles such as ‘community’, ‘social control’, and ‘globalisation’. Opportunities for social inclusion will inevitably be linked with the processes of socialisation (1). And as such, recognising the possibilities that exist for social inclusion is not possible without taking into consideration changing social conditions.

Increased levels of urbanisation, occupational specialisation, social mobility, communication and technological development, reliance on legal-rational authority, education and bureaucratisation, are some of the signs of an ‘advanced society’. The structural narratives, however, of political governance, methods of control, construction of individual rationalisation, and processes of science, remain largely entrenched. Therefore, a comprehensive break with the processes of modernity has not materialised. And as such, it would be premature to speak of society occupying a post-modern existence just yet.

That said, insofar as industrialisation and modernity is concerned, the distancing act going on between the two metaphoric points of what society was, and what society is, continues to cover new ground. Furthermore, there are undoubted signs of societal fragmentation and discontent. And while not wanting to suffer a similar fate to those who have in the past attempted to predict the future, there is no harm in prophesising between the probably impossible and the improbably possible. (Runciman 1998: 190) Thus, reference to a period of ‘late’ modernity indicates that although a new epoch of civilisation has yet to manifest itself in a way in which steam and the secularisation of society did two centuries earlier, the processes of transition are underway.
The characteristics of a period of late modernity

It can be argued that the post World War Two period has been distinguished thus far by three notable cohorts. The ‘lucky generation’, who were accompanied by financial and employment stability, and the post war economic boom; the ‘baby boomers’, who were both recipients and advocates of the civic, political and sexual liberation movements during 1960s and 1970s; and the so-called ‘Gen-Xers’, who are said to be characterised by insecurity, casualisation, individualism, and loss of communal direction. A fourth generation, those born after 1980 and influenced heavily by the technological revolution, remain for the moment, like those who came before them, a work in progress. (Mackay 1997, 1999)

Change during the post war era has been noteworthy for a number of reasons. For instance, in the western world the welfare state was dismantled in various ways, most notably by increased welfare targeting and the adoption of mutual obligation. Rural economies and labour markets have, or are about to, collapse due to development and industrialisation creeping into previously untouched frontiers. At the same time ‘mega cities’ continue to expand. Environmental degradation is no longer easily ignored as society’s awareness of the destructive properties of unabated industrial and population growth is higher than it has ever been. Developments in communication, technology, and the erosion of barriers can be witnessed within the areas of economic, political and cultural activity. There has also been a form of latter day imperialism as the industrialised West seeks dominance of, and modernisation for, ‘underdeveloped’ states in order to incorporate new consumer markets. Combined with various cultural indicators which appear more prevalent today by comparison with previous generations, such as divorce, single parent homes, independent living, unemployment, casualisation, and the increasing divide between wealth and poverty, there seems sufficient evidence to suggest that in varying ways we do indeed live in different times by comparison with earlier generations. Whether or not though, that the social constructs which produce these ‘different times’ have combined to produce a ‘community-free’ zone, with individuals confused and disorientated, lost within a self-centred, self-styled individualistic malaise with few options for social inclusion, remains for the moment unanswered. And while we need to reconcile the tendency to exaggerate the snugness of the social fabric which held individuals together in previous generations, falling into the trap of romanticising the past, there is little denying that social transactions are more diverse and complex than they once were. Caught up amongst
the fervour of internationalism, trans-nationalism, individualism and other topical ideological spin-offs which emerged over the 1970s and 1980s such as ‘cosmopolitanism’, ‘risk society’, ‘liquid modernity’, ‘third way’, ‘radical centre’, ‘economic rationalism’ and the like, it is hardly surprising that reflection is required to make sense of these transitional changes.

Many of the changes mentioned above have been incorporated for convenience under the generic banner of ‘globalisation’, an area of growing interest in the social sciences during 1980s and 1990s (Appadurai 1996; Axford 1995; Beck 2000; Breacker et al. 1993; Featherstone 1990; Gills 2000; Johnston et al. 1995; Keohane 2002; Lash & Urry 1994; Shaw 2000; Waters 1995). Globalisation, given the magnitude of its theoretical scale, has found itself being labelled or attached to a series of interrelated circumstances and social transformations. Most accounts of globalisation can, however, be reduced to the key components of time, space, and their interaction. Globalisation has been linked with the shrinking of distance and it has been contrasted with localisation, nationalisation and regionalisation (Keohane & Nye 2000: 2). Globalisation, it has been said, narrows the differences between states and reduces or ends territorial differentiation (Jones, R. J. B: 2000). Although heavily tied to economic activity and financial transactions, globalisation is also connected to an increase in the volume of interactions between states in areas such as trade, tourism and migration. Cultural homogeneity is at times a consequence of such heightened levels of interaction (Halliday 2001: 61). Globalisation has furthermore been interpreted as “action at distance”, and has been intensifying over recent years due to developments in global communication and mass transportation (Giddens 1994: 4) Globalisation has been described as essentially the history of humankind’s technical advancement, reaching its zenith with the collapse of all boundaries (Douglas 2000: 115) An underlying characteristic often attached to globalisation is that of speed, as has often been said, whereas once it was the big that ousted the small, now it is the fast that ousts the slow (Hutton & Giddens 2000: 23) As distinct from earlier forms of internationalism or transnational interaction, an element of globalisation lies with the perception that it has coincided with a movement reinforcing western industrial hegemony. Friedman says, globalisation has always been with us, it’s just nowadays it moves “faster, cheaper and deeper”. (1999: 7-8) Or in the terminology of Nye and Keohane, globalisation is now more “thick” than by comparison with the pre 1945 era, “giving rise to increased density of networks, increased institutional velocity, and increased transnational participation.” (2000: 9)
Manuel Castells suggests that it is this dense array of interconnected networks that constitute the new social morphology of society. Accelerated, and indeed embedded, by advancements in technology, he argues that the new information technology paradigm is possible throughout the entire social structure. (Castells 2000: 76-7) Castells is, however, equally as lucid when he suggests that the worshippers of statism, technology, and unfettered economic markets, have not had it all their own way. Both offensive and defensive methods of resistance have been forthcoming, driven by a desire to protect and encourage cultural diversity.

Thus, resistance identities are as pervasive in the network society as are the individualistic projects resulting from the dissolution of former legitimising identities that used to constitute the civil society of the industrial era...Thus, on the one hand, the dominant, global elites inhabiting the space of flows tend to consist of identity-less individuals (‘citizens of the world’); while, on the other hand, people resisting economic, cultural, and political disfranchisement tend to be attracted to communal identity. We should, then, add another layer to the social dynamics of the network society. Together with state apparatuses, global networks, and self-centred individuals, there are also communes formed around resistance identity. However, all these elements do not glue together, their logic excludes each other, and their coexistence is unlikely to be peaceful.’ (Castells 1997: 356)

Social movements and the possibilities for collective association

Much of the resistance Castells refers to has been generated through an array of social movements which have continued to arouse public awareness since they first exploded in the 1960s. (2) Thus far, areas of analysis into social movements have included the various types of social movements (Wilson 1973), the different tactics and methods employed to influence the outcome protest activities (McAdam 1983; Schumaker 1975; Tarrow 1998; Tilly et a. 1975), the ways in which varying internal structures shape social movement activities, (Barkan 1984; Clemens 1993; Gamson; 1990; Goldstone 1980; Kitzschelt 1986; Staggenborg 1988), the reasons behind the success or failure of various movements (Piven and Cloward 1979), and the way in which social movements have been shaped by cultural implications (Freeman 1979; Morris and Mueller 1992; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Shaw 1994a). Building upon the implications of cultural interference, in recent times there has been a growing body of literature on the so-called ‘new social movements’ operating in contemporary society (Boggs 1986;
Carroll 1992; Cohen, J.L. 1985; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Melluci 1989; Scott 1990). (3) Yet despite the density of scholarship, critics have suggested that there remain theoretical gaps. (Berkowitz 1974; Giugini 1999a; Gurr 1980; McAdam et al. 1988 & 1996)

Although globalisation implies universalism, the processes of globalisation have proven to be thus far, largely uneven, and as such has provoked and given rise to new movements of collective action.

Former chief economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, says the problems lies not with globalisation, but how it has been managed. He says ‘Globalisation itself is neither good nor bad. …But in much of the world it has not brought comparable benefits. For many, it seems closer to an unmitigated disaster.’ (Stiglitz 2002; 20) Whereas once international movements were focussed through the channels of the working class, socialising the economy and dissolution of the state, recent trends suggest global interaction is now best represented through the representation of human rights, famine relief, peace movements and others underpinned by humanity and ecological harmony, rather than economic determinism. The observation that social movements provide an opportunity for collective association in a period of late modernity does not though, on its own, assist in filling the theoretical gap mentioned earlier. What would be beneficial however, is a solution to the following two part puzzle; what are the triggers and conditions for collective mobilisation in a period of late modernity, and secondly, what are the binding characteristics which keep those collective associations (communities) together?

As yet, answers are not readily forthcoming, but a return to the Victorian Peace Network and its anti war activities may assist in bringing the problem into a better perspective. That 150,000 Victorians voluntarily gather on mass in protest to events that for the majority will have inconsequential implications on their daily activities is undoubtedly significant. It would seem too simplistic to conclude that such a display of mass mobilisation was due solely to the Bush, Blair, and Howard advocacy for a pre-emptive strike on Iraq. Keeping in mind that atrocities during the 1990s in localities such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Somalia, Tibet, etc., did not provoke anywhere near the same levels of public outcry. Similarly, it would seem that the issues relating the collaboration of fifty or so diverse community groups to form the VPN go beyond, and are more complex, than simple anti war rhetoric.
Is it coincidental that many of the organisations which comprise the VPN have their foundations in the very institutional networks whose legitimacy is increasingly challenged? The legitimacy and authority of traditional community institutions, such as political governments, formal religious bodies, family groups, and trade organisations, is not what it once was. And as such, alternate forms of social inclusion will be sought. In endeavouring to understand not only these times, but also the opportunities which exist for forms of collective association, social movements such as the mass peace protests which developed earlier this year, will occupy a significant part of the equation. A number of reasons have been suggested to validate this claim.

As the tendencies of late modernity continue to embed themselves in everyday living, such as changing employment and family patterns, personal mobility, contrasts between the information rich and the information poor, connotations of cosmopolitan citizenship and so forth, social movements present a timely opportunity for ‘self-realisation’ in every day life. By comparison with earlier movements driven by political orientations and individual self-preservation, contemporary social movements challenge the contradictions of civil society on cultural grounds. In this way, social movements provide “new ways of acting, new ways of knowing and being in the world, and new ways of acting together through emerging solidarities.” (Walker 1988: 147-8) Rather than accepting a linear progression of society, one which is moulded by the parameters of western neo-liberal ideology, social movement activists see the present as an opportune forum for action. Furthermore, they recognise the possibility of their action changing, even if ever so slightly, society’s trajectory. According to Melucci, social movement are symptomatic of the structural problems citizens of the world are forced to contend with. He says of activists,

Through their visible action they publicise existing conflicts, even though their mobilisation is limited to a specific time and place. This is fundamentally different from traditional forms of collective action. Conflicts are now played out in the present and as their critics have pointed out, have no programme, and no future. This is true, but not in the sense intended by their critics. Unlike their predecessors, contemporary actors are not guided by a universal plan of history; rather, they resemble ‘nomads who dwell within the present’. Expressed in theoretical terms, the present is the locus of current conflict. (Melluci 1989: 55)
In discussing possibilities and forms of social inclusion, what one is in part making reference to, is the opportunities which exist to be part of a community. We are also referring to the possibilities which exist to satisfy the human desire for a sense of belonging and recognition. As such, community is contested on two fronts; what it is, and, what it means.

Public or political rhetoric is often concerned with the ‘community good’, civic leaders reassure us of the ‘community interest’, participants are said to belong to a ‘community group’, and citizens are said to have access to ‘community services’. In each of the above mentioned scenarios, and although traces of interdependence can be found, a sense of community in each context is vastly different. Labelling multi-faceted circumstances and disciplines under the generic banner of ‘the community’, does not do our understanding of community, or for that matter, social inclusion, any favours. Community invariably finds itself being substituted for the massive middle ground consisting of the interaction between the individual, society, and forms of social solidarity. Typically, community has been a way of simultaneously recognising similarity and difference, or more specifically, inclusion and exclusion. Seen in this sense, community expresses a “relational” idea (Cohen, A. P. 1985: 12) In addition, community has often been linked with locality, shared moral beliefs and attitudes, common cultural and ethnic values, and a sense of belonging. In this sense, community has a wide “descriptive” meaning (Plant 1974: 13). An added complexity, however, is that there is the stark difference between an empirical description and a normative prescription. Consideration is needed in distinguishing between what community is, and what we think it should be (Bell & Newby 1972: 21). There remains an accompanying ‘feeling’ that unlike other social organisations (state, nation, society), community is generally viewed in a favourable context. Community is also spoke of as being ‘lost’, or in need of a certain ‘quest’ being undertaken to bring about its recapture (Nisbet 1962; Sellars 1975)

In an age of late modernity, social movements can assist in bringing community, albeit in a different context, back into the social realm in a number of ways. They provide a way of forging multi-layered solidarities. Also, social movements are able to protest against the contradictions of society. In addition, they are able to counter single power hegemony and the potential unification of differences.
into a single cultural entity. In the absence of traditional community groups, contemporary social movements serve as a substitute for the weakening of previously solid social institutions and structural boundaries. Furthermore, as carriers of global culture, social movements provide an opportunity for opting in, and being a participant, in the network society. The continuing push towards global integration, will continue to spark opportunities for global solidarity.

In short, a general consensus has been arrived at as to what triggers acts of resistance. Useeem suggests that,

The formation of a protest movement is generally contingent on the pre-existence of a group of people united around a set of political principles dealing with a solution to a social problem. Some protests erupt spontaneously and reflect little conscious effort by a politicised leadership. But many movements … are instituted only after a lengthy maturation process in which a substantial number of people come to view a new protest as valid and realistic.’ (1973: 37)

Yet this analysis only serves to reinforce that a social movement is not a fact, but rather a process, which needs to be understood throughout its entire evolutionary cycle. The congregation of 150,000 citizens in Melbourne is one thing, understanding the environmental conditions which triggered their activism is another. One cannot help but feel there is more to it than simply anti-American sentiment. It is anticipated that detailed analysis of contemporary organisations such as the Victorian Peace Network will assist in answering some of the key questions of our time; what possibilities exist for collective forms of association in these times, how do we understand these possibilities, and how do we understand these times?
References

(1) Socialisation defined by Brown as ‘the continued process of adaptation by the individual to his (sic) physical, psychological and social environment through ‘transactions’ (direct of symbolic) with other people.’ Brown, H. (1975) Socialisation, Open University, page 16

(2) A number of definitions are offered as to what constitutes a social movement, however the two definitions offered here summarise the key conceptual characteristics; ‘A social movement is a conscious, collective, organised attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by non-institutionalised means’ (Wilson, B., R. (1973). Magic and Millennium. London, Heinemann., page 8) and ‘a social movement consists of a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of repeated displays of that population’s worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.’ Tilly, C. (1999). ‘From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements’ in How Social Movements Matter. M. Giugni, D. McAdam and C. Tilly. Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, page 257. As a minimum, social movements requires continuos interaction between challengers and power holders.

In distinguishing between a social movement and an interest group Freeman says, ‘People are the primary intangible resource of a movement, and movements rely very heavily upon them. In fact, one could say that a major distinguishing factor between a social movement and an organising interest group is the particular mix of resources each relies on. Interest groups tend to mobilise tangible resources, some of which are used to hire professional staff to translate the rest of the resources into political pressure. Social movements are low in tangible resources, especially money, but high in people resources.’ Freeman, J. (1979). ‘Resource Mobilization and Strategy: A Model for Analyzing Social Movement Organization Actions’ in The Dynamics of Social Movements: Resource Mobilization, Social Control, and Tactics. M. N. Zald and J. D. McCarthy. Cambridge Massachusetts, Winthrop Publishers, Inc., page 172

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