



CITY AND POSSIBILITY OF COMMUNITY: A READING OF MAX WEBER AND LOUIS WIRTH

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Introduction

For the early theorists of the city life community emerged as a key question. Urbanization was described through its ability to bring transformations in the social, political and economic structure of society. The changes in the forms of community life became important to describe and evaluate these processes. Tonnies' distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* can be taken as an example of how urbanization's impact on social life made notion of community an important sociological concept. Fundamental aspect of this distinction was that the traditional form of community has increasingly given way to the modern form of individualist life. At the same time the early scholars of the city faced the paradoxical emergence of new communities in the urban settings.

Important questions that emerged in this context were: Whether urbanization necessarily causes deterioration of the communal way of life? Is community an obstacle in the way of urbanization? Whether urbanization means loss of community life or it gives rise to newer forms of community replacing the traditional forms?¹ Can community survive in the city? In this paper I seek to formulate a discussion on these question through an engagement with the work of Max Weber and Louis Wirth. I will argue that while for Weber traditional community was obstacle in the way of the proper emergence of the city, he still grounded the idea of city and citizenship in the possibility of what he called 'co-fraternity' and not independent individuals. Wirth took the idea of differentiation caused by urbanization to the fields of health, land value and ethnicity and described community as a response to changes.

¹For a discussion on community in urban context see (Mulligan 2013; DeMoss-Norman 2015; Klugh 2010).

City and Citizenship

The notion of citizenship has always been tied to cities. Etymologically both the ideas come from the same root. If city is comprised of complex and interdependent structure, citizen becomes not only its inhabitant and user but also a formal member who becomes condition of possibility of cities as politically, socially and economically specific kind of spaces. Starting from Aristotle, the polis is imagined to be the political community that the citizens occupy as its engaged and active members.

At the same time, the realization of the idea of citizenship always remained tied to the development of the real city spaces. From the very beginning the traditional forms of communities based on shared identities were regarded as hindrance in the way of the political participations of the citizens. It is one thing to recognize rights of an individual it is yet another to create an environment where those rights can be exercised. The

Citizenship is a status when it is understood in the sense of possessions of rights and this sense has been key to understand the democratic transition from merely being subject of the state to the political subject of the law and constitution and becomes a key measure to address issues pertaining to immigrants (Ranganathan 2014; Predelli 2008; Hunt 2009). In popular debates this idea is often captured through the expression of ‘law abiding citizen’. It becomes a ‘responsible citizen’ when the focus is on participation with the acknowledgement of individual’s role in the development of the political community. It also is a theory of personhood, when one speaks beyond minimal balance of self-interests for protection of a dignified life and moves towards civic virtues and public spirited-ness (Kymlicka and Norman 1994, 360) more citations.

There are several ways to approach these questions depending on one’s political and theoretical leanings but what remains crucial to these approaches is to assign minimum level of legal, political and social security and flourishing of the political community that the citizen is part of. The emphasis on the later is often so much in debates that the notion of citizenship becomes less about status of an individual and more about the structure and quality of the political community itself. Kymlicka and Norman in their excellent review on citizenship give a number of examples through which an individual’s relation with the political community can be illustrated- “their sense of identity and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic, or religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; their desire to participate in the political process in order to promote the public good and hold political authorities accountable; their willingness to show self-restraint and exercise personal responsibility in

their economic demands and in personal choices which affect their health and the environment” (353).

The Question of community

Most importantly, what links citizenship to a political community is the question of participation. It is through their active involvement in the city polity, the citizens establish their belonging to the urban spaces. Even for liberal tradition, which emphasizes the legal status and possession of rights instead of participation in the governmental processes, it is the active awareness of one’s space in the political community that the citizen can be ensured against the exclusion from the polity and the protection of individual’s rights is a mutual responsibility. What remains underlying thread of these varied positions is that while the exact definitions and roles might differ, it is in a thriving political community that a citizenship proper can take shape, and conversely it is through involvement of empowered citizens that a political community can be able to fulfill its goals.

How citizenship connects to urbanity can be seen from the perspective that the cities provided the spaces where an organic community based on associational bonds and free from the parochial belongings took shape. While Weber’s conception of emergence of an occidental city is often criticized for its orientalist bias, what remains central to his thought is that the origin of the city lies in the development of confraternity and mutual recognition of individuals’ sense of security. Such co-fraternity was possible only among those who could put aside their belonging to traditional clans and communities and participate in ritualistic coming together based on nothing but their common dwelling- “The polis is always the product of such a confraternity or synoecism, not always an actual settlement in proximity but a definite oath of brotherhood which signified that a common ritualistic meal is established and a ritualistic union formed and that only those had a part in this ritualistic group who buried their dead on the acropolis and had their dwellings in the city” (Weber 1927, 320).

What deterred the oriental cities from becoming such ritualistic co-fraternities was the fact that because of the continuation of the clan relations and occupational communities that did not let the formation of urban collectives of citizens. One reason for this was the persistence of magic elements in the urban religions of Asia. In the western cities, on the other hand, a religious community emerged which overshadowed the relations based on kinship and lineage. “In India ... the endogamous and exclusive caste with its taboos which has prevented any kind of fusion of city dwellers into an associations of burghers based on religious and

secular equality before the law, connubium, commensality, and solidarity against non-members” (Weber, 1978, 1241). In occidental city, on the other hand the ritual exclusiveness was never strong and with in medieval times the city dwellers achieved, at least in principle, a ritual equality. Second reason has to do with kind of army that defended the city. While in the orient, the army of the prince preceded the city, occidental cities developed a ‘mass army’ which re-enforced the confraternity. While prince’s army defended the orient city making the city dwellers subject to the monarch, the city-dwellers of the occident defended the city themselves and could in turn defend or fight for their own rights (also see Barbalet 2010).

This this of Weber on a sharp distinction between occidental and oriental cities has been long criticized for its orientalist bias (Said 1978; Dean 2003; Rodinson 1973; Turner 1974; Isin 2002). Engin Isin argued that even if we reject the orientalist part of Weber’s thesis, it still provides refreshingly provocative insights into formations of the western cities. One can also think how the role of the cities in establishing a confraternity as a ground for the modern citizen echoes in several other scholarships. The structure of such arguments is of the form that with the advent of modern city spaces, something fundamental changes in the social and traditional forms of social organization give way to the more associational political community of the city. For Weber, this new individual is ‘the man of property and culture’ who emerged after several social and historical transformations. Combined with Weber’s thesis on rationalization, secularization and bureaucracy this man of property and culture is placed in the complex structure, that is city itself, which make possible for him to sustain the status of the citizenship. We can add here Tonnies’ *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* lying on the either side of the urban transformation, with two different kinds of communities and two distinct concepts of man as their product.

Durkheim’s distinction between two kinds of solidarities can also be located through a similar structure. The most pertinent question for Durkheim is to explain the kind of solidarity modern man builds after the moving out of the simple and less differentiated societies which are based a shared set of traditional values and norms (Durkheim 2014; Aldous, Durkheim and Tonnies 1972; Merton 1934). Against the trends in British and German sociology which will emphasize the weakening of the community with the rise of individualism, Durkheim argued for the morphological transition in the solidarity rather than it becoming non-existent. If relatively simple societies were characterized by the common and shared beliefs and a solidarity by similarities, urban complex societies are more differentiated and individuals are connected to each other through the division of labor like different organs in an organism. For him, community like property of the mechanical

solidarity must live even after community of similarity disappears. How does this morphological transition from mechanical to organic solidarity takes place, or what are the causes that led to the division of labor? It is this part of Durkheim's thesis that might be more useful for our argument.

Very much like Weberian thesis of weakening of the clan relations with the formation of confraternity, for Durkheim, the division of labor takes place with the disappearance of the segmentary society, that is organization of society in different segments of similarities. The reason why this happens is that there occurs a drawing together of individuals who were hitherto separated from one another (Durkheim 2014, 200-201). In segmentary organization, different parts stay apart as if there are moral vacuums that do not let them meet. Thus fundamental transition for division of labor should take place at this moral level.

Community and Urbanism

Louis Wirth extends these theses further in his essay on urbanism. This essay which became seminal in urban theory sets for itself a task "to discover the forms of social action and organization that typically emerge in relatively permanent, compact settlement of large number of heterogeneous individuals" (Wirth 1938, 9). While for Durkheim the theoretical conclusions are based on thin empirical studies (Merton 1934, 21), Wirth bases his ideas on acute empirical observations peculiar to the Chicago school. This is the reason that he is not as optimistic of the new forms of the the social as Durkheim is. For him the increased density does produce the differentiation and the specialization but the promise of moral unity is disrupted by the loss on the subjective side of the personal contacts (Wirth 1938, 14). While for Durkheim the law and contract becomes manifestation of the moral unity that a society functioning organically achieves, for Wirth, closing working with numerous people in the city without the emotional and sentimental ties fosters 'a spirit of competition, aggrandizement and mutual exploitation' leading to the formal control institutions of law (15). Thus paying a visual premium for Durkheimian division of labor we no longer recognize a person but only the uniform that she wears as a mark for her roles and functions in the city.

Moreover, Wirth combines the division of labor with other factors like land values, accessibility, health environment, nuisance, ethnicity and status that determine the differentiation of the urban spaces as such and not merely of individuals in them leading to the segregation in different parts of the city, each playing a different specialized role. "The city consequently tends to resemble a mosaic of social worlds in which the transition from

one to another is abrupt” (15). This city as a mosaic of social worlds resemble more like a segmentary society of Durkheim with moral vacuums separating different segments than an organism. Thus, for Wirth, a solution for this problem has to be Weberian, that is to say, these segmentary social worlds or molar milieus develops a relativistic perspective that they can tolerate each other leading to secularization and they develop strong formal institutions and bureaucracy that can protect the social from the threat of the segmentation. This becomes the foundation for Wirth’s ecological vision of urbanism as way of life.

In the discussion above, I have shown that the question of citizenship is simultaneously a question of community and urban spaces. The idea of citizen as modern urban man was only conceivable within the reorganization of city spaces- for example their becoming denser, for Durkheim- and subsequently producing a new kind of community. If urban is understood through the reconfiguration of space, the new space, on the one hand, entails weakening of the community of similarities, most importantly those based on clan and kinship relations, but at the same time it envisions a new kind of community,² associational for Durkheim and Weber and ecological for Wirth, as condition for the possibility of modern citizen. This points to a fundamental paradox of community since on the one hand it must cease to exist freeing its members for newer and numerous social relationships on the other hand the property of community to morally unite. Community is thus expelled from the self-contained places of primitive societies, yet it has to find its ground in the city in such a way that it is based on nothing but the common dwelling place. “So, community flows backwards and forwards across such rural-urban distinctions, carrying the historical weight (and warmth) of “traditional” communities even as it is rediscovered in “modern” locations, bending space and time together in unsettling ways” (Clarke 2014, 47). The paradox deepens when the segmentary communities return in the form of mosaic of social and moral milieus which are, according to Wirth, abruptly joint to one another.

For Wirth, if urbanization marks fragmentation of life, community can become a space for refuse and comfort. In his study of Jewghettoes, he argues that for a common Jew the contacts with the outside world become abstract and cold, but the ghetto community offers opportunities of freedom (Wirth 1998, 26). He notes that the relations among the members of the ghetto community are “warm, spontaneous and intimate” (26). In the sympathetic environment of the ghetto, a member was able to find better appreciation and understanding. He/she was able to share common beliefs and traditions within the confines of the

²Also see (Delanty 2003; Prakash 2002; Creed 2006; Hage 2005; Ludden 1996)

neighborhood³, while the larger city life increasingly eroded the traditional life. Life within the ghetto thus was characterized by the possibility of the returning to the community. While for livelihood and commerce the Jews of the ghetto participated in the larger city life, but returning to their families was reaffirming their membership of the community (26). For those who were removed from their kin, the community still survived in their hopes and dreams. Ghettoes, thus, simultaneously became figures of isolation as well as that of comfort.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored how community became a paradoxical notion in the early sociologists of the city. Urbanity was on the one hand imagined as a form of sociality that has little space for traditional clan and community solidarities. But empirical findings revealed that ethnic and clan ties became one of the key aspects of urban social organization. On the one hand traditional communities were an obstacle in the way of urbanization. On the other, the urban life was increasingly informed by restructuring of the traditional community relations. In this context, Weber's idea of co-fraternity becomes important because it recognizes that even in the absence of traditional community, mutual fraternal recognition was necessary for the emergence of the city form.

For Wirth urbanism is marked by fragmentation of social fabric and loss of personal contact. The city for him is a collection of loosely connected or unconnected fragments and most of the processes work without a recognition of personal ties. For such fragmentary life, Wirth finds a Weberian solution, that is bureaucratization and rationalization of social factors. But the loss of personal ties leads to emergence of neighborhood communities through restructuring of traditional ethnic elements. While community does not play much role in economic and political processes of the city, community neighborhoods offer a warm refuge in counter-distinction with the abstract and impersonal relations that mark the world outside of these neighborhoods.

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³Chicago school of urban sociology conducted several studies on community based neighborhoods (Park 1928; Park and Burgess 1984).

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