Connected Communities

Urban communities in early modern Europe (1400-1700): A Research Review

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Executive Summary
This literature review identifies current approaches to ideas and practices of ‘community’ in European urban history between 1400 and 1700, and suggests where there is potential for new lines of enquiry. It selectively assessed the recent Anglophone literature – from roughly 2000 – with a focus on work that pushes the field forward methodologically. This desk-based research was combined with interviews with historians who work on community from various positions of expertise. This made the review a collaborative process, and one that points ahead of the published scholarship; the interviews have become a useful resource in their own right. These discussions, along with the review bibliography, are posted on a project website (www.earlymoderncommunities.com), accessed an average of seven times a day, with a total of 1,841 hits to date (April-October). The review’s principal findings were to recommend further research on: the relationship between space, memory and everyday movement in the early modern city; how communities were shaped by sound and smell as much as by visual stimuli; the nature of boundaries and negotiation between majorities and faith and immigrant minorities; how digitisation and GIS holds real potential for accessing and modelling the urban/spatial dimensions of source material.

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Report

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Overview

Recent historiography on early modern Europe has at once demystified “community”, but acknowledges that it continues to be an indispensable, if dangerous, term (Burke, 2004). In the first place, community is no longer necessarily defined as an experience of unity, a trope that has its analytical roots in late 19th-century sociology and in particular Ferdinand Tönnies famous opposition between community (gemeinschaft) and society (gesellschaft). It now tends to be understood as a complex set of social processes in which peace-making, conflict, rivalry, unifying rituals and the negotiation of power, resources and boundaries are all integral – so long as the actors involved are engaged in the same argument (Shepard and Withington, 2000; Halverson and Spierling, 2008; Cohen and Cohen, 2010). In this context, the distinction between “thick” trust (kin, faction, patronage) and “thin” trust (weak loyalties or connections based on values, beliefs, institutions and spaces shared by ‘strangers’) has been influential, a model injected into the discourse – at least for Italianists – through the debate around political scientist Robert Putnam’s theories of social capital (Putnam, 1994; Muir, 1999, 2002, 2011; Eckstein and Terpstra, 2009). In practice, ties of thick and thin trust overlapped at many points, but thin trust is seen as essential for a wider sense of social connectivity and empowerment, and it is here that the emphasis of recent work on urban community lies.

Within this framework, identity, space and agency have become increasingly significant, and interconnected, terms. Recent scholarship views identity as a constructed category, determined yet fluid. Urban actors often identified with multiple communities – of occupation, neighbourhood, ethnicity, confession, and more widely civic. Meanwhile, the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities has been predicated on the idea that space, rather than simply being occupied, is produced in relationship to the built environment (Lefebvere, 1991; Certeau, 1984; Crum and Paoletti, 2006). The effect of these two trends is to give as much weight to the agency of human actors as to overdetermining structures, or rather to see the two as mutually determining (Williamson, 2010; Kümin, 2009). The attention to space has also begun to intersect productively with digital mapping technology, offering new forms of visualisation of historical process and social interactions in the urban sphere (Gregory, 2007, 2011).
Space, place and the senses

The social analysis of government buildings and churches is a well-established way of thinking about authority, hierarchy and community at both the civic and neighbourhood levels (Najemy, 2006; Burke, 2006; Nevola 2010). More recently, however, attention has turned to other loci, above all taverns. These socially heterogeneous, liminal, and usually contested places could play both an integrative but also disruptive role for any given community – and in fact the tavern has been tied to, and the fresh historiography has been inspired by, debates around space and artisan agency (Kumin, 2007; Brown, 2009; Hailwood, 2010). There remains a case for a more thorough synthesis of cultural-literary and social historical approaches here, and a fuller exploration of the shifting gendered/class/political discourses that turned around taverns during the Reformation.

At the same time there is more work to be done in a similar vein, on other public spaces, for example, bath houses, marketplaces, streetcorners and indeed squares as junctions of community.

Two other recent trends are important here. The first is the gradual expansion of historians’ apprehension of urban life beyond the visual to embrace the other senses, which feeds into the way experiences of belonging, boundedness and exclusion were constructed. Smell has started to be strongly identified as one way in both places and groups – such as the “poor” – were identified and sometimes stigmatised (Jenner, 2011; Wheeler, 2007). Sound is also beginning to be more rigorously integrated into the analysis of the sensory cues that both connected and differentiated urban dwellers. Bells, for example, created community-shaping temporal regimes, both at parish and city levels, but could also be appropriated to disrupt everyday sonic rhythms and thus subvert normative structures of community (Atkinson, 2011). The other promising approach to community in public space, again privileging agency, focuses on motion. Building on the insights of a rich body of work on processions and the way they ritually and spatially defined sacred and/or political communities (Howe, 2007; Muir, 2005; Trexler, 1980), historians have productively begun to explore how everyday urban movements and a person’s associations with the places he or she passed through were productive of both self and community and at the same time kept the definition of spaces fluid and contingent (Milner, 2006; Atkinson 2011).

These two strands interact productively through the emerging medium of GIS visualisation of historic urban environments. Thus, for example, a new project ‘Sex and the Sacred: Negotiating Boundaries in Renaissance Florence’, aims to map zones of prostitution in relation to convents and palaces, and to become an online resource upon which more data can be layered (Nicholas Terpstra, University of Toronto; also underway is Locating London’s Past: http://locatinglondonspast.wordpress.com). Such integration of social and spatial data offer great potential for future directions in research.
Boundaries and exchange: faith and minority communities

The grand narrative of early modern European history tends to characterise community as an idea that increasingly intersected with purifying, essentialising imperatives, giving rise to harder distinctions and less penetrable boundaries. For example: distinctions between the confessions in the Reformations; between Christians and minority faith groups; between social strata. While this story remains more or less intact, the thrust of recent scholarship has been in the opposite direction. The emphasis has been on how boundaries, and identities, were permeable, how divergent communities remained connected and in negotiation.

The intensive scholarship on Jewish communities, expelled from Spain and Portugal in the late 15th century and ghettoised in some places in the 16th, has been particularly attuned to issues of identity, segregation and interaction. The “lachrymose” idea of Jewish oppression (Bell, 2011) has been leavened by a consideration of the Italian ghetto as a semi-autonomous community under the aegis of the state, which in effect made Jews a part of the greater body politic (Siegmund, 2006; cf. Stow, 2005). Ghettos appear in recent work as “incubators of social-cultural liaisons” with Catholic majorities (Ruderman, 2008) – and those correspondences have been seen in terms of the professionalisation of the rabbinate, marriage customs, educational standardisation, moral policing, social stratification, and bureaucratic structures (Ruderman, 2008, 2010; Bell, 2001, 2008, 2011). The exploration of connectivities, identity and the negotiation of boundaries finds an important arena in towns that fostered the co-existence of multiple religious communities, especially Amsterdam and Livorno (Ceserani, 2004; Sutcliffe, 2004, 2008; Muir, 2011). Moreover, this desire, in regard to Jewish communities, to unpack the nature of exclusion, exchange, and conflict, and the spaces through which that took place, mirrors recent work on the cohabitation of Christian confessional communities in urban spheres (Luria, 2005; Kaplan, 2007; Halverson and Spierling, 2008). One common thread here is a close attention to identity, the idea that early modern actors could experience a sense of belonging to more than one community (confessional, civic). The community-identity question becomes particularly charged around the issue of conversion. The “blurring of religious boundaries” remains at the forefront of research on early modern Jewry, due to the Conversos and other types of converts (Ruderman, 2009; Jewish History, 24, 2010 and 25, 2011). However, the question of how communities accommodated and were changed by internal religious differences, and in turn how individuals leapt between perceived communities, is a productive field with a wider purview. Recent scholarship, for example, has begun to address the neglected topic of female conversion between Christianity and Islam, during the height of Christian conversions in the 16th and 17th centuries (Dursteler, 2011). The other common thread, highly relevant to Jews, is the consideration of mobility – of migrancy, commerce, assimilation and marginalisation in, for example, expanding cities such as London, but also in the relatively neglected towns of central and eastern Europe (Selwood, 2010; Rosenthal, 2010; Dursteler, 2006; Keene; 2009; Miller, 2008).
Boundaries and exchange: Gender and class

A similar set of issues – the nature of space, boundedness, exclusion and exchange – are germane to the analysis of power relations and subordinate groups. Recovering the voices of such groups, assessing the nature of their marginalisation but also of their agency and self-reliance, has been a major trend in recent scholarship.

At the formally political, and more widely public, level, ideals of community were structured in a gendered fashion. Against this historiographically well-established paradigm, the question of women, agency and community has been of major interest (Broomhall, 2008, Cohen, 2007). Convents of nuns represent the clearest example of female ‘community’, deeply inserted within neighbourhood arenas, and connected through kinship and patronage to broader civic networks. Recent scholarship, notably for Italy, shows that nuns were anxiously contained yet convents could also be institutions of considerable economic and social capital, providing spaces for wider female association through education, work skills, guardianship of girls, and, as is now being revealed, trade in medicine (Strocchia, 2003, 2009, 2011). With the reforms of Trent and stricter enclosure, convents have been seen as a microcosm of the purging and purifying impulses that gripped Europe at large. But, again, ideals of impermeable boundaries were in dialectic with practice; there remained “cracks in the wall” (Strocchia and Terpstra, 2011). While this remains work in progress, there is perhaps more to be discovered outside the convent walls. If the public sphere was masculine, recent work suggest that public space and everyday social transactions as a more nuanced gendered arena (Flather, 2007; Cohen, 2009; Gowing, 2000). We still know far too little about consororities, for example, a formalised vision of lay female community (Terpstra, 2000; Strocchia, 2002). As for the idea of an everyday sense of ‘community’, of thin trust, experienced by lay women, especially among non-elites, this is more problematic. Microhistorical approaches have uncovered female association, and a street presence for women, particularly at the neighbourhood level, but little in the way of community, which implies some form of boundedness (Cohen and Cohen, 2011; Gowing, 2008; Capp, 2004). Yet the distinction between network and community should not drawn too sharply, since – as consororities suggest – overlapping networks (of communication, occupation, neighbourhood, and of devotion or charity) could bleed into, or were enacted as, community.

This idea of enactment is an important one for the study of community in general. While the tracing of networks delivers insights into mechanisms and webs of connection (MacLean, 2007), it risks privileging structure over agency. Since everyone has multiple networks, “the question is which one is important – and that tends to contextual and changing” (Muir, 2011). Indeed, community, or a thin trust sense of identification, may in some cases only be enacted, and revealed, during a crisis – from an external threat, political emergency, or sudden disaster (Muir, 2002, 2011; Cohen, 2009; Bell, 2011; Atkinson, 2011). This remains a fruitful line of investigation. However, equally important are everyday or cyclical strategies of enacting or representing community, particularly for non-citizens or ‘plebeians’. The ubiquitous early modern phenomenon of Carnival, where artisans chose neighbourhood or occupational kings, was one such marking out of
community (Burke, 2009). Recent work has linked such informal solidarities to everyday spaces, places and fraternal organisations, such as confraternities and guilds, to examine one way in which marginalised groups entered into a dialogue with elites and civic authorities (Rosenthal, 2006; Humphrey, 2001). There is more scope to get inside this “reverse discourse” from the margins (Duncan, 2007) – much of it accessible through the understudied medium of petition – by which those who were on the wrong side of increasingly robust social and rhetorical divides represented community as a means of collective bargaining and of resisting their exclusion from the larger civic community.

Communities of discourse

The study of circuits of information, stories and news, both oral and, from the late 15th century, printed – and, with cheap print, increasingly going beyond, or below, humanist or clerical circles – is an expanding field.

One promising strand of scholarship focuses on gossip, or “community talk” (Horodowich, 2005). Preliminary explorations emphasise how the exchange of information may have been a sign of inclusion in a defined group but also blurred boundaries between public and domestic space and spoke to a culture of neighbourhood surveillance (Cowan, 2009). While universally ascribed to women in the negative, gossip was one constituent in the glue that sustained informal female networks and a limited sense of community. Indeed, it was a force in the regulation of normative community behaviour, both when gossip was used by women against each other (e.g. witchcraft accusations), or to damage the reputation of men (Capp, 2004; Horodowich, 2005)

The other significant recent strand of research in the arena of urban communication focuses on street singers, storytellers, and news pamphleteers. What is emerging is the enormous diffusion of cheap print from the early 16th century, and the sale and performance of these texts in public spaces, suggesting that it is now problematic to assume that certain social groups would not have read a given text, or heard it performed (Salzberg, 2010, 2011). An amplification of a pre-Gutenberg street poetry traditions (Kent, 2000), cheap print included chivalric romances, edicts, social commentary and criticism, and it addressed, and shaped, both specific constituencies or publics – in particular artisans, with a literature on poverty – and wider audiences, creating shared knowledge linked to associations around particular places, all of which can be seen to feed a ‘thin trust’ sense of community (Atkinson, 2011). Moreover, the consideration of oral culture and the printed word, political gossip and the dissemination of print on public affairs is leading to a more robust mapping of a pre-Habermasian ‘public sphere’ a culture of conversation that widens the community of political discourse (De Vivo, 2007; Salzberg and Rospocher, 2012; Pettegree, 2007).

Again, GIS technology offers new tools for visualising the ‘community of discourse’ by mapping news information circulation and what specific publics were reading, hearing and talking about. (e.g. ‘Republic of Letters’ mapping project run by Paula Findlen at
Standord [https://republicofletters.stanford.edu/] (https://republicofletters.stanford.edu/). There is also scope, as the volume of digitised printed sources mushrooms, to exploit ‘text mining’. One path-finding example effectively shows what part of the discourse in a community of discourse looks like by visualising the relationship between places and themes (e.g., war) in English news pamphlets from 1653-4, totalling 800,000 words (Dunning, Gregory, Hardie, 2007; Gregory, 2011).

**Recommendations for future research**

Emerging from the review we have conducted and from the interviews that have formed part of this review process, we have identified a series of strands that are emerging as key areas for future research:

* The sonic dimensions of urban experience, better integrating sound (bells, drums, etc) into the semiotics of how communities were identified, regulated, enacted, or subverted.
* Combined social and cultural history approaches to unpack how actors occupied and navigated public places such as streets, streetcorners, taverns, squares, and thus produced both space, time and everyday experiences of community in a relationship with the built environment.
* Further research on the (self)-identification of faith or foreign minority groups, and the nature of the boundaries and boundary crossings between them and others.
* A more systematic exploration into the ways community was spatially and representationally defined and enacted by groups of non-citizens as a strategy for claiming agency and bargaining with authorities.
* The ways the street performance of texts and dissemination of print created shared social-cultural spaces which fed local and/or civic ‘conversations’.
* The way community was conceptualised in the visual arts, literature and theatre, and political treatises. While the ideology of community is often implicit to the analysis of such sources, it has rarely been tackled directly or systematically.
* Cutting across a number of these strands is the methodological innovation and potential offered by the application to the above recommendations for projects using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and other forms of data visualisation which can locate data in its spatial relation to the urban environment.
References and external links

On account of the numerous references included in this report we have decided to omit the bibliography, which can be consulted online:

http://communities-bib.wikispaces.com/Communities+Bibliography

EXTERNAL LINKS

Project website, including the eight interviews listed below:

http://earlymoderncommunities.com

As part of this report we have compiled an extensive wiki-bibliography. This contains the full bibliography consulted during this review process.

http://communities-bib.wikispaces.com/Communities+Bibliography

REFERENCES

As part of the research review we conducted interviews with historians who work on community from various positions of expertise. These are listed here:


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 inter-connected, 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