

The future of community research: a conversation with Alison Hulme, Alan Bradshaw and Adam Arvidsson.

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It's important to question categories like community. This is not least because manners and contexts in which people gather, distribute resources, and experience embodied and emotional togetherness are myriad and constantly changing. As such, it's helpful to keep an eye on the breadth of social science research that is currently investigating and writing about communities as sites, experiences, units of analysis, or strategic endpoints. Additionally however, where 'subcultures' or 'tribes' might once have been conceptual tools first and foremost for academic use, these labels long ago migrated into MBA classrooms, and escaped onto mean streets.

"My IG followers are my tribe", "We've always been a subculture". These day-to-day utterances betray how concepts of community are put to work in markets. Community is a label that is defined and deployed according to the needs and experiences of bikers, politicians, brand managers, estate agents, factory workers, programmers, restaurant goers, activists, social media influencers, car poolers, villagers, etc. This is important to recognize because these everyday uses of community concepts to achieve various ends means that our categories will change and shift over time and in different contexts. In short, community labels are as much a topic of investigation as they are descriptive of divergent social forms.

To better understand the state of community research in other disciplines, and to consider how the contexts of contemporary market societies are changing both communities, and knowledge making in respect of communities, we approached Alison Hulme, Adam Arvidsson, and Alan Bradshaw. Our conversationalists explore some of the intersections of social theory, and contemporary society in which communities occur, change, and prompt academic investigation. In this sense, we are very fortunate to benefit from three scholars who feel quite at home when throwing the categorical cat amongst the conceptual pigeons. In so doing, the following conversation is intended to challenge orthodoxy, to prompt scrutiny, and accordingly, to offer directions for future research.

Robin: There's always plenty of talk about how marketing and consumer research are magpie disciplines, and in terms of thinking about how ideas of subcultures, fan community and neotribes its true that sociology and cultural studies have inspired key community studies in our field. I wonder then, if we might start the conversation by considering *what do other disciplines now have to offer the marketing academy in the study of community that we're still missing?*

Alan: To start, something very elementary and obvious needs to be said - the form of any community will always be dialectically intertwined with the form of the economy. Our studies of community must never be a nostalgic lament nor should we forget that previous forms of community will have emerged from particular modes of governmentality.

That said, I think that one subject area that is interesting to engage is studies of labour during Post-Fordism, specifically studies that explore the current deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of community infrastructure. What I have in mind are analyses of how the traditional working class that used to live around large factories and be constituted by workers who largely worked the same job, for the same pay, listening to the same radio stations, read the same newspapers, lived in near-identical houses, allowed for a very collectively experienced and intense class cohesion and togetherness. The political strength that the working class had during Fordism was very much grounded in that sense of

community and shared experience. We can understand the formation of the Labour Party, for example, and the power of the trade union movement during the Fordist era as fundamentally linked to that sense of working class togetherness.

However in the Post-Fordist economy, where labour fragments and is atomised, and where consumer culture is so diverse, there is far less of a capacity to maintain a common class experience and it is hardly surprising that we have seen a collapse in militant working class politics. What is so interesting now is how, here in the UK, political agents like Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum are reassembling class awareness among the dispersed precarious labour of the younger generation. We are seeing, I suspect, a transition of working class politics away from their traditional grounding in the post-industrial strongholds, and towards people caught up in precarious labour and indebtedness. A very inspiring example of what the political future might look like was provided by the Deliveroo riders who managed to collectively mobilise themselves in their dispute over working conditions. Up until then, it was imagined that it would be impossible to collectively mobilise platform based workers, and yet there they were assembled in Bloomsbury, making their demands as powerfully as any trade union could. Phenomena like Momentum, the Deliveroo riders, and Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party with its membership of about half a million people tell us that things are getting very interesting in terms of consumption, politics, and governmentality.

Adam: I think one can sense a certain idealization of community in a lot of consumer research, maybe more so some years ago, it might be going away a bit now. However, it is or used to be understood that if consumers form community around brands or consumer goods then that is mostly a good thing. This idealization of community came to the fore in the 1990s, as political scientists and moral pundits (i.e. Putnam, Fukuyama, Amizioni, etc.) lamented the loss of community and social capital in American life, at the same time, roughly, as consumer researchers 'discovered' the social and relational role of brands and commodities.

Alison: Absolutely. And the forming of 'community' around brands was asserted, even celebrated, as a direct replacement for an 'older' form of community, as if it was equal to or qualitatively the same as the community that was apparently 'lost'. (As you can tell, I want to be quite careful about this 'loss' of community – certainly many political allegiances that had been straightforward were corrupted and broken up, but I am wary of romanticized visions of an era where political philosophies of the Left and Right were apparently uncomplicated and cohesive.)

Adam: But this idealization of community has a longer history in US social thought, going as far back as the social thought of early American puritanism. It became a key feature of American sociology through the Chicago school and their import of German social theory classics, like notably Tönnies. Tönnies magnum opus *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, or *Community and Society* as it is commonly translated, was in turn part of an old figure in German social thought. Community, or traditional, 'natural' social bonds, rooted in the land stood against civilization, the artificial social bonds of modernity that were distinctly French. (The English did not have any social bond at all, they were simply a 'nation of shopkeepers', as Marx described them). In other words the idea that community is a good, wholesome and progressive thing is in many ways an reiteration of a theoretical figure that had its origins in particular German romantic reaction to the consequences of the French revolution, or more generally, to a more cosmopolitan version of modernity.

In French social thought the tables are in a certain sense turned. Emile Durkheim, clearly favoured society, or as he (somewhat confusingly called it: 'organic solidarity' over community (marked instead by 'mechanic solidarity'). The challenge was not so much how to re-construct community in a modern world where traditional bonds were disappearing, but rather how to find new ways to combine individual freedom, autonomy, what the relationship coach would call an 'inability to commit' with a meaningful existence. Alexis de Tocqueville was arguably on to something similar when admiring the ability of Americans to develop meaningful coexistence in a situation where traditional bonds and hierarchies were absent.

We can learn from this alternative theories, I think, because not only do they provide a less romanticized and idealized vision of community, but they also better describe how consumption communities actually work. Very few people actually identify with brands or consumer goods in as strong and passionate ways as marketers would wish. People who have love marks or define themselves as Apple devotees are probably as frequent as stamp collectors or passionate ping pong players. They are not a paradigm for understanding human action in general. Most people have a more fleeting relation to brands. Brands are important, sometimes, in some situations, but they do not provide a source of identity, passion, love or affection. This is particularly true today as social media has increased the levels of saturation of everyday life with brands and consumer culture, and on the other hand, economic decline has significantly reduced the ability for most people to actually purchase the goods thus advertised. This gap between the ever more distant ideal of branded consumer culture and the material conditions of actual realization is making a different relation to brands more common. Brands do not, or do no longer (there is an interesting historical argument to be explored here) serve as 'beacons of consumer desire' as much as they are cultural symbols among many others, to be used and recombined as the situation commands. The culmination of this relation to brands is the *brandedness* that mark global *Shanzhai* or pirate culture: the fake smartphone with a Disney and Apple logo combined on the back side, the jeans with Levis, Facebook and Nike logos on sale on the backstreets of Delhi or Bangkok. Fleeting, weak organic or *gesellschaftliche* associations, rather than strong stable, mechanic, *gemeinschaftliche* relations are I think the model of how brand and consumer 'communities' increasingly look like today.

Alison: Returning to the question of *what other disciplines have to offer the marketing academy in the study of community*, I think it might be easier in some ways to answer this question in terms of what other disciplines have taught us *not* to do with the term community! Firstly, I entirely agree with Alan that any 'community' cannot be un-entwined from economy, and indeed separating the two may not be useful. It is this separation that economist Stephen Gudeman attempts to blur when he argues for an understanding of the economy that consists of both 'market' factors and 'anthropological' factors. His attempt to join market and community in a new conception of economy is inspired by the view that while anthropologists employ an oversocialized view of human action (embedded communities), economists employ an undersocialized one (disembedded communities). So, following this logic, in non-market economies, there is more instrumental action than anthropologists recognize, and in market economies, there is more embedded action than economists concede. This is a useful acknowledgement of economic and anthropological typecasting of situations and works towards a sort of market – community merger which has some promise, although fundamentally I am at odds with Gudeman's ends, as for him

essentially the community-economy is uneven and needs to be if it is to breed creativity and innovation. This then, despite surface appearances, does not challenge in any way a classical liberal economic model in which only capitalism can form the backdrop for innovation, and the hardship involved is seen as an opportunity rather than an injustice. So – I have my issues with this!

Of course, communities are both real and imagined as in Benedict Anderson's much-quoted work – and this speaks to Alan's concern with nostalgia and a kind of fake history of certain communities. The classic imagined communities are nation states and personally I am very interested in the intersection of thinking on consumption, development, and the nation state/nationalisms. Frank Trentmann's work is particularly rich in this area. Communities in this sense becomes about the development and indeed survival of nation states. In fact the more deeply entrenched the political thinking around the most effective developmental pathways being those that lead towards becoming a consumer nation, the more consumption becomes about how we perform (or are expected to perform) our citizenship – as consumer-citizens and members of an imagined (national) community. This angle rather detracts from the arguments of Danny Miller about the agency of the individual – agency depends on how far we choose to zoom out. Seen from the scale of nation states, the consumer-citizen seems to me to have rather more structural constraints or duties than agency. This is perhaps why nation states are struggling, but also rallying through new nationalisms, to speak effectively to peoples' everyday lives. Chris Rumford's book *The Globalisation of Strangeness* is a wonderfully sensitive exploration of this. And yet, there are certainly, genuine, and genuinely exciting, new solidarities both in Britain and elsewhere. So, I am interested in the limits of community if you like, or to put it more positively, how we can reclaim community in the name of new solidarities.

I think also that community studies have tended to see consumers only as consumers, and pitted them against producers who are perceived as only producers, when in reality consumers are increasingly being asked to be part of the 'production' of a brand, and producers in developing countries are increasingly being required to become reserve armies of consumers for the over-production of goods (this is especially true in China since the global financial crash). Borrowing 'following the thing' methodology from cultural geography can help to break down these boundaries between consumers and producers. This methodology takes a specific object and allows it determine the locus of the research – Pietra Rivioli on T-Shirts, Caroline Knowles on flip-flops, my own work on pound stores, and Ian Cook's on food are all examples. Such studies help us think differently about what really holds together communities and the limits of both structure and agency involved.

Robin: Bernard Cova's ideas about Mediterranean marketing that he mooted some years back seemed to hold the promise of not only contextualizing the enactment or practice of community within particular geographic and economic spaces, but also allowing that our own epistemic cultures are never really as impartial as we might pretend when seeking out generalizable contributions. So, besides from searching beyond our discipline, the flip side of the first question would be what are we missing in terms of authors and ideas from our own discipline that might lead community research in useful directions?

Adam: I think it might be worthwhile revisiting early consumer researchers like Dichter or Martineau, or Levi for that matter. Not so much for theoretical guidance as for methodological reflexivity. Dichter was able to construct an entire anthropology of consumer desire by posing what can be described as leading questions. The use of the focus group created a situation where people were gathered in a room and sometimes even paid money to discuss the virtues of margarine for hours. This very probably to an exaggeration of the significance of margarine in their lives, as well as to a number of insights into the psychology of margarine users that, while interesting might not be particularly relevant to even to the lives once they left the room. I think that a lot of contemporary consumer research works in similar ways. If you interview people at length about their relation to brands and consumer goods, it is almost inevitable that the result will illustrate how these objects are deeply meaningful and rich in signification. But this might very well be an artefact of the interview situation. Do I really care about my Mac computer that much? Maybe not, but if you ask me about it I have to say something, and some of the things that I say will seem to make the interviewer happy. I remember finding this account of how the deep psychological motivations between housewives' aversion to plastic were constructed by Italian motivation researchers (inspired by Dichter) in the 1960s.

Alison: Indeed. Plus focus group participants are very aware that if they simply say they don't really care about margarine they won't be invited to another focus group!

Alan: In my work with Detlev Zwick, we have argued that marketing has a biopolitical tendency - that is, that it wants to reshape life into the image of capital - and this is perhaps best evidenced by marketing discussions of community. Consumer research explores communities via a broad range of perspectives including consumer subcultures, communities of consumption, consumer tribes, brand communities, online communities, etc. but perhaps we might consider to what extent each of these, with the possible exception of subcultures, might be better understood as fragmentations of communities. Following the work of Jodi Dean and Slavoj Zizek, we might read these so-called communities as grounded in the interpassivity of their members and where the glue that binds the community, so to speak, is formed in the lifestyle commitment of each person to the commodity, rather than their active commitment to each other. Now I fully realise that a person's commitment to their commodity might serve as a medium for their commitment to other people so there's no necessary exclusivity at stake, and there's always somebody who can point to empirical research that demonstrates tight community bonds in certain cases, however nonetheless there is much work that attests to the ephemerality and loose social bonds in many of these notional communities.

Myself and Detlev argue that here our subject's ideology is sometimes exposed; whereas other subject areas, like sociology, might prefer to ground their definition of community on strong social ties, marketing desires to apply the word community precisely to those sites in which we can see the undoing of the ties. Marketing scholars are right to take interest in these phenomena because, in the undoing of the ties and the deterritorialisation of community infrastructure, we see new modes of valorisation emerge. For this reason, myself and Detlev argue that the elasticity that we are willing to allow ourselves for defining a term like 'community' is fundamentally a matter of ideology and I hope that marketing scholars will be reflexive in how they themselves sometimes become implicated in and so reproduce that ideology by swiftly declaring specific phenomena to be

a community, when that phenomena might be better understood as the deterritorialisation of community.

Alison: In a similar vein to Alan, I have an interest in this idea of 'commitment', and how marketing absolutely tends to paint this as people being bonded to the commodity, rather than to each other. For me, this is a 'commitment' that can too easily be undone by the inherent competition between individuals who are part of capitalism; being bonded to each other – or 'solidarity' as I tend to call it – can float rather more freely of capitalistic competition and its urge towards individualism. Christina Kiaer's work on Aratov's 'socialist objects' is a good 'in' to discussions in this area, enabling us to ask what objects can do when we actually *use* them, not just what happens when we buy them. Also, Olga Kravets piece 'On Comrades and Things', published in *Ephemera*, and Christina Kiaer's book *Imagine No Possessions*. All these enable us to reconsider and re-theorise the relationship between people and things as one that has the potential to create solidarities, rather than neo-liberal subjecthood in which the commodity thing (despite maybe sometimes creating some fleeting communities with rather loose bonds) creates rifts between us and stalls potentially new, and yes sometimes revolutionary, groupings or 'communities'.

Robin: What are the 'telling silences' of research investigating community? Who/what isn't speaking?

Adam: Ordinary people. Contemporary culturally influenced consumer research, and CCT in particular is a vicious breed of cultural studies and the case study methodology, as practiced in business schools. This means that CCT is probably the only discipline in the social sciences where it is legitimate to generalize from a single case. Some people we talked to in suburban US said that they identify and feel close to people who use the same brands, some even participated in brand related discussions online, ergo: brand community is a concept, which is universally applicable. Usually the cases that are used are those that are easiest to study, people who self-select by joining discussion groups around brands, or even people who pay to spend a weekend with fellow brand enthusiasts.

But how representative are they of the ways in which ordinary people (the 99 per cent, call it what you will) relate to brands or consumer goods? There seems to be very little interest in examining questions about the extent to which such concepts can be generalized, or the conditions under which they can. Are passionate brand relations something that applies mostly to the people who otherwise have no friends? Is it more prevalent in certain social groups than in others, the upwardly mobile with low cultural capital, perhaps? In other words, how ordinary are the kinds of observations that are being made, and under which conditions and to whom do they apply?

Alan: I think the central issue should be of class conscientiousness. Again the post-Fordist scholars are very good in pointing out how class politics, consumer culture, labour conditions, and of course, gender, are all intertwined. If we were to ask ourselves, what forms of community might be best suited to neoliberal social reproduction, then I think much of the sorts of cases that attract consumer culture theorists might well be exemplars. If I am right about this, then it is a perplexing thought. For this reason, we should never stop

asking how new forms of community might be understood as new forms of class composition. Most of all, I think we should keep our eyes peeled on the Deliveroo riders.

There's something else - the very basis of our democracy are grounded in particular community and class formations. Jeremy Gilbert is very good at arguing that it is no coincidence that early 20th century demands for enfranchisement co-appeared with, and in some cases used as a promotional media, modern forms of consumer culture as well as Fordist working conditions. There are those, like Jodi Dean, who see the fragmentation of community grounded in the decline of symbolic efficiency and the rise of interpassivity, as constituting a crisis for democracy itself. We ought not to forget, therefore, that there are real political issues at stake.

Alison: People who do not care about brands are not speaking, or rather, the conversations in much research – market and academic – are simply not aimed at them. This can come from a left-wing, anti-brand position as much as a market capitalist position. Plus, of course, 'hard-to-reach' research participants such as NEETS are not speaking, or not being spoken to. I think essentially the result of who we are speaking to is a kind of constant affirmation of the false partnership between consumption and democracy that began with the consumer movement in the USA and has been consolidated by the likes of Milton Friedman. Research speaks to those who care about consuming more than others; so naturally it picks up on the (false) idea that it is very important in terms of peoples' liberty, free-will, and sense of agency, when for most it is simply a mundane decision within a set of financial, political and cultural constraints. Calvin Hui wrote an excellent chapter for a book I edited a few years back on consumption in China, in which he argues the apparent 'choice' of women in China now to dress more femininely than they could under Mao, has actually simply made some versions of womanhood impossible to inhabit – i.e. that this consumer 'choice' has simply changed the range available or lopped off the scale some of the more masculine ways to be a woman. We are not talking to people with interesting experiences of consumerism such as these – basically those we speak to support the notion that consumption is something far greater than just that – that it has deep philosophical meaning rooted in a sense of personal freedom etc. Friedman loves this stuff – it suits him just fine... which is a good reason to stop writing it. I'm not saying that consumption can't be this; I just think it often isn't... but this doesn't make it any less important to study!

Robin: Finally, what do you think are the key future research directions that need to be explored by the marketing academy?

Alison: Well, being a strange hybrid of a Cultural Studies person with an Anthropology background, who became a cultural Geographer and then entered Development Studies(!), I think we should be looking at the extent to which the consumer and/or consumerism is 'the answer' for less developed countries. Of course, my political angle on this is that geo-politics operate on the basis of nations following 'our' development trajectory and joining the consumer nations 'club'. (Modernisation theory may be dead in the academic study of development, but the assumptions that accompanied it are still alive and kicking in supranational institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.) I think looking at practices and meanings of consumption and thrift in light of social and economic development is key.

Alan: I started off by saying that there is a dialectical relationship between community and economy but it is equally elementary to also say that there is a dialectical relationship between community and material objects. All communities will have a materiality, or as Daniel Miller might say, will have lots of stuff. Therefore it would be a mistake to see a community as inherently undermined because of the presence of branded commodities, so perhaps a little bit more work might be necessary to flag up what sort of community we, or at least I, would like to see, and how brand or commodity communities might disappoint us.

Cornell West talks about communities as places in which we experience renewal; by that he means a collective sense of moving forward in which a struggle can be sustained. Like many of my British colleagues, I have recently had a very intense reminder of what this is like; I have spent much of the last while on strike as part of the University and College Union defence of our pensions. During this last period, I have experienced an extraordinary surge in community with my colleagues and I found it repeatedly at many meetings, picket lines, lobbies, rallies, and other events. To give one example, lots of us marketing scholars marched together, along with tens of thousands of university workers, to the British parliament during heavy snowfall. For at least some of us, if not everybody, I believe that there was an intensely shared cathartic sense of renewal; that to find ourselves as a community grounded in collectively refusing our working conditions, and boldly asserting our demand for dignity, had an almost electrifying effect that also served to remind us how we have missed collegiality proper during these years of enervating university neoliberalism. Now imagine if somebody was to study the strike action as a moment of brand community (with the brand being the union) or as strikers as consumers of their pensions, I would anticipate that such studies might starkly miss the point.

Alison: I agree, and I like how this idea of ‘embodied intensifications’ Alan mentions speaks to pedagogical thinking on us (particularly us as lecturers) becoming critical beings as well as critical thinkers, and indeed passing this on to those around us including our students.

Alan Jeremy Gilbert’s *Common Ground* (a book which I emphatically recommend, by the way) reminds us that neoliberal theory gives us compelling explanations of the individual and individual motivation. But what is far less developed is a theory of collective motivation and community with horizontal organization and Gilbert is right to identify that as a task that should preoccupy us. In recent times there have been a series of books that talk about the very embodied intensifications that take place during collective mobilisations grounded in struggle. I’m thinking now of, certainly Jeremy Gilbert’s book, but also *The Party* by Jodi Dean, *The Politics of Transindividuality* by Jason Read and *Radical Happiness* by Lynne Segal. These books remind us that collective experiences of togetherness can also be very radical affirmations of a different type of existence, an existence which is far more viscerally embodied but also highly charged with political possibility and renewal. When studying community, we should hold that possibility in mind.

[reading list or a bibliography](#)