

Modernist Communities

Periods and Theories

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Several decades apart, novelist Virginia Woolf and philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy both saw the idiosyncratic space of the train carriage as a modern metaphor of communal coexistence. Through a train journey or simply a commute, one travels in time and in space, but one also travels with the fellow passengers fortuitously seated in our carriage. For Nancy, the contingent sense of being-with induced by modern transport is unintentional; it is a position, not a project. Neither a crowd nor a group, such community is simply there in the sense that “we” are momentarily together, in speech or, more often than not, silence. While Nancy chose this scene of daily life as an exemplum of his postmodern theory of being-in-common, written against communitarian and communist projects of community, Virginia Woolf, several decades earlier, had already picked up on the train carriage as a paradigmatic figure of modern co-being.¹

Woolf’s “An Unwritten Novel” (1920) and “Character in Fiction” (1924) both trace the genesis of fiction down to the guessing game one engages with when facing a female stranger in a carriage. In the short story, cognitive intimacy prevails; in the essay-pamphlet, dissensus takes over as two camps of novelists are opposed, but the compartment ultimately gathers everyone, including us readers, “fellow travellers with Mrs Brown” (Woolf, “Character” 436). As a metonymy for the modernist period, the railway carriage suggests a common historical position based

on the plurality of accidental companionship. It is such plurality that our collection seeks to register, not just with Woolf and Nancy but with a variety of other accidental companions, across media and cultures, and above all across rigid dichotomies—individual and collective, private and public, high and low, conservative and progressive, local and global.

Periods

What, then, does it mean to talk about community in modernism, that famously individualist era that followed upon the many communitarianisms of the nineteenth century? It is not hard to imagine that by the early twentieth century the word *community* would have become difficult to use, heavy with residual meaning. Is it, then, perverse, or anachronistic, to talk of modernist communities? If conceived of as a historical period, modernism entails a shift but not a total rupture from the end of the nineteenth century—despite the claims of those who lived the times. “In short,” announced Sidney Webb, the prominent reformer and member of the Fabian society, “the opening of the twentieth century finds us all to the dismay of the old-fashioned individualist, ‘thinking in communities’” (Den Otter 150).

Yet even as Webb declares rupture, his politics and ideas provide a bridge from one generation to another. Perhaps nineteenth-century ideas about community became as important to question as was everything that Mr. Brown represented to Virginia Woolf. This collection will show that there was indeed continued interest in the name and practice of community in the modernist era, despite its centrality to certain nineteenth-century currents of thought; and that as a result of community having been used in sometimes totalizing, repressive ways in the nineteenth century, modernist employments of community are all the more diffuse and evanescent—an annoyance perhaps for us scholars, but also a protection against the forms of community (national, ethnic, religious, military) that were so robust in Victorian, and later, fascistic renderings.

Indeed, references to Victorianism and fascism, useful though they may be, simplify what might be termed the *emplacement* of the various modernist experiments with community that are chronicled in this collection. As a whole, these essays range from Delhi to Paris to the American Southwest to wherever Gertrude Stein fancied herself in a given

moment, and bow to no simple narrative of center, periphery, diffusion, or belatedness. Important work in new modernist studies, such as that of Susan Stanford Friedman, and Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel in *Geomodernisms* (2005), has shown how precarious is the traditional periodization of modernity when a more global approach is taken. Friedman suggests that scholars instead recognize the “plural periods of modernisms,” accepting modernism as “the expressive dimension of modernity . . . based on an engagement with the historical conditions of modernity” in multiple different locations (432). This collection takes such reconsiderations of modernism seriously and follows Mary Favret’s consideration of “period” (in Austen) as “an index of human contact: it is a marker of meeting . . . [that] contrasts sharply with the historicizing impulse that uses periods to divide or exclude” (375). Our introduction aims to illuminate the question of community through a handful of late nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century moments, attempting to offer glimpses of modernist “periods” that complement the rich and riotous account of communities best offered by a collection of essays fiercely committed to pluralizing modernism.

Raymond Williams’s notes on community in *Keywords* emphasize the nineteenth century as a turning point for the term, in which community becomes more firmly linked with “immediacy or locality” as opposed to more formal and abstract modes of association (the contrast theorized in 1887 by Ferdinand Tönnies through the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, to which we will return later). For Williams, the residue of this shift is tonal: community is the “warmly persuasive” term used to describe varying and sometimes contrasting sets of relationships, distinctive in that it “seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (*Keywords* 75–76).²

Certainly the persuasive nature of the word community is most in evidence in the intentional communities so important in the generations before modernism: in Great Britain and the United States, utopian social experiments proliferated, and the writings of Charles Fourier, William Morris, and Edward Bellamy found wide readerships. These writers tend to fall outside all but the most flexible conceptions of modernism, though many later participants in the communities and readers of the works might well be considered modernist. Between Sidney Webb’s confident declaration and H. G. Wells’s savage parody of Webb’s and other

Fabians' views in *The New Machiavelli* (1911) lies nothing so clean as a generational break, so how are we to identify a clearly modernist set of views of community?

One way might be to approach the question through the attentiveness to tone that Williams modeled for us, imagining the tonal shift that would make possible a “warmly persuasive” account of community in modernist terms. Such an attentiveness to tone orients us toward modernist stylistic choices and helps us recognize how the persuasive tactics employed by a Morris or Bellamy might have lost their force due to the sheer scale of their success. Anna Vaninskaya convincingly argues that a commitment to initiative and conscience characterized late-Victorian and Edwardian utopian socialism—that ultimately Morris and his peers put forth an idea of the “conscious community,” one arising through rational means (199–203). Yet many of the conditions and preoccupations usually associated with modernism—among them the shocking irrationality of war, the rise of psychoanalysis and other theories of the unconscious—suggest the appeal of more provisional ideas of community, ones less anchored in consciousness, ones that linger on the isolated experiment rather than focusing on its value and applicability to an overall society.

If late-Victorian and Edwardian approaches to community bespeak socialist and utopian impulses, their modernist counterparts reveal a tonal resonance with empiricist and experimentalist leanings. For example, in Chicago over the 1910s and 1920s, the sociologist Robert Park and his colleagues practiced a form of empirical investigation that proved highly influential on conceptions of community. Park's early essay “The City” (1915) emerged from his sense that the centrality of urban social formations in modernity provided an opportunity for sociology to adopt scientific methods: the study of society awaited its own Louis Pasteur, and Park proposed to fill that role. Park came to his study of society from a literary and journalistic background, but Priscilla Wald has convincingly argued that his insistence on “communication” as constitutive of communities was inflected by a more bacteriologically derived idea of contagion: this “allowed Park to depict both communication and the social bonds it constituted as simultaneously psychological and physiological; society was at once a collection of individuals and an organism” (Wald 680). Park and his sociological legacy help to advance a view of

communities that emphasizes the “volatility,” “instability,” and “even obvious fictitiousness” of these entities even as it insists on empiricism and experimentalism as the most viable forms of approach to them (*ibid.*).

While what William James termed “radical empiricism” cannot stand in for all empiricisms of this moment, it aptly illustrates the importance of empirical approaches in modernist versions of community. One of James’s central claims (and innovations) is that his radical empiricism “does full justice to conjunctive relations” (“Pure Experience” 1161). As against earlier empiricisms that saw consciousness suturing together distinct sense impressions, James believes that relations are basic sense experience: “The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure” (“The Meaning of Truth” 826). This is not outright an account of community, but it is a claim that the connection that community entails is basic to experience, rather than a kind of secondary synthesis of primary materials.

Alexander Livingston explains radical empiricism as a late iteration of William James’s thought, that is, part of James’s ongoing attempt to reject both atomistic and holistic accounts of experience. What is *radical* about James’s late empiricism is the firmness with which he at last dispatches consciousness: “with the self now only one body in affective connection with a multiplicity of other bodies and processes, the boundaries of the self become fuzzy and vague” (Livingston, n.p.). The self of radical empiricism is not the distinct site of stitching-together, in other words, but rather the indistinct thing produced by the continual concatenations that are experience. Community in its most elastic sense (as relation, network, concatenation, or any of the forms of “withness” that James understands as in play) is empiricism’s primary datum.

But notes of warning also emerge from contemporaneous accounts of community envisioned as exactly the contingent, experimental thing that so many modernists valued. In the “global, universally interrelated civilization” so important in these periods, Hannah Arendt discerned a dark conundrum of precarity (302). In her considerations of imperialism in the work published as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt tracks the plight of what she calls the “rightless” in the first half of the twentieth century: people sundered from their homes and, finding themselves “thrown out of one of these tightly organized closed communities,” find

themselves “thrown out of the family of nations altogether” (294). This narrative is revelatory for Arendt:

The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion—formulas which were designed to solve problems *within* given communities—but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them. (295–96)

Arendt insists that “not the loss of specific rights . . . but the loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever” has been the calamity of the age (297).

For Arendt, the community must be able to function as a polity; the group that cannot call upon the resources of a state to support its claims has no hold on the status of community, but is instead the detritus of a global situation without opportunities to re-found communities. The loss of government protection is in these cases justified through pluralizing appeals to “what they unchangeably were—born into the wrong race or the wrong kind of class or drafted by the wrong kind of government” (294). In other words, communities conceived of as consistent with the experimental and empirical currents of modernism are vulnerable. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she meditates upon the perils for stateless communities in a way that continues to resonate into the twenty-first century and that must productively trouble our considerations of modernist communities.

Theories

Hannah Arendt’s trouble with community resonates powerfully with the theoretical uneasiness surrounding the concept of community at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In an interview published on the blog *lundimatin* in January 2017, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, shifting away from his earlier theorization of the “inoperative community,” even disavowed the word *community*, which he felt had of late given rise to misunderstandings, and suggested it could be replaced with the term *commune*, in reference to the collective action of the Parisian *Commune*.