Connected Communities

An exploration of the relation between the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘future’ in philosophy

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Executive Summary

This scoping study and research review has examined a range of contemporary and historical philosophical approaches to understanding the relation between the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘future’. In two lines of research an overview of six theoretical strands was produced, including virtue ethics, philosophical liberalism, the capabilities-approach, recognition theory, the philosophy of G. Agamben (strand 1) and E. Bloch (strand 2).

It emerged that futurity and future-orientation, although implicitly present, are marginalised as explicit objects of an ontological enquiry in most theories. As a result, philosophers, whilst dealing with ethical relations between present and future community, do so without a sufficient ontological foundation of the relations in question. The ‘not yet’ of the future is ontologically complex, as is its impact on the nature of community.

To investigate it deeper, the linearity and uni-directionality of future orientation needs to be contested. The future as future needs to be acknowledged as a pool of potentialities and not merely as present reality in waiting. This warrants an exploration of qualitative and relational aspects of future and future orientation. At the same time the relation between the complex not-yet and the constitutive factors of community needs to be articulated.

Researchers and Project Partners

This scoping study and research review was conducted by dr. Johan Siebers and Dr. Elena Fell, Division of English Language and Linguistics, Literature and Cultures, University of Central Lancashire

Key words

Social philosophy, Time, Future, Community, Metaphysics, Modality, Utopia, Temporality
Introduction

Summary of research questions

The future of a community is as important for the shaping of the present life of a community as are history, cultural memory, traditions and values accumulated over time.

Social and political utopias, revolutionary ideals, religious beliefs and aspirations such as concepts and images of an afterlife and a new earth, as well as notions of responsibility to future generations are examples of how an attitude towards the future directs or channels people’s communal life and how communities negotiate the domain of the future.

However, there has been a lack of a fundamental systematic philosophical evaluation of the ways in which the view of the future affects the life of a community. The aim of this project is to provide the groundwork for such an evaluation.

Contribution to the Connected Communities programme

This project is relevant to Review Topic Ia (conceptualizations and meanings of communities) and IIb, c, and d, IIIb and c, IV and V. Topic IIIb explicitly addresses ‘learning from the past’; our project concerns modes of ‘learning from the future’ as well as learning from ‘past futures’. We have considered how communities negotiate the domain of the future and how to connect research on communities by developing a general and systematic understanding of the role of the future for community life. Understanding community as a complex temporal network of future-orientated social processes gives a new perspective on community participation, community well-being, prosperity, sustainability, institutions and community cohesion across times, which may contribute to improving the well-being of present and future communities.

Research activities

We have examined a number of contemporary (social) philosophies with a view to developing an overview that will allow us to formulate directions for further research: 1) virtue ethics and philosophical communitarianism (MacIntyre and related literature); 2) recognition theory (Honneth); 3) philosophical liberalism (Rawls); 4) capability approaches (Nussbaum, Sen); 5) messianism and philosophy of law (Agamben); 6) Ernst Bloch’s utopian theory of community and the future.

We conducted a literature review and conceptual analysis, and we produced a series of discussion papers (available online, see below). Discussion paper 1 summarizes the literature review and contains the exposition of relevant findings. Paper 2 uses these findings as a starting point for developing a conceptual framework for a systematic philosophical investigation of community and future, considering the ontological, epistemological and ethical aspects of the relation between present and future community. Paper 3, on Ernst Bloch’s philosophy, explores aspects of Bloch’s innovative and original social philosophy, which until now has not been sufficiently utilized in the
philosophical conceptualisation of community. Bloch’s explicit future-oriented thinking allows us to address topics and issues which the other approaches we investigated give us little handle on.

We have found that most contemporary social philosophies share a concern for the future welfare of communities and articulate a vision of a possible better future for all: they all embody reflections on community (and indeed on politics as the shaping of the good community or good society) as an essentially temporal and future-oriented phenomenon, but very often do so implicitly. Communities have to negotiate their relation to the future. However, the dimension of futurity in this state of affairs, and hence the place of the future in our ideas of the good society, is hardly ever conceptualized explicitly and as such.

This report highlights the perspectives opened up by a trajectory that we have reconstructed from Giorgio Agamben’s ideas on community and the future to those of Ernst Bloch and by our consideration of the complex, non-linear aspects of the ontology of temporality and their relation to the moral dimension of a community’s relation to its future. Both directions of research deal with the question of the future in terms of the complexity of the not-yet.

**From Agamben to Bloch**

The philosophy of community of Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1998, 2005a, 2005b, 2007) stands in a long messianic tradition of thought, and by emphasising the communal aspect of the messianic (the Christian ‘kingdom to come’) he shows how the religious-theological tradition within which European philosophy long operated still needs to be appropriated. The messianic dimension of temporality can be understood as either ‘the promise of a future that is always ‘yet to come’ (Kochi 2002, p. 34; cf. Derrida 1994), or as the promise of a redemptive dimension to history, that lies outside of the train of historical progress itself and yet gives it meaning. Both conceptions provide a link between community and future because for both the messianic dimension orders connections between people, either as promise or as redemption, and can thus be said to be constitutive of community.

The former conception has been used by Derrida to develop a theory of justice and democracy: “It is simply the structure of promise which is inherent in all experience and whose lack of content, resulting from the radical opening to the event, to the other, is the very possibility of justice and gives its only meaning to democracy ‘to-come’.” (Kochi 2002, p. 34) The latter can be found in Benjamin’s notion of ‘weak messianism’ (Benjamin 1969), but also in the notion of utopia as it is used by Adorno (1996) and Bloch (1986). In both, the future appears as the horizon of significance and of shared understanding. This idea can already be found in Heidegger’s (1962), for whom Dasein is a process of realising one’s own past, present and future (temporalisation), and it is certainly the case that Dasein has to be understood also in terms of a communality, e.g. that of a ‘people’. There is, for Heidegger, an authentic mode of being for a community, which takes the form of realising itself on the basis of an active inheritance of its history or tradition in the light of the horizon of future possibilities. This hermeneutical interconnectedness of temporal modes does not necessarily involve a notion of the messianic (we see it for example largely without this in Gadamer’s theory of
interpretation (Gadamer 2004), which nevertheless embodies a notion, if only regulative, or a universal community of understanding).

Bloch’s secular, utopian messianic thought (and to a lesser extent that of Benjamin and Adorno) is of particular relevance to the present project, because, over and above Derrida’s theory, Bloch is able to link the messianic expectation with agency towards the future, in other words with an idea of the (not yet realised) good community or society (Bloch 1986, 1987). His philosophy is the explicit attempt to at once take seriously the idea that at the bottom of our temporal communal existence lays an openness towards the future, and the idea that only in (political, social, cultural, existential) praxis which strives towards human dignity lies the adequate response to that openness. It is not a coincidence that Bloch, in distinction to Derrida and Agamben, inherits the tradition of natural law in his elaboration of the idea of human dignity (Bloch 1987). Thus, the notion of utopia is reconceived by Bloch, not as the programmatic march towards a perfect state of being, but as the active, secular, concretely anchored response to a foundational openness in existence: things are not what they could be, the central contents of our experience are characterised by being unfinished. We do not yet know what freedom, community, humanity, nature can be. This openness is the modality of potentiality: that which is not, but which could be. The name for the active response to it is hope. Bloch offers a reflection on the concrete dynamics of the relation between communities and their future, across a range of parameters, including the political, cultural and religious. His philosophy has an ethical, political and cultural dimension, but is based on an ontological analysis of modality and temporality (the ‘ontology of the not-yet’) which is particularly relevant to the relation between community and future. He develops a theory of dual temporality, one of historical advance and one of a pre-figuring or premonition of what might be (Bloch’s interpretation of the Pauline ‘time that remains’; cf. Siebers 2011), to articulate the radically unfinished nature of existence. Following Aristotle, Bloch (1986) distinguishes between two forms of potentiality: that which is in itself possible, in the sense of not impossible, and that which, in a given concrete situation, emerges as a possibility which may be realised or passed over. Our future orientation mitigates between the two: utopian thought and action is always concrete, in that it is located in what is concretely possible, but it stand out towards a more final conception of possibility as an identity of subject and object, a coming-home in the world. All communities stand in the tendency between these two poles, and can therefore be said to have a latent dream or operative wish, a utopia, of themselves, which they try to realise and which does not so much have the character of a definite picture or goal, but which rather is the engine that keeps the movement between concrete utopia and the eschatological dimension going. The mode of temporality in which things stand out to what they not yet are is the mode of temporality in which mutual recognition, and hence community, is possible. For Bloch there is an identical ‘invariant of direction’ in all utopian goals (which he characterises as ‘home’ or also ‘real democracy’), but it lacks content; at the same time there are ‘many rooms in the house of world’, and the process of ‘tendency/latency’ (Bloch 1978) is not that of a Hegelian development of the inevitable, but a material, situated, historical journey characterised by ruptures, breaks and revolutions. The eschatological is, as it were, at right angles with history; progress is the precarious resultant vector. Denying or destroying the ‘dream’ of a community is tantamount to the destruction of the promise in Derrida and to the failure to accord the primary affective recognition in human
relations its place in social structures (reification, cf. Honneth 2005); it provides a basis for a provisional and regulative account of communal relations and their pathologies, but it includes, unlike the other examples, a post-secular way of understanding the importance of the moment of ultimate identity (both in communities as well as in individual human beings) without relapsing into a simple re-affirmation of religious or reifying accounts of it. (Habermas 2008; Bloch 2009). Up to this point there has been no systematic attempt to apply Bloch’s theory to contemporary questions of community identity, belonging and historical development. This lack is one of the things our future research hopes to address.

What the philosophy of communal future must take into account

Another line of research was concerned with the evaluation of five contemporary strands in the literature. The main conclusion of that part of the research was that whilst theorists are concerned with the ethical dimension of the future orientation of community, their work often lacks a foundational, systematic study of the ontology of futurity and future-orientation. In particular, ideas of temporal progression, setting goals and realizing them are founded on an underling belief in the linearity of time, and this proves to be too simplistic as our relations with the future impact the present. Our findings can be summed up as follows:

1. Existing theories concentrate on the ethical relation to the future without sufficient ontological foundation.

2. The not-yet of the future is ontologically complex.

3. The linearity of future orientation needs to be contested.

4. An exploration of qualitative and relational aspects of future and future orientation is necessary.

5. The future qua future is a pool of potentialities and not merely present reality in waiting.

The relation between present and future is ontologically, epistemologically and ethically complex. Our own temporal position as present enquirers affects our perception of the future. The future is ‘not yet’ and this, we may feel, relieves us from an obligation to consider it at all. The ‘not yet’ of the future, however, is not the same as ‘not ever’ or ‘not at all’, and this in itself calls for an elaboration of the future’s ontological status.

In its present a community negotiates at least two futures: the real projection of our present and the hypothetical future of our goals. Whereas the real future emanates from the present and is viewed from the present point, the relation of the hypothetical future to the present is the reverse. When we act in our present with a view of the hypothetical future, as an acting agent we remain in the present, but as an observing agent we place ourselves at the point of the planned achievement in the hypothetical future and evaluate our actual present from that position. Our imaginary position in the future is treated as the imaginary present, and from the point of view of this present, our real present becomes the past of our imaginary present.
Thus the future of community is not merely a postponed present, as it is depicted in many social theories. The future is a realm of would-be potentialities and is richer in content than the present reality that it will become. The point of reflection on the meaning of the future for communities lies precisely here, to see that the active orientation on the future is at the heart of the present life of the community: this is what our conceptual analysis shows. If we talk of future per se, i.e. while it is future, then future is not what will be but what can be, and what can be is more abundant than what will be. The present to some extent defines which of the future potentialities will become real, and this unequal relation of ontological dependence of the future on the present should be acknowledged as the basis for the moral dimensions of their relation. At the same time, the present is present only insofar as it enacts an orientation on the future. The continuous connection between present and future of communities is intricate and subtle and is not a mere abstraction from community members’ lives. A community as a whole has a complex undulating temporal structure, with a gradual descent into the past and gradual ascent towards the future.

**Conclusion and directions for further research**

Further research, linked to the broader theme of the temporality of community, must investigate what is obvious and what is not in the relation between the people who shape the future and the future that they shape. This warrants a detailed investigation of qualitative and relational components of the present and the future. In connection with this, time itself and our understanding of it must become a subject of a focused enquiry. Two specific directions for further research can be formulated: (1) A study of quantified time (clock time) as a universalized expression of temporal relations and qualitative time (lived time) linked to the way in which processes unroll naturally and in which people encounter one another will be a necessary step towards a deeper understanding of the relation between the nature of community and of the future. (2) The ethical relation between present and future people will require an investigation into the specific ontology of temporally displaced agents and events. This investigation will address the temporality of societal ends and means taken as complex temporal processes. These directions for further research will be most fruitful if they are conducted in an interdisciplinary context, which explicitly links (philosophical) theory to the practice of community engagement in the context of a process of co-inquiry.
References and external links

This scoping study and research review produced three discussion papers, a comprehensive research report and a bibliography. These can be found under the heading ‘research’ on:

http://www.uclan.ac.uk/schools/journalism_media_communication/siebers_johan.php


The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*to mobilise the potential for increasingly interconnected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.*

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)