COMMUNITY, COHESIVE CAPITAL AND CAUTION

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1. Introduction

I have chosen the title for this brief address with some care. This is because I do not wish to be misunderstood. In suggesting that we should be cautious in our approach to policy ideas like community, social capital and social cohesion (the latter two of which I have conflated to create a new and unwieldy beast of jargon, 'cohesive capital'), I am not dismissing the collective, cooperative and relationship-based potentiality of human kind out of hand**.** In theoretical terms, there is probably no more fundamental question than the collective. What is it that holds human beings even minimally together? Whatever it is, it is this that makes the whole notion of social order and indeed of society even possible. Unless, of course, you are Margaret Thatcher and believe that there is no such thing as society, just an agglomeration of self-interested individuals! So too in terms of policy. I am equally convinced that the best solutions are to be sought in our collective capacities, making use of our cooperative and empathetic potentialities rather than in the individualistic, rational-choice model of human behaviour so beloved of the market.

Having said this however, I do wish to enter a plea for caution about our enthusiasm in embracing what David Adams has termed 'policy fads' such as community and, I would add, social capital or cohesion as social policy panaceas. Borrowing the words of Raymond Williams, I think we need to hesitate before what seems like all the richness of developed theory and all the opportunities for accessible entry into immediate practice in this regard, and entertain a moment or two of radical doubt (1977, p.11). For this coterie of concepts has of course been subjected to considerable criticism and qualification, reservations that all too easily become lost amid the understandable sense of urgency and enthusiasm to formulate new policy mantras.

That this should be so is, I think, more the fault of academics than of policy makers and practitioners. While we in academe talk to each other about such things endlessly, maybe to the extent that the problems of communalism could by now be said to be academically well known, we have signally failed, I believe, to communicate our reservations and caveats to the decision-makers. It is not perhaps just some contemporary intelligence services that allow people to hear what it is they want to hear!

And want to hear it they certainly do. With breathtaking social insight, would-be sociological ayatollah and local warlord Tony Blair proclaimed in 1998 that community "defines the relationship not only between us as individuals, but between people and the society in which they live"(McLaughlin, 2002, p.90). John Howard apparently used the term no less than 11 times in his "Motion for Reconciliation" speech in 1999 (Australian, August 8, 2003). According to one of the best-known

sociologists currently working in the criminological field in the United States, community "now reigns as the modern elixir for much of what allegedly ails American society" (Sampson, 2002, p.213).

As with "community" so too with "social capital", perhaps most succinctly defined as being "focused on social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trust" (Grootaert and van Basteleer, 2002, p.ix). Again, Tony Blair is quoted as proclaiming that " the 'third way' will build its prosperity on human and social capital" (Prabhakar, 2002, cited in Fine, 2003). In Australia, Peter Costello (2003) and Mark Latham (2003) have jostled to demonstrate their appreciation of social capital's virtues, and right and left have competed to assert true ownership (Donnelly,2003). Leading public servants endorse it as one of the keys to "community strengthening" (Blacher, 2003), and pivotal public institutions have turned their attention to defining, measuring and discussing how social capital's merits can be harnessed for the public good (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Productivity Commission, 2003).

Nor is the list of those alleged merits a short one. Where community has been described as a perceived policy elixir, social capital theory has spawned an enormous array of empirical studies claiming positive correlation with social benefits from child-welfare to mental health, from literacy to lower crime rates, even to the prevention of civil war and, less dramatically, though no less ambitiously, to good government, itself. (See, for example, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). As Ben Fine observes, social capital purports to reign over a domain of social analysis ranging from the affairs of twelfth century Italy to those of the twentieth century United States (2002, p.1).

The question of why these ideas should have come into such public policy prominence in recent years could form the subject of a lecture in its own right. You will probably be relieved to learn that I do not intend to embark upon delivery of such a lecture. Suffice it to say that, far from just representing an effusion of good ideas, most analysts locate the popularization of these policy precepts within the nature of some of the most fundamental changes to overtake late modern society since the advent of the welfare state - things like globalisation, the state's fiscal crisis, the advance of neo-liberalism and the decline of civil society.

What I do want to do however is three things: I wish to suggest some radical doubts about community and social capital or cohesion, in turn; and then I would like very tentatively to suggest how we might begin to reorient our policy thinking to retain notions of the collective and the cooperative without uncritical endorsement of the mantras of community and social capital.

2. Community

Of the many issues that have been raised in relation to the traditional notion of community[1] as an actual or potentially closely bonded collection of people, relatively homogeneous in terms of shared values and usually occupying an identifiable geographic space, it seems to me that there are four of particular relevance to the use of that term as a policy foundation at the present time. I will deal briefly with each of these in turn.

a) Community as a natural category

We have a tendency, I think, to assume that community is the natural form of social organization or association for humanity, that it is somehow or other naturally "out there", awaiting reactivation or to have its capacities rebuilt. If it is not, then our policy task should be to facilitate, if not indeed to drive its emergence.

The trouble with this view, it is argued, is that it is an extremely Anglophone view of the world. In my own field, for example, commentators have noted that the term "community" is one with few resonances, save for negative ones, in countries like France, Germany and Italy (Hughes, 2003; Lacey and Zedner, 1998; Nelken, 2000). Chris Cuneen (2002, p.38) has made the same point very forcibly with regard to the over glib utilization of the term in relation to what are often historically disparate groupings of Aboriginal peoples:

> "The point to be made is not that these 'communities' are necessarily dysfunctional because of their history, but rather that the reality of community is a profoundly political and historical construction. Colonial policies were directly responsible for constructing community in the interests of the colonizers. 'Community' is not a natural process."

b) Community as an empirical reality

There is then a possibility that our emphasis on community as a foundation for social policy may smack of the Anglo-centric, if not the neo-colonial. Even in the Anglo-Celtic context, moreover, doubts have been expressed as to whether the traditional, perhaps idyllic notion of local community accords with empirical reality. Whether it actually ever did is of course a historical question, and not necessarily a straightforward one either. As far as the present is concerned, however, the suggestion is that traditional community seems likely to become increasingly inappropriate as a policy focus in direct proportion to the empirical fact of its disappearance as the central organizing feature of local or national life in late modern society. While such communities may still exist, the traditional image of the actually or potentially close

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[1] In this paper I am not addressing the sophisticated and voluminous body of thought around the subject of 'radical communitarianism', a discourse with which I have considerable sympathy even if I cannot share some of its central precepts. This is because I do not believe that community and social capital oriented policy in Australia is in the main, or even in large part based on this particular version of the communitarian theme.

knit community is becoming less and less of an empirical reality in the more fragmented, loosely connected world resulting from processes like globalisation, technologically advanced communication, population mobility and so on. Indeed, we are perhaps better described in the main as a society of loosely connected or lightly engaged strangers rather than in terms of the old (and itself questionable) idea of the traditional community. This is particularly true in our large cities, but is by no means restricted to that setting. The general point has been made succinctly by the well known social historian, Eric Hobsbawm, who nearly a decade ago heretically suggested that "never was the word 'community' used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life"(1994, p.428). And whatever the historical truth about other societies, as Pusey and others point out, Australia (or at least European Australia) was born modern, never having experienced the primordial local ties of pre-industrial society (2003, p. 113). The past apart, according to the same author, middle Australians today see themselves as living in a society of "fraying social ties, impersonality, indifference, retreatism, copping out, incivility, shallow commitments and so on" stemming from economic dislocation (ibid. p.135).

c) Community as differentiating and excluding

Another reason for querying the place of community in the close knit sense on our policy agenda arises from what many see as its possibly inescapable negative connotations. To the extent that community does exist or can be resurrected, it is argued, the concept carries a very strong element of differentiation and even exclusion within it. To identify with, or to find one's identity through a community necessarily entails a sense of differentiation from other groups and, more importantly, of others outside the community being different and "other". From there it is a small conceptual and practical step to community becoming very exclusionary. Paraphrasing Zygman Bauman (2001), we can only ever achieve even the semblance of "community" by constantly engaging in the process of defending it from outsiders and external threat. Paradoxically, he says, it is purchased at the price of the insecurity that requires "twenty-four hour a day vigilance and a daily sharpening of swords"(ibid. p.17).

Community therefore potentially contains another fundamental contradiction at its heart. Coveted for its secure sense of belonging and inclusiveness, even its most fragile and ephemeral realisation may hinge upon vigorous exclusion and differentiation. To the extent that we can experience it, we do so by expressing the insecurity of our own difference from others and their collective exclusion from our ranks. Nor can this insecurity be obviated by resort to more finely differentiated communities of identity, or multiple communities as they are sometimes called. As Jock Young, writing well before 9/11, Tampa and Iraq observed, we may try to locate ourselves in terms of a more precise cartography or map of identity, "but none of this will stop the struggle for certainty: of demons being invoked outside of our borders and within the heartland of our security"(1999, p.166). From there, one does not need to draw a very long bow to discern some potentially worrying implications for human rights within the superficially comforting confines of traditional community, particularly in an age of imminently massive population movement across the globe and increasing racialisation of many social policy issues.

d) **Community as disembedded and responsibilised**

To locate either the genesis or the solution to our social policy ills in the collectivities known as communities, it is also argued, is in both respects to ignore the broader context of their existence, the context in which they are embedded. Communities at best mediate and at worst have little effect upon the macro-structural forces external to them and located in the wider influence of political economy, whether it be of the city, the nation-state or the globalised market. In practice moreover, their activities are contoured along lines of power, class, gender, inequality and the like, once more therefore being significantly embedded in broader features of culture and social structure. Moreover, it has been contended, community is a philosophy for the weak, those who can afford to opt out of it choosing to do so. More crudely, if trenchantly, some have claimed that in terms of social policy, community is for the poor (Dench, 1986) – we rarely talk of "community capacity building" for Toorak! Nor could we even be sure that the residents thereof would be very keen to have it, save when an issue of specific concern to them should arise, in which case they have more than adequate capacity to mobilise collectively on their own without, as far as I know, any finely developed sense of intimate community relations.

And yet, with apologies for the violence wrought upon the English language by some academics, so-called communities are "responsibilised". As so often happens, the terminology may not be particularly felicitous, but the argument is important. For it points up the curious contradiction inhering in the possibility that even as community melts away empirically before our eyes, we invest more and more heavily in it in terms of our preferred modes of governance.

In terms of community based social policy this has important implications. For in broadest terms, it means that we must countenance the possibility that we are part of a broader transformation or master narrative in this respect. More specifically, we may be part of a larger process whereby the mentality or rationality of governance is shifting the spatial locus and responsibility for policy implementation away from the state, through the idealised and vanishing idea of community, onto other collectivities and citizens. To be sure, as experts in the field are quick to point out, this may be an uneven process and one best perhaps portrayed as producing hybrid rather than pure forms, but community is implicated nonetheless in what is said to be a discernible trend. And if this is so, it is a trend that may significantly and maybe even conveniently deflect attention away from issues of social disadvantage and social justice onto the deficiencies of communities and the need to bolster their disembedded capacities.

3. Social Capital

Let me now turn my attention briefly to social capital, the element of cohesiveness deemed so central to good policy outcomes that the Word Bank has famously dubbed it 'the glue that holds society together'. Popularised by Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone(2000),* a title chosen to capture the decline of civic engagement in the United States signified by the fact that people no longer were going bowling together in groups, the networks and associated normative connections of social capital have become something of a further policy panacea in many jurisdictions, including Victoria.

As I have already indicated, many social benefits are claimed to arise from high levels of social capital, and once again I have no wish to be dismissive of these claims out of hand. What I do want to do, however, is suggest that we might show rather more circumspection in our enthusiasm for incorporating the precepts of social capital into our political rhetoric and policy agendas without qualification. For many criticisms and limitations have been noted by the proponents of the doctrine, themselves, even if all too often they merely note them and then proceed to celebration of the positive potentialities without that sense of caution which their own critical insights might justify.

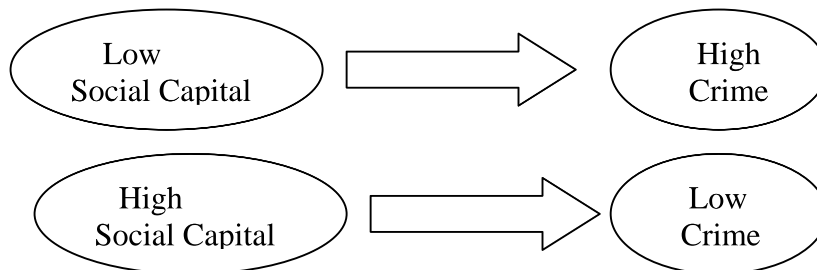
a) Socialisation or economisation?

A good place for such circumspection to begin might be with reflection upon the overarching thrust of social capital theorisation. Often, this is represented as a welcome trend towards the socialisation, or even the humanisation of economics, with the notion of capital being married to the social. An alternative and no less plausible reading however is that the popularisation of social capital represents a trend in the opposite direction – towards the further colonisation of social science and social policy by economics. I am not an economist and this is not an argument I would therefore wish to take on in any detail, but it does seem to me suggestive at the very least that social capital should be such a favoured body of theory by bodies like the World Bank, the Productivity Commission and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development. Indeed, it may not be insignificant that the latter's major pronouncement on the subject should have appeared under the title *The Well-being of Nations (2001),* a rather obvious and pretentious play upon the classic foundational text on capitalism, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations (1776).*

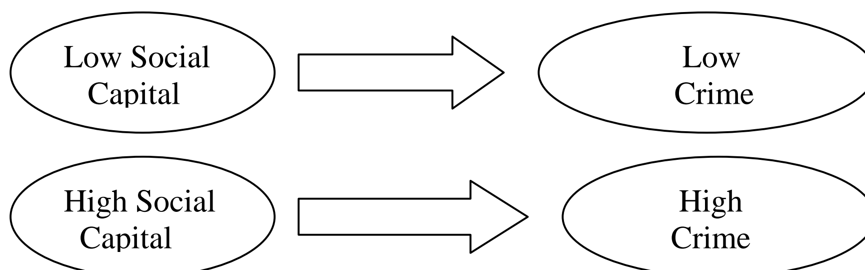
Other qualifications surrounding social capital resemble some of those that have already been raised in connection with its close cousin, community, itself. Thus, it has been argued, for example, that social capital can promote inequality and can be highly exclusionary – after all, the close ties of bonding social capital perhaps work best when they do so to the exclusion of outsiders (for a very accessible though not unsympathetic account of these and other criticisms see *Field, 2003, Chp.3*). But the two principal deficiencies which tend, I believe, to be glossed over in our enthusiasm to embrace the concept refer respectively to the so-called 'dark side' of social capital and to its specification, at least by implication, of an optimal location or focus for social policy intervention.

b) The 'dark side' of social capital

The difficulty with unqualified renditions of the social capital/ desired social outcome nexus is that quite often it simply does not compute. In its most straightforward, optimistic and most attractive policy form, social capital theory postulates that low social capital is associated with or maybe even generates undesirable outcomes, while the opposite is true with regard to high social capital. The argument can be crudely exemplified by reference to crime, one of the favourite empirical examples used in the field.



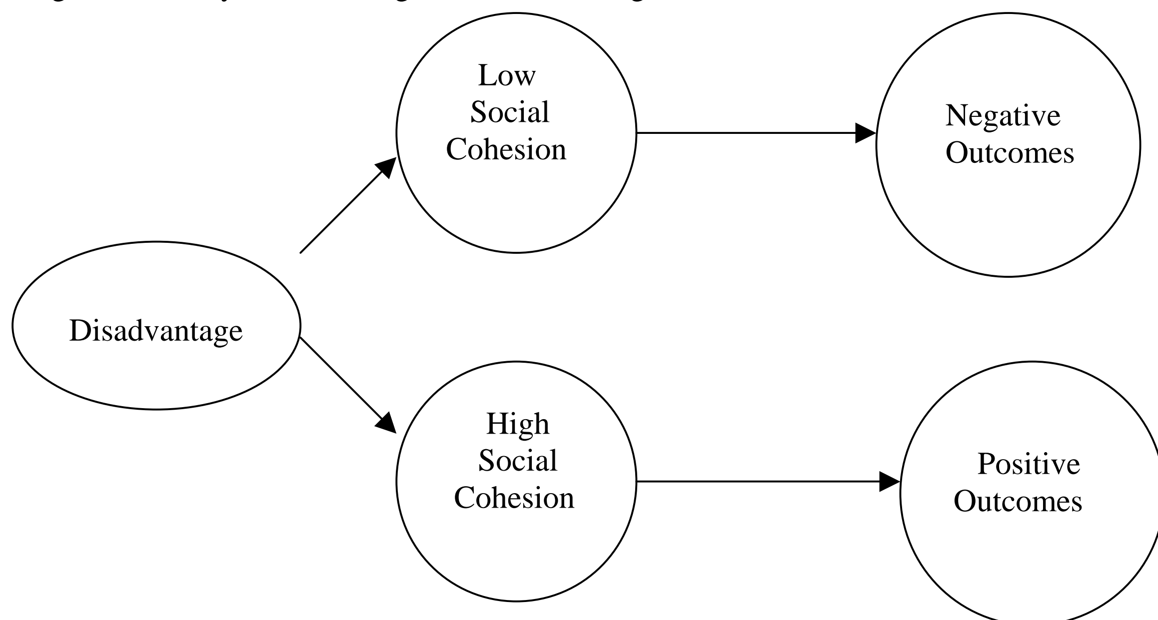
Unfortunately for this convenient formulation, however, the associations encountered in empirical reality do not always flow so smoothly and clearly. Thus, areas of relatively weak social networking, as many middle-class suburbs might today be characterised as being, may have low levels of reported offending (Bottoms and Wiles, 1996). The new world of 'gated' apartment complexes in areas like St. Kilda and Docklands may well fall in the same category. Conversely, as social phenomena as diverse as organised crime, juvenile gangs, Abu Ghraib prison, relaxing football teams of various sporting persuasions, corrupt police and professions which conveniently relocate paedophiles elsewhere within their networks all demonstrate, high social capital is by no means always associated with good social outcomes. And so we are left with the possibility of an additional and very different picture.



It would be wrong to assume or assert that the original proponents of social capital did not take any cognisance of its dark side. But what many of them, and even more so their more recent disciples have tended to do, is simply note the phenomenon, perhaps even at length, and then move back to the main agenda – which is the positive benefit to be derived from social capital. Yet it seems to me that, whether in relation to crime or any other social outcome, the dark side of social capital constitutes more than a particularly pointed exception to an otherwise general rule. For as Robert Sampson and his colleagues have observed, it implies the need to invoke a normative or goal-directed dimension when evaluating social capital, a requirement that takes us into the realms of moral philosophy (1999, p.4). And in this context, statements about building social policy baldly on social capital *tout court* are at best meaningless.

c) Social capital and policy targeting

The standard version of how social capital impacts on social policy outcomes attributes to it a mediating role between various structurally negative factors and their undesirable social consequences. In the words of Tony Vinson's recent work , *Community adversity and resilience*, for example, 'social cohesion' , of which he sees social capital as comprising an important element, 'buffers or contains the deleterious influence of factors……shown to be recurrent features of highly disadvantaged areas'(2004, p.76). David Adams has more recently represented the idea diagrammatically in something like the following form.



To Vinson's credit, he is at pains to point out that outcomes are not entirely shaped by what happens at the localised level in terms of cohesion. Like Robert Sampson, whose sophisticated work 'beyond social capital' in Chicago he misinterprets to overstate the role of close social bonds and networks in producing 'collective efficacy' (2002, 220), he acknowledges that macro-economic and the broader political economy do matter. At the same time, however, the invitation to place the focus of policy on things like community strengthening rather than underlying disadvantage is always there. As

John Field describes, social capital thus leaves itself open to charges ranging from distracting attention from the underlying structural causes of inequality, to acting 'more or less explicitly as an alternative to social democratic welfare policies' or more pointedly, as a 'fig-leaf for welfare cuts' (2003, p.118). Just how easily social disadvantage as such can become elided in a social capital-type policy formula is apparent from David Adams' rendition of Vinson's work, where community strengthening becomes an 'uncomplicated solution' (in crime prevention) and a 'basis for a new approach to social policy' (2004). And so, via the agency of social capital we come full circle, back to that disembedded and responsibilised community to which I referred earlier in this address.

4. Conclusion

This afternoon's opening session of the congress is entitled "Community: Critical Perspectives" and in this respect I have not stinted myself. Given the brief, I suppose technically I could leave the matter there. But this would be unfortunate, I think, because it would leave the impression of complete negativity about the role of the collective in framing and achieving successful policy outcomes. So let me conclude by outlining, however sketchily, what I see as some of the requirements of an alternative collective approach that is not predicated on the close social ties of community or the networked bonds of social capital. Based on what I have already said, there are three prerequisites that can be discerned.

First, I think we must face up to the fact that the nature of social connection or social solidarity in late modern society has become much looser, fragmented and contingent than is implied by the traditional arguments of community or the rediscovered theories of social capital. Paraphrasing Alain Touraine (I think), we must accordingly be careful that we are not persisting in trying to deploy a nineteenth or maybe even an eighteenth century repertoire of collective action in dealing with twenty first century problems. And in this respect, Tony Vinson's interpretation notwithstanding, I think the work of Sampson and his colleagues on collective efficacy may begin to point a way forward. For above else, and there is a lot more to it, they categorically assert that shared expectations for collective action among people who are typically acquaintances or strangers rather than friends, something which they see as the key to collective efficacy, categorically does not hang solely on the strength of social ties:

> "Although some level of working trust or cohesion is essential for shared expectations to take root, strong personal ties are not the key to understanding in this theoretical framework…."(2002, p.220).

A formulation such as this makes it easier to accommodate successful collective solutions within the framework of a society comprising loosely or lightly engaged strangers. But it leaves unanswered the question of how we move forward collectively and cooperatively without invoking the exclusionary tendencies that I have suggested can so easily permeate notions of community and social capital. In the light of recent events, not to mention the possible imminence of fairly massive trans-national population movement, moreover, this is possibly an issue of particular importance and urgency at the present time.

Here, very briefly, I believe the answer lies in a reorientation or rediscovery of human rights as a core value guiding our social policy formation. We need a language that is positively welcoming of strangers and 'others', whether from within or without, albeit one that does not unconditionally accept or endorse all of their views or behaviour (Pavlich, 2002; Gandhi, 2003). Making common cause with radical communitarians like Adrian Little, which in a number of respects if not all I am very happy to do, we need to move beyond the indifferent or even grudging tolerance of liberalism, to 'the positive value of respect for diversity in terms of the creation of a supportive social environment in which citizens share a concern about, and even accept a certain responsibility for each other's well-being' (Frazer and Lacey, 1993, quoted in Little, 2002, p. 47). Perhaps we even need to embrace a new vision of human rights based upon such shared concern, what Turner (1993) called a 'frailty theory of human rights', as the true residual basis of social solidarity in our loosely knit and fragmented world.

As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, however, respect for difference cannot simply be reduced to cultural distinction and treated as a replacement for the criteria of social justice (2001,p.88). And so my third and final prerequisite for successful collectively based policy is that we acknowledge the connection between human rights thus redefined and questions of distribution, between rights and substantive inequality. It is here that Bauman again sees the aspects of community, the ones that really matter to our present troubles, missing from contemporary life. 'The two tasks…to counter head-on the pathologies of the atomized society of today on a battle-ground that truly counts', he asserts, 'are equality of the resources necessary to recast the fate of individuals *de jure* into the capacities of individuals *de facto*, and collective insurance against individual incapacities and misfortunes' (2001, p. 149).

I agree. But this means that while what I would prefer to call 'neighbourhood' does matter, it cannot be made the sole or maybe even the primary policy focus. Instead, or in addition, we need to maintain or shift our attention back 'upstream' to the fundamental issues underpinning social disadvantage. Questions pertaining to growing inequality, the looming demographic crisis in terms of how to support a greying population, widening disparities in educational opportunity, housing and health cannot be resolved in a fundamental sense at neighbourhood level or through close social ties, however designated.

Having said that, I repeat what I said a moment ago and what I stressed right at the beginning. Collectivities and by extrapolation, neighbourhoods do matter. And at this level, I think the challenge is two-fold. At one level, there is the challenge of how to deliver, in an integrated fashion, the local services reflective of human rights and social justice oriented policies stemming from more macro- level determination. At another level, I think the challenge is to identify what one might call new 'entities of engagement' for social policy.

Such a point of local policy departure is perhaps to be found somewhere within current debates surrounding place management which can embrace the possibility of things like urban renewal, integrated service delivery and collective action without predicating them on notions of unreconstructed community and social capital. But this in turn leads us back to another and very basic debate about the adequacy of our

representational democracy. For utilisation of 'community', whatever its shortcomings, can perhaps be seen as an attempt to incorporate into our policy-making and delivery a constituency falling outside the strict framework of formal politics. If, as I think we must, we move away from a traditional community orientation, then the question becomes how do such 'sub-political' realms gain a voice? More specifically, how can the excluded and the disadvantaged be drawn more directly into our policy formulation and delivery processes, and how can they be given more access to the vertical dimensions of power rather than to the marginal consolations of things like social capital?

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