FOREVER TEETERING BETWEEN PERSONAL INTEREST AND COLLECTIVE ACTION: CONSIDERING THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY, LOCALITY AND IDENTITY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY

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FOREVER TEETERING BETWEEN PERSONAL INTEREST AND COLLECTIVE ACTION:

Considering the importance of community, locality and identity for the study of labour history

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INTRODUCTION

Community, locality, and personal identity are increasingly being recognised as important for the study of labour history. This is not to suggest that communities and localities were previously ignored. On the contrary, numerous studies of coal mining and steel making industries acknowledged the importance of these phenomena. But with only a few exceptions,[1] most labour histories of localities that were dominated by these industries tended to subordinate communal dynamics to economic, political and industrial developments.[2] This lack of prominence can be explained partly by the greater interest in class that dominated the field until recently, and partly by the failure to define 'community' or place it in a theoretical context. As Greg Patmore pointed out in 1994, most labour historians neglected to explicitly deal with the ideological ambiguity inherent in the concept of 'community' because they related social interaction, networks and 'localism' to labour movement institutions and the emergence of working class unity.[3] Likewise the overarching emphasis on economic and political structures sidelined questions about the nature of 'locality' and the nexus between personal and collective identity.

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[1] E. McEwen, The Newcastle Coalmining District of NSW, 1860-1900, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1979; Andrew Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of NSW*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988.

[2] Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union 1860-1960*, Melbourne, 1963; Peter Cochrane, 'The Wonthaggi Coal Strike, 1934', *Labour History*, no. 27, 1974, pp. 12-30; Claire Williams, *Open Cut: The Working Class in an Australian Mining Town*, George Allen & Unwin, 1981; Andrew Reeves, 'Damned Scotsmen': British Migrants and the Australian Coal Industry, 1919-1949', in Eric Fry (ed.), *Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986; Peter Cochrane, Winifred Mitchell and Geoffrey Sherington, 'Port Kembla Workers', in Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt (eds), *Australians 1938*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney, 1987; Beverley Burgmann, 'Working in Steel City', in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *Making a Life: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble/ Penguin, Melbourne, 1988.

[3] Greg Patmore, 'Community and Australian Labour History', in Terry Irving (ed.), *Challenges to Labour History*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1994, pp. 178-184. Ian Watson's work on class memory provides an important exception to this tendency. See further: Ian Watson, 'Class Memory: An Alternate Approach to Class Identity', *Labour History*, no. 67, November 1994, pp. 23-41.

This paper presents a conceptual overview, which seeks to unravel the multiplicity of forces that shape how communal processes and class relationships intersect in particular, spatial boundaries. It begins by considering the problems involved in identifying linkages between experiences and expressions of class, community and locality. Such problems are directly related to the way popular uses and scholarly traditions have shaped representations of the latter two phenomena. These have not only underestimated the inherent complexities and parochial tendencies that shape communities, localities and identities but also the conceptual ambiguities involved in the study of these phenomena. The epistemological approach adopted here highlights how politically conservative assumptions about people's identities and relationships to each other and to specific places formed and became commonplace. In short, it seeks to historicise the language of community in order 'to come to grips with the notion of discourse as power', and thus to enhance our understanding of the relationship between community and 'the operation of what Antonio Gramsci called the hegemonic ideas of any social order'.[4]

The second half of the paper proposes an alternative approach to community that draws on scholarship related to the politics of space and identity, as well as a paradigm proposed by two organisational theorists.[5] Throughout this part of the discussion reference is made to a range of metaphors that help to address the ephemeral and fragmentary nature of communal life. Metaphors are valuable since they make the unfamiliar more familiar.[6] Equally, they enable us to reconsider taken-for-granted assumptions about how people negotiate specific material conditions in various locations. Such linguistic constructions cannot, however, be seen in isolation, separate from lived experience. As John Murphy argued, although 'language doubtless plays a crucial role in the construction of our experience of social reality, reducing the latter to language involves an unacceptable political demobilisation.'[7] For this reason metaphors are used in conjunction with conceptual frameworks pertaining to class and

[4] David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 9-10.
[5] For example, Michael Keith & Steve Pile (eds), *Place and the Politics of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1993); Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991; Geoffrey Stokes (ed.), *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997; Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Blackwell, Cambridge USA, 1994; Debra Meyerson and Joanne Martin, 'Cultural Change: An Integration of Three Different Views', *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 24, no. 6, November 1987, pp. 623-47.
[6] Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, 'Grounding Metaphor: Towards a spatialized politics', in Keith and Pile (eds), *ibid.*, p. 69.
[7] John Murphy, 'The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory', *Historical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 87, October 1985, p. 170.

broader structures of power that shape people's social and political identities and relationships. Instead of simply locating concepts of community and class 'in political rhetoric', the actions that people take and the words they use, as well as their silences are related to each other. This approach connects the first and second parts of the paper because highlights the nexus between historically specific patterns of thought and speech and 'the relationships of exploitation that are embedded in creating the goods and services used in everyday life'.[8]

COMMUNITY AND LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHY

Why have locality and community played a peripheral part in labour historiography? In the first instance, the answer relates to the influence of Marxist ideology and methodology on the early labour historians. Often referred to as dialectical materialism, this approach privileged the concept of class and the economic structures that shape class relationships. As a corollary, those scholars who adopted a Marxian framework also privileged the working classes in their research. The formation and evolution of trade unions and political parties associated with workers or professing a commitment to them thus came to dominate the field because these institutions were deemed the most important forms of class expression. During the 1970s, however, the emergence of the 'New Left' in Australia and the new social history movement in the United Kingdom refined traditional approaches to class. Both intellectual developments drew attention to the social and political contexts in which labour institutions operated, as well as to the 'rank and file', hitherto marginalised groups of workers, such as women, indigenous Australians and migrants and also the social aspects of workers' everyday lives.[9]

Against this backdrop, scholars began to focus on race, ethnicity and gender as important sources of social division and cohesion that 'constantly cut across class relationships'. Class retained its value as a tool of analysis but not its privileged position for historical explanation. Also, as a result of E.P. Thompson's work on the formation of the English working classes, class came to be understood as a culturally specific phenomenon and not simply an economic one.[10] Class, according to Thompson's definition, 'entails the notion of historical relationship', one that is 'embodied in real people and in a real context.' It is a relationship that happens

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[8] Montgomery, *Citizen Worker*, pp. 10-11.
[9] Eric Fry, 'The Writing of Labour History in Australia', in Eric Fry (ed.), *Common Cause*, pp. 139-155; Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates, 'Is Labour History Dead?', *Australian Historical Studies*, no. 100, April 1993, pp. 470-81.

when some people, 'as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other' people 'whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.' The experience of class, according to Thompson, 'is largely determined by the productive relations into which' people 'are born or enter involuntarily', while class consciousness relates to 'the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms.'[11] As will be seen this definition has significant implications for the way that class and community intersect.

Thompson's explanation of class broadened the scope of labour history. From the 1980s the field expanded to embrace the study of urban history and housing, women's work, race relations, work processes, management and the cultural dimensions of work.[12] It was on this foundation that increasing attention was given to local history and community.[13]

In the hope of teasing 'out the social intimacies that were once the hallmark of the working class', early labour history studies of working class communities in specific localities addressed connections between public and private life.[14] A good case in point is provided by Stuart Macintyre's path-breaking study of three Communist-dominated communities or 'Little Moscows' in the United Kingdom during the 1920s and 1930s; communities 'where the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were manual workers and their dependents, and where there were particularly close ties of place, kin, friendship and recreation'. Instead of only focusing on 'specific trade unions or political organisations', Macintyre retained the

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[10] Ann Curthoys, 'Labour History and Cultural Studies', *Labour History*, no. 67, November 1994, pp. 12-15.
[11] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Penguin, Harmmondsworth, 1975, pp. 9-10.
[12] Greg Patmore, *Australian Labour History*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 1-20; Patmore, 'Community and Australian Labour History', pp. 169-88; Lucy Taksa, 'Toil, struggle and repose: oral history and the exploration of labour culture in Australia', *Labour History*, no. 67, November 1994, pp. 111-13.
[13] Max Kelly (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Sydney: Essays in Urban History*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1978; Jill Roe (ed.), *Twentieth Century Sydney: Studies in urban and social history,* Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1980; Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows: Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain*, Croom Helm, London, 1980; Janet McCalman, *Struggletown: Public and Private Life in Richmond, 1900-1965*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1984; Shirley Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp: Sydney 1870-90*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987; Max Kelly (ed.), *Sydney: City of Suburbs*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1987; Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *Staining the Wattle: A People's History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1988; Lucy Taksa, 'The 1917 Strike: a case study in working class community networks', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal (OHAAJ)*, no. 10, 1988, pp. 22-38; Lucy Taksa, 'Defining the Field', L. McCarthy (ed.), *History and Communities: A Preliminary Survey*, Proceedings of the Community History Program Seminar, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 1990, pp. 11-30; John Shields (ed.), *All Our Labours: Oral Histories of Working Life in Twentieth Century Sydney*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 1992; Patmore, 'Community and Australian Labour', generally.
[14] McCalman, *Struggletown*, p. 1.

notion of community for the simple reason that 'it made sense to those who lived in' these 'militant' localities. Hence, he used this 'category of analysis' to explore 'the fullness of social and political relations in their particular locality' by relating 'community' to the way that workers in the Little Moscows were able to achieve 'a highly unusual degree of unity', one that transcended social divisions based on occupation, craft skills, residence, gender and lifestyle. In other localities, by contrast, such sources of identity hindered the ability of their residents to take concerted action. In Macintyre's narrative of political and industrial mobilisation, local identity and local loyalty, as well as a sense of belonging that distinguished 'us' from 'them', were identified as critically important for communal formation that sustained militancy.[15]

Nevertheless, Macintyre acknowledged that the:

> notion of community is used and abused in a seemingly endless variety of
> contexts. Often it serves as a cant word, conjuring up a nostalgic closeness
> and attachment where these qualities patently do not exist. As used in the
> social sciences, the term itself is so imprecise and so laden with
> unwarranted implications that some have cast doubt on the entire enterprise
> of community studies.[16]

But despite this critique, Macintyre's reliance on variables like 'local identity' and 'local loyalty' inferred similar assumptions about community as those that underpinned the nostalgic representations which he disparaged.

How do these assumptions about the building blocks of community relate to the epistemological traditions that have dominated treatments of this phenomenon? To answer this question effectively it is necessary to consider how 'community' came to be associated with the rhetoric of unity and harmony, of shared interests and direct and responsible relations. For as Raymond Williams warned, 'a term which everybody likes, a notion which everybody is in favour of' should be regarded critically because 'if this reflected reality then we'd be living in a world very different to this one.'[17] In short, the advocacy of all those 'positive' features usually associated with traditional communities, particularly by politicians

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[15] Macintyre, *Little Moscows*, pp. 176-95.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 18, p. 176.
[17] Robin Gable (ed.), *Raymond Williams Resources of Hope Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, Verso, London, 1989, pp. 112-113.

and public servants, sends an extremely conservative message. Emphasis on harmony, co-operation, mutual aid, personal responsibility, and local initiative ignores what McEwan described baldly as the 'nastier features' of communities.[18] The denial of their oppressive tendencies, their capacity for intolerance and ostracism, the repression of individual identity, or at the very least its limitation by reference to group authority and the legitimacy of tradition, reflects a disjuncture between a 'reality' of social diversity and division, and an aspiration for unity.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF COMMUNITY: ORIGINS AND MEANINGS

The conservative message that is projected by this aspiration centres on the etymological association of community with 'the articulation of commonality and consensus'. As Rey Chow has it, ' a community is always based on a kind of collective inclusion' because no community forms without an implicit 'understanding of who is and who is not to be admitted.' This admittance, according to Chow, operates in three crucial ways. First, it involves being allowed to enter certain physical spaces, ranging from buildings and organisations to nations. Second, such an ability to enter involves an abstract entry, one based on being recognised as 'having a similar kind of value to that which is possessed by the admitting community'. And third, it involves an individual's surrender to social rules and responsibilities. These three kinds of communal admittance have important ramifications for class, gender and race to the extent that admittance invariably implies exclusion.[19]

A recurring feature of working class communities, as Macintyre demonstrated in his aforementioned study, has been the exclusion of women 'from the principal forms of public activity' that underpinned collective action.[20] From this perspective, community can be 'viewed as a vehicle for the reproduction and perpetuation of "traditional" gendered social roles' and particularly women' s subsidiary role in male-dominated society.[21] Race provides an even clearer indication of this process of inclusion and exclusion, for as Frances Peters suggested in discussing the relationship between Aboriginal people and community in Sydney's Leichhardt Municipality, 'the term "community" refers to boundaries that have been created by non-Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people.' As she continued:

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[18] Ellen McEwen, 'The Ties that Divide', in Burgmann and Lee (eds), *Staining the Wattle*, p.27.
[19] Rey Chow, 'The Politics of Admittance: Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon', in Meaghan Morris and Stephen Muecke (eds), *Intellectuals and Communities: The UTS Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, August 1995, p. 6, p. 20.
[20] Macintyre, *Little Moscows*, p. 139, p. 147.

there are some people who would go as far as thinking that you're not really

Aboriginal if you don't grow up a certain way ... So who's measuring here? ...

there's this pressure on us to think that we're supposed to have all the same

background and the same point of view ... that's so conservative ... Now you have

to identify with a community. That's an interesting thing. Which community

identifies here? Who's in and who's out of it?[22]

Yet as George Revill has argued, 'for good or ill, the idea of community does have a part to play in the way people think about themselves, in the construction of subjectivity, and in the production of personal identity'.[23] For this reason it is imperative to heed Clarke's advice by carefully examining the way 'community' has been used in the past and making concrete suggestions for its use as an analytical tool.[24] This makes it possible to consider how the term's origins and evolution shaped its association with positive sources of identity, cohesion and stability and also to identify how it intersects with locality in practice.

'Community' has been part of the English language since the fourteenth century, although the modern uses of the term, according to Calhoun, are located in the tradition of pastoral poetry, in the puritan theory of the commonwealth, and in the social changes spawned by the industrial revolution. Such multiple roots resulted in a variety of meanings. The term was used to describe actual social formations, ranging in size and nature, and also to evoke values of togetherness because it implied the idea of holding something in common.[25] This duality was infused into the concept of 'community' by the intellectuals who used it to describe the effects of the industrial revolution on social existence. Their 'rediscovery of community' centred on idealised culturally and politically homogeneous local social systems, which distinguished 'community' from 'society', as was demonstrated by Ferdinand Tonnies in 1887 in his book, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.* Here, Tonnies linked community to the sense of belonging based on kinship, neighborhood and long acquaintance that characterised

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[21] George Revill, 'Reading Rosehill: Community, Identity and Inner-City Derby', in Keith & Pile (eds), *Place and the Politics*, p. 120

[22] Diana Plater, 'Aboriginal people and "community" in the Leichhardt Municipality', in Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon (eds), *Minorities: Cultural Diversity in Sydney*, State Library of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 48.

[23] Revill, 'Reading Rosehill', p. 120.

[24] D.B. Clarke, 'The Concept of Community: A Re-examination', in P. Henderson and D. P. Thomas (eds), *Readings in Community Work,* Allen & Unwin, London, 1981, p. 32.

[25] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Flamingo, Great Britain, 1982, pp. 75-6; C.J. Calhoun, 'History, anthropology and the study of communities: Some problems in Macfarlane's proposal', *Social History*, vol. 3, no. 3, October, 1978, p. 369.

supposedly stable traditional agricultural societies; the very bonds then being lost in the social life of the growing cities. Tonnies' 'romantic communitarian usage' of the word established a tradition, if not an orthodoxy.[26] So even though the term's use spread in response to concrete social and economic changes, it rapidly became associated with static categories related, rather vaguely, to either geographically or administratively bounded populations (rather than to different types of social relationships) or to the notion of 'a group of people bound together by particular common interests' or by a common identity.[27] Instead of being seen as a dynamic social process, 'community' came to be conceived as a fixed social entity generally encompassed in a specific place. One hundred years after Tonnies, Mark Lyons pointed out that although community does not necessarily require a shared locality, the tradition in Australian community studies is to use the term as a synonym for 'the social organisation of a limited geographical area.'[28]

This orientation can be traced back to the influence of Malinowski's ethnographic model of community study, which focused the attention of anthropologists and sociologists on isolated populations. Since the 1960s, many community studies eschewed the construction of 'communities as objects or organisms' that typified the Malinowskian approach. But according to Metcalfe, this development did not lead to a major methodological departure because scholars continued to isolate communities for the purposes of analysis. In other words, community remained 'an *object* for study.' In Metcalfe's view:

> The abstract isolationism of the vast majority of community studies is a
> double-sided deficiency. If studies treat communities as things they
> misinterpret social activities in the so-called community: their sense of
> community integrity overlooks internal divisions, while their sense of
> community autonomy neglects broader social relations that shape, or are
> played out at, the local level. At the same time, community studies are an
> unreliable guide to the broader social world because they obscure or take for

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[26] McEwen, 'The Ties that Divide', pp. 27-28; Lois Bryson & Martin Mowbray, 'Community: The Spray-on Solution', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 1981, vol. 16, no. 4, p. 256.

[27] C.J. Calhoun, 'Community: toward a variable conceptualisation for comparative research', *Social History*, vol. 5, no. 1, January, 1980, p. 105.

[28] Mark Lyons, 'The Politics of Community Programmes', unpublished paper presented before the Australasian Social Policy and Administration Conference, Melbourne, 1985, pp. 3-4. See also. Clarke, 'The Concept of Community', p. 32.

granted the most comprehensive social relations, which give the society much of its character.[29]

Precisely because of this isolationism, community has tended to be narrowly equated with locality.

Admittedly, locality often helps to define how people feel about a community and their sense of belonging to it. The unique natural or built features of a place can certainly become associated with a community's self-perception and the values that are held in common.[30] But 'place' provides only one possible identifying feature which should not simply be equated with the existence of 'community'. More importantly, Chris McConville's point that inequalities of power and class exist in all 'places' or localities,[31] draws attention to the fact that social and economic divisions may be contained within a community or may distinguish and divide one community from others. These sources of division challenge the static one-dimensional assumptions underpinning the traditional, conservative representation of 'community'.

People usually have numerous interests and sources of identity which link them to more than one community. Their identities and interests can, and usually do, change over time. As importantly, communities of interest do not exist in a vacuum. They overlap and interpenetrate with other communities. Connections and interactions between communities of interest imply a dynamism which often evades the study of communal formations, particularly when focused on a specific place or locality.[32] As Metcalfe puts it, localities are contestable entities with contestable rights, whose existence depends on economic and political processes which reach beyond their borders. In other words, they cannot be isolated, mainly because a multiplicity of social processes and networks pass through them 'in different directions and for different distances.'[33]

Ethnicity provides a good example of all of these interconnected and fluid processes. As Fitzgerald and Wotherspoon suggested in their introduction to a study of minorities in Sydney, the formation of residential 'ghettoes' by specific ethnic groups attests to the

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[29] Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity*, p. 6.
[30] Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope*, p. 22.
[31] Chris McConville, 'Conflicting Loyalties', in Burgmann & Lee (eds), *Staining the Wattle*, p. 21.
[32] Clarke, 'The Concept of Community', p. 36. For an example of overlapping membership refer to McEwen, 'The Ties that Divide', p. 36.
[33] Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 7-8.

importance such groups attach to having 'a space' which they can 'call their own'. This tendency has produced what Ian Burnley calls a 'geography of ethnic communities'. In turn, these spaces or 'ghettoes' provide an anchor for communal 'organisations' and venues, such as social clubs, churches, pubs and coffee shops, and ritual practices, such as carnivals and ceremonies, all of which provide a foundation for group identification. The association of the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt with the Italian community presents one of many examples of the way that place and group identity become entwined.

Yet the connections between community and locality are far from simple. The strong association of a suburb like Leichhardt with Italian Australians hides the presence of other communities of minority groups, notably Aboriginal Australians. Occupation of distinct spaces by specific groups is, moreover, constantly subject to change.[34] People move from one district to another according to the dictates of fashion or fluctuations in their social and economic standing. The same can, of course, be said of local boundaries, which are often altered by administrative edicts or political imperatives.

RECONSIDERING THE CONCEPT OF PLACE

This idea of shifting boundaries raises important questions about how we conceptualise places. Traditionally, they have been represented in geographical terms, as points or territories with their own 'flora and fauna and local allegiances' as well as 'concentrations of people and economic activity.' Yet as Sharon Zukin comments, place can also be seen as a cultural artefact of social conflict and cohesion and, as such, it can be employed as a useful concept which 'expresses how a spatially connected group of people mediate the demands of cultural identity, state power, and capital accumulation.'[35]

This alternative conceptualisation demands a recognition of the interstices between space and time, history and geography. As Doreen Massey stresses, '[p]laces as depicted on maps are places caught in a moment; they are slices through time' or what she calls 'specific envelopes of space-time', which are continuously being shaped by 'constant struggles to define, and to make cohere, their internal characters'.[36] Because places are generally perceived in spatial, geographic terms, we tend to lose sight of their political and social dimensions. The boundaries of certain places 'cut across a million social interactions.' Those, such as nation-

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[34] Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon, 'Introduction', in Fitzgerald and Wotherspoon (eds), *Minorities*, pp. 6-13. See further: I.H. Burnley, 'The geography of ethnic communities', pp. 174-91.
[35] Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, p. 12.

states for instance, are maintained by 'political power, legal agreement, physical force'. They articulate social relationships that are at once internal to an area and external to it. From this perspective, Massey concludes that the identity of places is 'always, and always has been, in process of formation' and maintained by the exercise of power relations.[37] However, the idea that localities may be spatially fluid and internally-divided challenges traditional assumptions about localism and also traditional approaches to local history.

Localism has variously been defined as 'a set of ideas about the significance of place', 'locality consciousness', and the espousal of 'a feeling of attachment' to a locality regardless of class and other divisions. The 'positive effect' associated with this concept of localism overlaps with the established conservative conceptions of community discussed above, to the extent that localism can have a 'distracting effect ... on class consciousness, through offering an alternative avenue for group formation'. And because of its capacity to legitimate local power relations, this 'spatially divisive attribute' has the tendency, much like community, to obscure local class relations.[38]

Building on such assumptions and tendencies, local history has tended to be informed by static assumptions, parochial tendencies and a celebratory approach. As Raphael Samuel explained in the first issue of *History Workshop*, published in 1976, local history was 'very much the province of enthusiasts', a point reiterated four years later in an editorial published in the same journal. Focusing on the relationship between local history and urban history, it was argued here that both fields had 'remained, by and large, locked in their own particular discourse'. On the one hand, the 'local patriotism' and 'consuming sense of place' that characterised local history was not accompanied by 'curiosity about how social relationships are constructed'. On the other, urban history was dominated by the inert categories of social 'strata' and 'structure' and often bereft of social relationships.[39]

In 1987 this view was echoed in Australia by Andrew May. Writing about the historical experience of the street in Melbourne, May argued that 'in illuminating the city as a place of social power the historian must be sensitive both to structures of control on the one hand and the vicissitudes of local experience on the other.' Too often, he added, 'urban histories tend

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[36] Doreen Massey, 'Places and Their Pasts', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 39, Spring 1995, pp. 187-88.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 186, p. 190.
[38] Ian Gray, *Politics in Place: Social Power Relations in an Australian Country Town*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 161-2.

towards one or other extreme, emphasising a complex theoretical framework devoid of people or else descriptive vignettes devoid of any analytical context.'[40] In this sense, urban and local history had much in common. Local historians all too often stressed the 'shapes on the ground', argued Samuel. As 'in an aerial photograph', which provides a panoramic view, topographical features and structures 'appear with brilliant clarity' while people appear comparatively indistinct, 'at one remove', as it were.[41]

These common outcomes can be related to the problem of clarifying the nexus between locality and community. In turn, the difficulty inherent in unraveling the conceptual overlap between spatial forms and social processes has been exacerbated by a scholarly preoccupation with semantics, which has, in itself, had serious methodological implications. As Macintyre pointed out, during the 1970s community studies was wracked by the lack of any substantial agreement among scholars about the actual meaning of 'community', let alone its analytical value.[42] When one scholar identified ninety-four different definitions, it was disparaged as a 'non-concept', on the grounds that it promoted confusion. As late as 1995, Etzioni admitted that the term remained 'vague' and 'fuzzy'.[43] Similarly, during the 1980s, when urban studies became more attuned to the spatial dimension of human experience, increasing efforts were made to define 'urban' forms of landscape and to relate them to social relations and activities.[44]

Meanwhile, labour and socialist historians interested in local history began to question the value of traditional spatial assumptions embedded in the notion of 'locality', which construed the idea of place as distinct and static. As Samuel saw it many local history studies were 'repetitive and inert', despite the field's popular orientation and its need for 'a different kind of knowledge' than that focused on 'high-level national developments' and 'abstract categories of social class'. 'Why', he asked rhetorically, 'do the localities themselves, when reconstituted

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[39] Raphael Samuel, 'Local History and Oral History', *History Workshop*, no. 1, Spring 1976, p. 191; Editorial: 'Urban History and Local History', *History Workshop*, no. 8, Autumn 1979, pp. iv-v.

[40] Andrew May, 'Structures with Actors: An Approach to the Historical Experience of the Street in Melbourne', *Melbourne Historical Journal: History Under Analysis*, vol. 18, 1987, p. 10.

[41] Samuel, 'Local history', p. 195.

[42] Macintyre, *Little Moscows*, p.18, p.176; Charles W.J. Withers, 'Kirk, Club and Culture Change: Gaelic Chapels, Highland Societies and the Urban Gaelic Subculture in Eighteenth Century Scotland', *Social History*, vol. 10, no. 2, May, 1985, p. 173; Calhoun, 'History, anthropology and the study', pp. 363-73; Lyons, 'The Politics of Community', p. 5; Bryson and Mowbray, 'Community: The Spray-on Solution', pp. 256-9.

[43] Clarke, 'The Concept of Community', p. 32; Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda*, Fontana, London, 1995, p. ix.

over time, look so interchangeable?' While Samuel found that the problem was in large measure due to the sources available to local historians, he also stressed that both local history and urban studies invoked 'community' in an unproblematic way , 'as little more than a convenient fiction'. Accordingly, he disparaged local history's concentration on identifying the ways that groups of men, women and children, who were bound by common interests, gathered together in one place, and urban history's concentration on civic and municipal affairs, which in the countryside tended to carry 'an unwarranted assumption of equilibrium'.[45]

OVERCOMING TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

Can such assumptions of stability, stasis and harmony be overcome by labour historians? The answer must be in the affirmative. On the one hand, labour historiography can only be enriched by the more intimate frame of reference made possible by the study of localities and communities. On the other hand, local and urban histories can fulfil their potentially democratising effect if they are informed by the wider historical and theoretical questions usually associated with labour and social history, particularly those concerning capitalism, class formation, politics, ideology and consciousness, gender construction, sexual division and the components of domestic order.[46]

Academic studies of localities and communities can avoid reproducing what Revill refers to as parochial and repressive versions of society if they conceptualise both phenomena 'in terms of fluidity, contradiction and conflict.' As he commented further:

> The value of community as a concept ... is that it throws into prominence
> the tensions between senses of belonging which form ties between
> individuals and groups and between peoples and places. It is not that it
> enables us to identify a stable or a dominant set of social and cultural
> characteristics by which a particular place or a group of people might be
> identified. Rather, community focuses interest on the processes that create a
> sense of stability from a contested terrain in which versions of place and

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[44] May, 'Structures with Actors', pp.12-13. See further papers by Jill Roe, Tom Stannage and Graeme Davison included in 'Conference Symposium: The State of Urban History', *The Sydney Gazette: Organ of the Sydney History Group*, no. 5, December 1982, pp. 15-37.
[45] Samuel, 'Local history', pp. 192-94, p. 197.
[46] Editorial: 'Urban History', p. v.

notions of identity are supported by different groups and individuals with varying powers to articulate their positions.[47]

Hence, if we accept that '[p]eople are not bounded together by place - which is somewhere they live - but by debt, kinship, employment, rivalries, passions',[48] then it becomes possible to acknowledge that communal formations operate on a number of different levels simultaneously. To borrow a metaphor elaborated by Peter Read, community is like a journey that can take place on the ground or in the mind.[49]

As open systems rather than as static entities encompassed within limited administrative and geographical boundaries, communities rely for their existence on a range of institutions, activities, and shared practices, as well as shared understandings that result from such practices, even where those who engage in them don't personally know each other or have any direct physical contact.[50] Communities can co-exist in a physical sense or they can contain associations based on class, ethnicity, religion or gender. The important point is that external pressures can disrupt such formations by promoting segmentation and segregation.

Traditionally labour historians have been particularly interested in the affect of such pressures on the nexus between class relationships and communal processes. Three particular representations are evident in this regard. One casts community in opposition to labour or the working class. This construction assumes that community, particularly in the context of a specific locality, reflects cross-class identification and co-operation, which potentially at least undermines class-based identification, labour organisation and action both in and beyond the locality.[51] Another construction focuses not on opposition between community and the working class, but instead on collaboration or what Patmore has referred to as 'labour-community' coalitions. These emerge in particular localities at particular junctures either to support workers in industrial action or to promote infrastructural development of value to all

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[47] Revill, 'Reading Rosehill', p. 120.
[48] Editorial: 'Urban History', p. vi.
[49] Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: the meaning of lost places*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. vii.
[50] See for an example: Martyn Lyons, 'The History of Reading and Reading Communities', *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1997, pp. 5-15.
[51] Erik Eklund, 'We Are of Age: Class, Locality and Region at Port Kembla', *Labour History*, no. 66, May 1994, pp. 72-9; Erik Eklund, 'One Big Happy Family?: Constructions of Local Identity in an Australian Steel town', paper delivered to the North American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University, Detroit,USA, 19 October 1995. See also, McConville, 'Conflicting Loyalties', pp. 13-26.

sub-groups in the locality.[52] A third construction equates community with the working class by focusing on the processes by which different workers from a variety of localities or groupings centred on trade, ethnicity, religion and so forth, identify a commonality of interests during moments of hardship, such as industrial or political disputes.[53] None of these constructions are mutually exclusive because the relationship between class and community is continuously shaped and reshaped by contingent factors. Thompson's earlier mentioned definition of class, with its emphasis on common experiences, the articulation of an identity of interests through shared traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms highlights the points of intersection between the two phenomena. Hence, his point that '[c]onsciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way', is as pertinent to communal consciousness as it is to the way community and class intersect at different historical junctures.[54]

These three constructions of class and community relations are therefore useful in that they allow us to discern different communal patterns that emerge at different times. But by focusing on broad social trends of this nature, we lose sight of individuals, their subjectivity and agency.

CLASS, COMMUNITY AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

Identity 'is inherently a dynamic, interactive social process', which forms a crucial building block of all the categories of analysis considered thus far. Not only is it central to the formation of community and locality, but also class relations and mobilisation. The interplay between personal and group identities can provide a source of unity that permits political action that is designed to achieve common aims. Group identity can also be a source of division and resistance, particularly when it is predicated on some people being depicted as 'others' or 'aliens'.[55] In short, the construction of identity involves political contests 'over the

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[52] Greg Patmore, 'Labour-Community Coalitions and State Enterprise: Retrenchment at the Lithgow Small Arms Factory, 1918-1932', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 39, no. 2, June 1997, pp. 218-43. See also, John T. Cumbler, 'Labor, Capital and Community: The Struggle for Power', in Milton Cantor (ed.), *American Workingclass Culture: Explorations in American Labor and Social History*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1979, pp. 156-58.
[53] Cumbler, *ibid.*, pp. 149-55, p.163; Peter Cochrane, 'The Wonthaggi Coal Strike', pp. 12-31; Taksa, 'The 1917 Strike', pp. 22-38.
[54] Thompson, *The Making*, pp. 9-10.
[55] Geoffrey Stokes, 'Introduction', in Geoffrey Stokes (ed.), *The Politics of Identity*, pp. 5-9.

content, boundaries and practical implications of the group identity', as well as disputes 'over who has authority to define this identity.'[56]

Growing interest in the politics of identity has been closely associated with postmodernism. As a result, the field has been criticised by Hobsbawm for promoting discourse analysis informed by relativist assumptions. The politics of identity, according to Hobsbawm privileges 'rhetorical constructions' at the expense of the strictly scientific procedures of 'history, designed for the universal communication of what' can be 'tested by evidence and logic'.[57] And because Hobsbawm considers that 'it is essential for historians to defend ... the supremacy of evidence', as the foundation of the discipline, he concludes that historians:

> must be for universalism, not out of loyalty to an ideal to which many of us
> remain attached but because it is the necessary condition for understanding
> the history of humanity, including that of any special section of humanity.[58]

However, the politics of identity can also be applicable to the broader history of humanity when it is considered in relation to class, consciousness and mobilisation.

As Liz Bondi argues, Marx's assertion that 'our sense of ourselves as individuals and social beings' results from structural processes, implicitly challenged the prevailing normative claims of universal, unchanging attributes of identity. It also suggested that differentiation and movement between identities was characteristic of modern societies.[59] By advancing the possibility of 'an oppositional political subject' who could redefine and assert individual and collective identity through organisation, despite being enslaved by the structures of capitalism, Marx highlighted connections between class and identity. Moreover, when he distinguished between class-in-itself and class-for-itself, and drew attention to the possibility of transformation from the former to the latter as a result of collective activity, he invariably recognised the importance of individual agency and subjectivity, albeit in the context of a paradoxical conjunction between freedom and constraint.[60] As Bondi puts it:

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[56] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[57] Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1997, pp. 268-71
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 271, p. 277.
[59] Liz Bondi, 'Locating Identity Politics', in Keith and Pile (eds), *Place and the Politics*, p. 86.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 89; For an extensive discussion of this problematic in Marx's thought refer to: Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982, pp. 214-23.

> Collective political action acts both as the medium in which class conscious
> subjects can emerge and as the product of their consciousness: fostering a
> common identity or sense of community is intrinsic to the project of
> awakening a radical proletarian subject. Thus, Marx's conception of
> subjectivity sits on a cusp between an anti-humanist notion of consciousness
> as produced by social forces beyond the control of the individual, and a
> more humanist notion of the possibility of achieving (at least temporarily) a
> stable, coherent, common, authentic identity.[61]

The problem with this view of identity, as Bondi alerts us, is that 'Marx's proletarian subject is implicitly male', one whose class consciousness and identity is fostered in the public sphere. The notion of divided identity implicit in class consciousness clearly provides little assistance in explaining how women's personal identities are formed in the private sphere and how such identities intersect with class and community. The idea of multiple identities is far more effective for this purpose because it highlights the numerous, and sometimes competing subjective realities that women often experience as a result of their indeterminate position vis-à-vis both public and private spheres.[62]

However, in recognising the importance of multiple identities, we are faced with the problem of unravelling multiple allegiances, explaining shifts between identities and, by extension, acknowledging that individuals make selections based on changing priorities. Again we must return to the politics of identity and to the question of whose authority defines it. On the one hand, contests over social or group identity can be inspired by a perceived threat to values or to the material resources necessary for the group's survival, which results in disputes over the exercise of institutional, material and symbolic power. On the other hand, such contestation can involve resistance by individuals and groups to the imposition of collective representations of identity.[63] For this reason community can best be conceived as a series of social pressures which affect individuals, small groups who know each other in a direct and immediate sense, as well as larger aggregates.

What are these pressures? One of the key features of the discourse surrounding community today, much as in the nineteenth century when the term initially became fashionable, centres

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[61] *Ibid.*, Bondi, p. 90.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 90, pp. 93-5.
[63] Stokes, 'Introduction', p. 6.

on the notion of integration. This is particularly the case when it is adopted by journalists or politicians who use the idea of integration in a normative way to promote a vision of how society or nation should ideally function. Yet by invoking community in this manner, a state of opposition is invariably inferred. Implicitly, social integration assumes the presence of social differentiation, fragmentation and even conflict.[64]

This dichotomy was particularly evident during the NSW general strike of 1917; an event that involved not only over 70,000 workers in NSW but also their families, neighbours, friends and members of disparate communities in numerous cities and towns.[65] Like other labour historians who have examined community mobilisation during strikes, my study of this dispute addressed the nature of social solidarity within working class communities and social conflict between members of this class and members of other classes.[66] In this context, oral history testimonies consistently raised the issue of community as one of the key integrative forces that sustained mobilisation by ensuring that individuals conformed to group norms. Their consistent emphasis on shared experiences, loyalty and conformity to collective goals through collective action and organisation highlighted the value of community as a tool for interpreting social cohesion and fragmentation across time and space. In other words, attention to shifts in communal allegiances highlighted the way that broader sources of unity and conflict changed relationships not only between people but also different places.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY

How can the multiplicity of social forms and identities referred to earlier be effectively analysed? It is first necessary to conceptually differentiate between these basic building blocks of community in order to clarify how communal relationships develop and change at specific times in different locations. To this end, it is useful to recast social forms and experiences in terms of structures and subjectivities. On the one hand, social relationships, organisations and practices can be construed as structural in the sense that they are material, located in space and shaped by a specific mode of production and class relations. On the other, the experience of community (that is, the idea of shared concerns, interests, and identities earlier referred to as communal consciousness) can be related to less tangible

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[64] John T. Cumbler, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1979, pp. 7-8.
[65] Lucy Taksa, 'Defence Not Defiance: Social Protest and the NSW General Strike of 1917', *Labour History*, no. 60, May 1991, pp. 16-33.

subjective factors. Those material conditions that enable people to physically interact with each other and that delineate and sustain communities spatially, economically, socially and politically can be included in the structural field. Such structures can encompass institutions and forums based on kinship, employment, residence, religion, industrial and political associations, recreational clubs and social venues, and they can involve social practices such as picnics, dances, benefits, lodge meetings, sports activities and other such rituals. All these institutions, forums and practices create, draw on and sustain formal and informal networks through which people assert their individual and group identities. Even local politics and strikes can be seen as structures that shape community to the extent that they provide opportunities for people to mix and exchange ideas, make collective decisions, develop policies and enact them. At the same time, these small 's' structures are shaped and circumscribed by the broader structures of capital.

This construction suggests that the structural dimension of community is, as Calhoun puts it, 'made up of relationships among social actors, and relations among these relationships'. These are, according to Calhoun, formed as a result of practical activity and three 'orders of communal bonds that are based on familiarity, specific obligations, and diffuse obligations.' *Familiarity* refers to frequency of interaction. S*pecific obligations* refers to more binding sorts of relationships characterised by economic interdependence and co-membership of formal organisations. And *diffuse obligations* refers to a broader system of moral relationships that, to varying degrees, encompass relationships based on clearly stated or contractual obligations. And this brings us to the subjective dimension of community, because as Calhoun has it, 'kinship and in most societies, friendship, are relations identified and sanctioned by public opinion, as well as the immediate investment and agreement of the parties' in the community.[67]

What precisely is the relationship between the structural and subjective aspects of community? These two dimensions are dialectically interwoven. The experiential quality is certainly derived from the structural features of community in the sense that feelings of friendship, conceptions of loyalty and reciprocity build on material conditions, class relations,

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[66] Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1987; Peter P. Cochrane, W. Mitchell and G. Sherington, 'Port Kembla Workers', pp. 293-304.
[67] Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle*, p. 157.

institutions, social bonds and networks. But in certain circumstances, this subjective aspect can also influence the direction in which networks cohere or fragment.

An example from the NSW general strike provides a good case in point. This dispute occurred at a time in Australian history when religious communities dominated society. Catholics and Protestants provided the basis for two dominant sub-cultures, which played an important role in defining identity and social differentiation. After one week of the strike, railway and tramway employees who were members of the Loyal Orange Institution organised a deputation to the Acting Premier to request that the government reconsider its opposition to the strikers. Subsequently, a mass meeting of working class Orangemen criticised the government for its unresponsive attitude and stressed that Orange railway and tramway employees had decided 'to stand loyally by the strikers'. This action was taken in the face of a public rebuke by middle-class Orangemen who were generally associated with a pro-war, pro-conscription and anti-strike stance and at a time when the labour movement was increasingly being identified by its strong Catholic membership and leadership.[68] So while these people continued to consider themselves Orangemen, during the strike their identity as workers assumed a dominant role in modifying their communal allegiance and behaviour. Under the influence of an external event, they gave greater priority to one source of identity and interest over another, one which was spatially connected to the workplace and socially centered on class affiliations. This realignment illustrates the dialectical way in which the structural and subjective aspects of community intersect. And this raises two additional points.

First, shared experiences arising out of everyday activities can produce perceptions of mutual interests, which Calhoun suggests is 'a much more likely and solid foundation for collective action' than the mere existence of common interests. This in itself demonstrates the linkage between subjectivity and agency identified earlier, because the very 'idea of action implies choice'. In Calhoun's words, it 'is only meaningful to conceive of any course of action as voluntary where other courses of action are possible.' But choice is not simply a subjective issue; the possibility of action, particularly collective action, is equally 'determined by

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[68] *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 1917, 21 August 1917; D.W. Rawson, *Labour In Vain*, Longmans, Australia, 1966, p. 16.

objective structural conditions', which include the behaviour of other actors and also the organisation of the collectivity itself.[69]

E.P. Thompson's notion of the 'moral economy' provides a particularly useful paradigm for interpreting the way that the interplay of structures and subjectivities enable a group to become a collective actor. According to Thompson, action taken in support of a group's moral economy involves 'a defense of the material web of social relations which situates individuals in their communities and in the world at large'. Such action presupposes family, workplace and social bonds that form in the home, as well as daily practices, which include informal conversations and meetings at work and at recreational venues. In addition, such defensive action is also influenced by moral norms and socially integrative pressures, both of which shape the way that class relations and communal activities intersect.[70]

How does locality and place relate to this conceptualisation of community? To answer this question it is useful to draw on Henri Lefebvre's model of space, a model that involves a dialectical relationship not simply between two elements but three. This triad is made up of physical, mental and social spaces, which Lefebvre describes as 'lived, perceived and conceived'. *Lived space* is that which is experienced. It is where 'users' and 'inhabitants' engage in everyday activities and social practices in concrete settings. These can be both public and private, including places of abode (both permanent and temporary), work and recreation. In short, lived space forms a field of action and provides a basis for action. *Perceived space* overlays physical, lived space and involves symbolic representations that are produced by artists or writers. *Conceived space* is, by contrast, abstract in the sense that it is geometrically arranged and thus able to be manipulated by the activities of scientists, planners, architects and social engineers, among others. In this way a wide range of 'authorities' impinge on lived and perceived space. All three sorts of space are, according to this model, interconnected.[71] Again, a specific example illustrates its value for understanding the intersection between place, community and class.

During the general strike of 1917 certain recreational places, like the Sydney Domain, provided arenas in which people from a wide range of communities socialised with each other

[69] Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle*, pp. 226-7.
[70] Calhoun, *ibid.*, p.46; E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, no. 50, February 1971, pp. 76-136.
[71] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, pp. 38-42, p.51, pp. 190-93, p. 206, pp. 361-63.

and thus forged social networks that built on and extended the bonds of kinship, religion and ethnicity, neighborhood, trade/craft, workplace and political affiliation. This 'lived' recreational space integrated the three orders of communal bonds based on familiarity, specific obligations and diffuse obligations, mentioned earlier. It also nourished working class organisations by providing a physical anchor for ritual practices, such as demonstrations during times of disequilibrium, such as the 1890s strikes, the 1916-1917 crisis over conscription, the 1917 strike and the protest over the dismissal of the NSW Premier Jack Lang by the NSW Governor Sir Phillip Game in 1932. In turn, these public displays of communal moral economy allowed working people from a diverse range of localities to assert their mutual interests and promote a collective identity.[72] The Domain clearly provided both a field of action and a basis for action. But this only accounts for one dimension of this lived space. It is also important to recognise how it was conceived by government authorities, how they determined its use and, in turn, how particular use shaped the way it was represented.

The Domain became a field of action for working class people during their recreational activities on Sunday afternoons from 1860 when the NSW Minister for Lands, John Robertson ordered that the gates be left open so that the 'people' could enjoy the space in the evenings after work. This conception of the Domain as the 'park for the people' resulted in its close association with public speaking, which was increasingly of a radical nature. On this basis, working people came to perceive the Domain as their 'institution' and 'meeting place', as well as 'the parliament of the bottom dog',[73] while politicians and public administrators increasingly represented it as a 'safety-valve' for popular causes and social problems.[74] Additionally, the often 'inflammatory' nature of the speeches that were made at the Domain caused the police to make repeated attempts to limit its public uses. As the Metropolitan Superintendent of the New South Wales Police Force, J. Tait, argued in a report he issued on 12 June 1918, 'Perhaps I might be permitted to point out that the time has undoubtedly arrived

[72] Taksa, 'Toil, struggle and repose', pp. 121-124; Lucy Taksa, 'Spreading the Word: The Literature of Labour and Working Class Culture', in Shields (ed.), *All Our Labours*, pp. 77-81; Lucy Taksa, 'Oral History and Collective Memory: Labour Rituals and Working Class Memory', *OHAAJ*, no. 16, 1994, pp. 47-8. See also, Cumbler, 'Labor, Capital and Community', pp. 153-55.

[73] Interview with Sir William McKell, on 25 July 1983; Interview with Stan Jones, on 8 September 1983; Interview with Keith McClelland, on 7 September 1987 for the NSW Bicentennial Oral History Project (BOHP); Interview with Edna Ryan, on 19 October 1987 for the NSWBOHP; Interview with Alice Doyle, on 25 May 1987 for the NSWBOHP; Audrey Johnson, *Bread and Roses: A Personal History of Three Militant Women and their Friends, 1902-1988,* Left Book Club, Sydney, 1990, pp. 6-9; *Australian Worker*, 15 March 1917.

[74] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 March 1919; Edwin Wilson (ed.), *Discovering the Domain*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1986, p. 53; Steve Maxwell, *The History of Soapbox Oratory: Prominent Speakers of the Sydney Domain*, Standard Publishing House, Sydney, 1994.

when all such meetings should be absolutely prohibited in the Domain and other public places, in the interests of the Empire.' This view was based on the transcripts of speeches that were recorded by detectives who regularly attended the Domain meetings during and after World War One ostensibly to prevent disorder. Working class activists, however, viewed the note-taking by police as an intrusion and a threat to free speech. On one particularly violent occasion one speaker, Vance Marshall accused the police of aiding and abetting the 'outbreak of Hoolinganism', which occurred when soldiers incited a riot at the Domain on 16 June 1918.[75] Following an increase in such violent skirmishes during the late 1920s and early 1930s, the right to hold political meetings and disperse literature was restricted to certain hours of the day.[76] In these ways the lived and perceived space of the Domain was circumscribed by and impinged upon by a wide range of 'authorities'.

To the extent that lived space provides the foundation for social interaction, it is also critical to the formation of community. As Erik Eklund pointed out, the main street in a town like Port Kembla, performs an important integrative function that can sustain an impression of shared interests.[77] Hence, places where people regularly and informally socialise provide a material basis for social solidarity and the mobilisation of formal and informal institutions around issues of common concern to their users.

Yet not all lived spaces are the same. Places like the Domain and the main streets of country towns produce very different sorts of social cohesion. In one very basic way the difference between them relates to the structures of fixed capital, that is the geography of production manifested by infrastructure such as roads, factories, houses and so on. This geography of production varies in different places, thus giving rise to different social compositions and relations as well as specific, often localised political configurations. A main street in a town or suburb can help to forge or reinforce cross-class alliances that, in turn, produce a perception of a 'structured coherence' reflected in a town's identity and a sense of belonging among its residents.[78] By contrast, recreational sites like the Domain, which have traditional associations with working class people, can foster intra-class alliances that draw together a

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[75] Report produced by Metropolitan Superintendent, J. Tait on 12 June 1918, regarding meeting held in the Sydney Domain on Sunday 9th June 1918 and Letter from Vance Marshall to the Chief Secretary of the State, 19 June 1918, in 'Police Reports on Political Meetings held in Sydney Domain 1918-1921', Archives Office of New South Wales, Ref: 7/5589 & 7/5594.
[76] Wilson, *Discovering the Doimain*, p. 53.
[77] Eklund, 'We Are of Age', pp. 76-7.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

variety of associations whether they are constituted by kinship, residential or occupational proximity, political or religious alignment or ethnic origin.[79]

Both types of places can equally produce bonds of mutualism and solidarity that sustain collective action. But in a town such mutualism is grounded in a relatively coherent space and the local sense of belonging based on 'face-to-face' connections and a symbolic geography of street patterns emanating from the family home. By contrast, a community formed on the basis of a common class position is not bound by time and place in the same way. Working class communities are more likely to be characterised by impermanence and thus tend to lack the social continuities of rural or small town communities. Whereas shared identity and memory in small towns and rural settings is often shaped in opposition to the outside world, in urban working class communities identity, memory and interests are more explicitly construed in opposition to those of employers or even the state. As Fentress and Wickham have it, '[p]eople in towns locate their memories in space, as peasants do, with streets and squares replacing fields and hills'. By contrast, 'for factory workers the sharpest distinction is characteristically that between memories of the space of work and those of non-work, whether in the city or the home'.[80] Hence, we could describe a community based on common class position as more portable.[81]

While both sorts of communities encompass a variety of social sub-groups, class division tends to be underplayed in agricultural or pastoral localities, and played up in industrial localities. But to say this tends to underestimate the similar sorts of processes that shape communities. The integrative pressure mentioned earlier as a key variable in creating and sustaining communities, operates in similar ways on either side of the class divide. It is not simply something that allows members of different classes to unite in labour-community coalitions, it is something that is also imposed by working class people on each other; a classic example being the social pressure imposed on those who try to exercise individual choice by not joining strike action. Or more broadly speaking, it can be imposed by working class people on members of other classes, by means of a boycott. Put another way, this integrative pressure is as crucial to the formation of a 'community' around class identities and

[79] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1992, p. 119.
[80] *Ibid.*, pp. 114-25.
[81] Stephenson, 'A Gathering of Strangers', p. 39. See further: Eric J Hobsbawm, 'The Tramping Artisan', in Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour*, London, 1964, pp. 34-63; Graeme Davison, 'People, Places and Spaces', *The Sydney Gazette*, pp. 33.

interests, as to an extension of communal boundaries across classes, because it provides the mechanism by which a gathering of family members, neighbours, friends and fellow workers expands to encompass what Stephenson terms 'a gathering of strangers'.[82] As E.P. Thompson noted regarding the collective self-consciousness that characterised the emergent English working class of the early nineteenth century:

> The conflict between alternative ways of life was fought out, not just between the middle and working classes, but within working-class communities themselves. But by the early years of the nineteenth century it is possible to say that collectivist values are dominant in many industrial communities; there is a definite moral code, with sanctions against the blackleg, the "tools" of the employer or the unneighbourly, and with an intolerance towards the eccentric or individualist. Collectivist values are consciously held and are propagated in political theory, trade union ceremonial, moral rhetoric.[83]

It is critically important to elaborate on the nature of this integrative tendency because it provides a useful concept for explaining how specific identities, particular interests and immediate relationships are harnessed to broader social attachments and conceptions of shared interests.

As already indicated, communal integrative pressure relies on cultural practices and symbols, as well as institutions. It is precisely this pressure that produces the positive element associated with community and localism. Often referred to in terms of sharing, it promotes consensus and conformity to imposed notions of identity and norms of conduct, and it is critical in establishing imaginary (and sometimes all too real) boundaries between insiders and outsiders. But such pressures have not historically succeeded in eradicating the agency of individuals or differences between them. As Meyerson and Martin point out, beneath the appearance of unity lurk sources of diversity and the possibility of conflict.[84] Hence, we return to the issue of differentiation between and within communities.

In any given locality it is possible to find the existence of many sub-communities. To varying degrees all sub-communities perform integrative functions. They enable interaction, establish

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[82] Stephenson, *ibid.*, pp. 31-52.
[83] Thompson, *The Making*, p. 463.

patronage and support networks, behavioural norms (particularly about reciprocal rights and duties) and help their members to form and assert collective identities. At the same time, they segregate groups from each other. As Mosely comments, the ethnic soccer clubs associated with specific districts in Sydney, provide 'a refuge for people anxious to preserve their customs, way of life and identities' . But in doing so they also create a basis for separatism.[85]

A locality simply represents an arbitrary spatial boundary around a collection of sub-communities, or what we more commonly refer to as sub-cultures. At the same time, however, all localities also encompass vertical associations because people are not one-dimensional. They usually have numerous interests and sources of identity that link them to more than one sub-community; plurality, as Hannah Arendt observed in 1958, 'is basic to the human condition.'[86] The concurrent membership of numerous sub-communities facilitates cross-class coalitions. It is in this regard that in some localities women's communal activities have been able to extend beyond horizontally distinct social groupings. It should not, however, be assumed that such fluid attachments or the social activities that transcend class and sub-communal boundaries necessarily assure cohesion or prevent segregation.

As Ellen Ross argued in her study of neighbourhood networks in London before World War One, women were pivotal to group survival and to the 'structuring of culture itself'. As wives and mothers they 'contributed to the establishment of their family's (and often their street's) reputation', and protection in the case of illness, evictions and intervention from various sorts of government authorities. 'Collectively,' Ross continues, 'women were instrumental in organising ties between households, thereby facilitating the creation of shared working-class values and identities'.[87] But while gender created social links beyond the home to the street or neighbourhood, it also created barriers. Married life was based on a clear 'fissure between wife and children on the one hand, and husband on the other', so that '[g]oods, services and friendship, and certain spaces - in shops, pubs, doorways, streets - were shared with members of the same sex, and not with spouses.' [88] And although most neighbourhood assistance was

[84] Meyerson and Martin, 'Cultural Change', p. 626.
[85] Philip Mosely, 'Life and sweaty: ethnic communities at play', in David Headon, Joy Hooton, Donald Horne (eds), *The Abundant Culture: Meaning and Significance in Everyday Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995, pp. 200-1.
[86] Craig Calhoun, 'Social Theory and the Politics of Identity', in Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory*, p. 9.
[87] Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I', *History Workshop*, no. 15, Spring 1983, p. 4.
[88] Ellen Ross, 'Fierce Questions and Taunts: Married Life in Working-Class London, 1870-1914', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, Fall 1982, p. 578.

organised through women, groups of male co-workers also took action to provide for 'a man's illness, his funeral, or for his widow and orphans'. As Ross puts it:

> Gender differences were reproduced in patterns and movements in streets, shops, and pubs. Men and women socialised differently, and actually often knew different people on their own streets ... Ties of friendship and mutual aid among non-kin seldom crossed gender boundaries.[89]

The only exception to this involved marital relations, which themselves relied on negotiations between 'wives and husbands over cash, time and goods', and which often resulted in 'usually public and ritualised fighting' between men and women.[90]

But conflict of this nature was not limited to men and women. The intimacy and support that characterised neighbourhood networks, and that generally united women, also at times generated tension, anger and conflict between them in the form of public accusations, gossip and ostracism. Relationships between mothers and daughters, in which the latter's labour was often used as a form of currency in neighbourhood exchanges, sometimes resulted in overt public conflicts.[91] In other words, it would be wrong to assume that women's sharing of social spaces in specific localities necessarily produced social harmony. Regardless whether neighbourhood provincialism reinforced class homogeneity or inter-class camaraderie, it encompassed the potential for social tension as much as co-operation.

How can these often complimentary and sometimes competing processes be effectively related to the intersection between class and community? Perhaps the best way to make sense of this conundrum is to return to the question of individual and collective identity.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Identity politics have been central to the formation and mobilisation of labour movements and working class communities. From the nineteenth century labour movements were actively involved in legitimating the 'worker' as an identity and in advocating solidarity among those who shared this identity. However, as I noted earlier, this identity was entirely related to the

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[89] Ross, 'Survival Networks', p. 5, pp. 8-9. See further: Ellen Ross, 'Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep: Respectability in pre-World war I London Neighborhoods', *International Labor and Working Class History*, no. 27, Spring 1985, pp. 39-59.
[90] Ross, 'Survival Networks', p. 16; Ross, 'Fierce Questions', p. 592.
[91] Ross, 'Survival Networks', p. 11, p. 15.

public sphere and to conceptions of masculinity.[92] This universalising way of conceptualising politics and mobilisation has shaped academic approaches to class and its institutional expressions. In turn, scholars generally and labour historians particularly have tended to 'underestimate the struggle involved in forging identities, the tension inherent in the fact that we all have multiple, incomplete and/or fragmented identities' and that various identities do not have equivalent public standing.[93]

This is particularly pertinent for women's identities which, as a number of feminist scholars have argued, are multifaceted or as Bondi puts it, 'internally fractured and externally multiple'.[94] The problematic surrounding women's identities relates to the fact that they have been construed in relation to the more oblique private sphere, with its web of informal social relationships. While this sphere historically provided the main autonomous space available to women, it confined the choices of identity available to them and rarely provided the basis for distinct group consciousness. Only where women have had the opportunity to enter the world of paid employment have they had the opportunity to attain a relatively independent social role and identity, albeit circumscribed by the need to imitate men,[95] or acquiesce to the latter's stronger collective identity claims. In this sense the question of women's identities has broader significance because it highlights the inextricable linkage between the politics of personal identity and the politics of collective identity. Put another way: 'every collective identity is open to both internal subdivision and calls for its incorporation into some larger category of primary identity.'[96]

Yet if we accept the idea that the formation of personal and collective identity is an interactive and dynamic social process, how do we account for the way people select which of their many identities will guide their actions at any given time. And relatedly, how do we explain shifts between the integrative and divisive forces that shape changes in communal formations? Psychological explanations focused on variables such as 'rational self-interest' are inadequate because they fail to account for structural constraints and also irrationality in human affairs. Likewise, purely materialist explanations focused on social positions are problematic because they neglect the question of subjectivity.

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[92] Calhoun, 'Social Theory', pp. 22-3; Michael Leach, 'Manly, True and White: Masculine Identity and Australian Socialism', in Stokes (ed.), *The Politics of Identity*, pp. 65-6, p. 76.
[93] Calhoun, *ibid.*, p. 24.
[94] Bondi, 'Locating Identity Politics', p. 97; Marilyn Lake, 'Stirring Tales: Australian Feminism and National Identity, 1900-1940', in Stokes (ed.), *The Politics of Identity*, pp. 78-80.

Thus we return, once more to the dichotomy between unity and disunity, cohesion and fragmentation, without reaching a clearer picture of how people reconcile simultaneous membership of numerous communities, particularly when the demand for mobilisation is associated with one and not all the communities to which they might belong at any given time. The key question appears to be, how do people deal with the experience of ambiguity. Only by addressing it, does it become possible to consider connections between workers' subjective sense of class consciousness, their location in the social structure, their perceptions of the places which they inhabit and their personal decisions to engage in collective actions. To answer this question, as Davison stressed some time ago, it is essential to recover people's 'mental maps'.[97]

A particularly useful entry point into this subjective realm is provided by organisational theorists Debra Meyerson and Joanne Martin who propose that attention to integration and differentiation actually conceals the importance of ambiguity. What do they mean by ambiguity and how does it relate to community? While this term can be interpreted in a number of ways, Meyerson and Martin use it to refer to the situation that occurs when individuals simultaneously embrace two or more irreconcilable meanings.[98] This state, they suggest, is not a temporary one, but instead the way things are. Culture, they argue, cannot simply be characterised as generally harmonious or full of conflict, for the simple reason that 'consensus, dissensus and confusion coexist, making it difficult to draw cultural and subcultural boundaries.' Their ambiguity perspective rests on the proposition that individuals share some viewpoints and disagree about others at the same time.[99] Accordingly, they suggest an alternative metaphor that is particularly relevant to the conceptualisation of community as a dynamic social process.

Culture, they argue is like a web:

> Individuals are nodes in the web, temporarily connected by shared concerns
> to some but not all the surrounding nodes. When a particular issue becomes
> salient, one pattern of connections becomes relevant. That pattern would
> include a unique array of agreements, disagreements, pockets of ignorance,

[95] Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, pp. 137-43.
[96] Calhoun, 'Social Theory', pp. 27-8.
[97] Davison, 'People, Places and Spaces,' pp. 34-5.
[98] Meyerson and Martin, 'Cultural Change', p. 626.
[99] *Ibid.*, p. 637.

and hypocrisy. A different issue would draw attention to a different pattern of connections.[100]

This metaphor provides a means of interpreting changes in the relationships between social formations based on class, community and locality. It also forces us to acknowledge that individuals are constantly making choices about their identities, affiliations and actions. Such choices are certainly constrained by structural conditions and environmental changes. But they are also affected by personal priorities. From this perspective, individual selections influence realignments in collective identities, make mobilisation possible and thus also result in changes to communal formations.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered how popular but problematic assumptions about shared identity, experience and interests developed and became embedded in traditional approaches to the study of communities and localities. It has also drawn attention to the extremely complex forces, structures and processes that shape these phenomena in different historical and geographical contexts. The close relationship between the lived experience of class, community and space identified here suggests that labour historians interested in exploring specific places need to expand the conceptual framework to include the politics of identity formation, as this involves ambiguity and individual choice. By so doing, they can help to challenge the traditionally conservative assumptions and normative imperatives that have dominated understandings of community and localism. In turn, such a broader approach will promote greater understanding of the way that men and women, individually and collectively negotiate the specific material conditions that they experience in different places at different moments of history. The chief conclusion to be drawn from this conceptual overview is that the formation of class and communal relationships have much in common, and that all manner of identities, be they individual, social, or geographical are shaped by political processes. None are fixed. Rather, all are subject to personal and collective conflict and struggle.

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[100] *Ibid.*, p. 638.