**Keynote Speakers**

Lindsay Tanner, Federal Shadow Minister for Finance  
Opening the Conference on Saturday 2 October

Pat O’Shane, Magistrate NSW and UNE Chancellor  
Sunday morning, 3 October

Professor Eileen Yeo, University of Sussex  
Monday morning, 4 October
Labour and Community, Past and Future: or why Merrie (White, Male) England and Mateship are not enough

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You would think New Labour had invented the word 'Community', so often do the Blairites use it. A new 'Active Community Unit' is being established in Whitehall, to spearhead Blair's challenge for Britain to mark the millennium with an explosion of giving of acts of community that would touch people's lives'. Key Labour politicians have attended seminars on communitarianism, a rather authoritarian moralistic voluntarism, developed by sociologist Amitrai Etzioni in the USA.

Twenty years ago it was also true that 'you can't get away from the word "community", as a local Youth Officer said when showing me literature on the National Federation of Community Associations. Go back 160 years and the term is still very visible. In Britain, working-class co-operators and socialists were using it to convey a vision of a New Moral World, while their antagonists were attacking it as a code-word for everything destructive and immoral. For the last 500 years in Britain, Community has carried a positive resonance that has been worth trying to monopolise. Indeed Community might be called an essentially contested concept since it involves issues about human and social value and potential.

The concept of Community has had a fascinating capacity to carry incompatible even contradictory meanings – it is the AC/DC of concepts. Two quite opposite models of power relations and decision making have been contained in it – power operating from above and from outside versus control from below or from within. The earliest concept of community had to do with the state and the realm and the inhabitants in it as distinguished from people of other communities. Phrases like 'all classes of the community' were frequently employed in the eighteenth century to denote either the state or civil society and all the inhabitants or groups composing these. The term 'community', usually with the definite article, meant the realm and the inhabitants in it as distinguished from people of rank. By the early nineteenth century, the community denoted either the state or civil society and all the inhabitants or groups composing these. Phrases like 'all classes of the community' were frequently used; some voices like W.A. Macklison in 1828, used 'nations or communities' interchangeably in ways which have become familiar during the twentieth century. From this period onward, as people migrated into cities or industrial villages, a community of poverty and place became apparent among working people. The one-industry, virtually one-class villages, of which coal villages were the epitome, made their appearance, and their isolation and separateness were noted from the first. But similarly in the great cities, although often further subdivided on ethnic lines, a neighbourhood community appeared, sometimes also based on an industry as, e.g., in the docklands. These communities were often highly gender divided, a fact to which I will later return. Men had the common trials and tribulations of the workplace, which often involved physical danger as well as endemic struggles against capitalist exploitation. Women had the shared trials and tribulations of managing family survival which included childbearing and rearing, as well as feeding and clothing the family and paying the rent. The landscape of men was often marked out by beer houses and pubs. The landscape for working women was often the family dwelling and the adjoining street.

Reciprocity, neighbourliness, mutual aid of a monetary or non-monetary kind were the values and practices of these communities. However desirable and comforting these values on an ethical and emotional scale, they were also materially necessary to survival. Henry Mayhew observed how Irish working men in closely packed London courts in the late 1840's would club together to raise interest-free loans for some needy Irish neighbour, so that he could start a business in a small way or tide his family over a time of hardship. Fifty years later in the same areas, poor women, as the work of Ellen Ross shows, exchanged childcare and sick nursing, borrowed each others pots and pans or dresses and hats, loaned each other small amounts of money several times a day, in a continuous, ingenious effort to keep the family alive. The days of supportive communities of poverty and place are now remembered with great nostalgia by older people – those were the days when you never needed to lock your door, when neighbours disciplined any unruly child on the street and helped anyone in need. Poverty, Hardship but Happiness, a QueenSpark book from my neighbourhood was published in 2000.
Labour Movement Community

This informal community, which could be also called defensive community against the insecurities and oppressions of work and life, was only one variety of the community that labouring people created. The principle of mutuality — each for all and all for each — was generalised more formally into labour associations of various kinds in Great Britain — trade unions, friendly societies, co-operatives, and socialisms. Raymond Williams, the great socialist thinker about culture and community, was deeply impressed by the social creativity of working people and their ability to go some way towards turning ‘defensive’ practices and ‘mentality of the long siege’ into ‘positives in a fully democratic society’.4

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, a striking feature of British Labour movements was how they tended to provide for any aspect of social life that might come within their influence. They provided a version of supportive community to their members, which went well beyond their stated aims and objects. Trade unions aimed primarily to protect and improve wages and working conditions (on the bundle of sticks principle of ‘united we stand, divided we fall’). But often they also provided social benefits and especially funerals for their members. Even in the 1830’s this was a trump recruiting card: the large funeral procession for a London bricklayer, organised by the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union, ‘had an imposing effect. It had already reconciled many of the Operatives to the Union’. Further north, a Barnsley Linen weaver’s funeral provoked the remark ‘if this be union. I will be made a member next Saturday night’.5

Friendly Societies were supposed to offer the security of insurance benefits at times of sickness, unemployment and death. But the sociability aspects of the monthly club night and the Annual Feast were as popular with the members as they were frowned upon by the authorities, including the Registrar of Friendly Societies. Co-operatives by the third quarter of the nineteenth century boasted that they looked after their members from the cradle to the grave, and proposed in their co-operative theory and practice a practical alternative to capitalist production and retailing, indeed a new co-operative commonwealth. William Openshaw, as President of the National Co-operative Festival in 1907, declared

Almost every variety of the necessaries of life was now co-operatively produced but co-operators had a long way to go before they reached the end they had in view, viz. to become a practically self-supporting and self-employing community, co-extensive with the limits of the civilised world.6

Perhaps, though, it was British socialism in its various phases before the First World War which was most intimately linked to the concept of community. It had a monopoly of the word in its supportive sense during the first half of the nineteenth century. This socialism at first aimed, through a series of practical steps which included co-operative trading and employment, to move eventually onto the land in small communities of mutual co-operation. In community, all social relations, including those of family life would be restructured on the basis of equality and mutuality. Social knowledge would also be revolutionised — indeed social science, the science of universal happiness, would replace political economy, the individualistic and crude science of wealth.

The early socialists created an attractive version of community which was only realised by poor people in partial local ways. Thus the local Hall of Science, a multi-purpose socialist cultural centre, was the biggest taste most members ever had of community. Here members or attenders could spend their leisure time in educational, religious and recreation activity — socialist style. For example, in the midst of an Evangelical religious stranglehold on pleasure in many localities, the socialists (like other working-class movements), provided a regular round of enjoyable tea parties, soirées and balls.7 The socialists would turn the most solemn moments of the Christian year, like Good Friday, into occasions of maximum hilarity, even bringing in laughing gas to make the festivities more merry.

Contesting Labour’s Community

Working-class community effort did not go unnoticed. How could it be ignored, when the Manchester Hall of Science was the largest public building in the world headquarters of industrial capitalism in 1839? At first the socialist brand of community was attacked. Religious detractors especially lambasted socialist community, with its recipe for reforming gender relations and allowing for easier divorce, not only as the work of the devil but as ‘one vast brothel’. However, by the mid-1840s another strategy from above began to develop, that of offering counter-attractives, not only in terms of activity but in terms of language and concepts.

Community was much-used in the mid-nineteenth century by middle-class liberal and indeed Tory local governors and philanthropists. By Community, they meant service in a public entity whether the local government borough or a formal voluntary association. Service would introduce a dimension of caring and an emphasis on universal participation which would soften the class antagonisms of the preceding period but would do this without disturbing power relations or creating universal democracy. Raymond Williams distinguished between bourgeois ideas of community as service compared with working-class ideas of community as solidarity or ‘active mutual responsibility’. He spoke of the education of ‘upper servants’ to look after ‘lower servants’ a practice which he thought ultimately maintained the status quo and therefore was a denial of equity to the men and women among whom I had grown up, the lower servants, whose lives were governed by the existing distributions of property, remuneration, education, and respect. The real personal selfishness, which ratified the description as service, seemed to me to exist within a larger selfishness.8

In the late Victorian period, from 1880 to 1914, in a period of intense international rivalry, the earliest meanings of Community as the nation became salient again. This was the period which corresponded with the federation of Australia as a nation and concerns about the quality of the British race and the future not only of the nation but the empire were high on the agenda. Anxiety reached panic point during the Boer War (1899-1902) when not only did a small number of settlers nearly defeat the British army but a large percentage of army recruits were found to be physically unfit for service. Welfare State measures were one response and along with them came a whole new cadres of lower-status middle-class professionals, women as well as men, who often had a deep commitment to service but also a vested interest in more national, state-oriented understandings of community. They have been called, collectively, the professional and managerial class (PMC) or those who have accumulated large amounts of cultural capital.9 In the formulation of the Ehrenreichs, this grouping functioned to displace the knowledges, cultures and communities of the older working-class type with expertise of their own. An example of this is the profession of social work, one of the caring women’s professions par excellence. Thus Helen Bosanquet, an activist in the Charity Organisation Society and a pioneer of social work training, actually articulated the shortcomings of women’s informal caring communities:

The unceasing sacrifice of patiently unintelligent women and selfishly unintelligent men is of little use to the community. It
does not rise to the level of self-sacrifice, for there is seldom anything voluntary about it; it is submission to the brute forces round them. Bobanquet tried to substitute for this community, the professionalised service of social workers. The crusade against germs gave a booster to women in the health professions, especially nursing and health visiting. But in the absence of drugs which combated the newly-discovered microbes, the zeal of the health professionals was directed towards cleaning up the houses of the poor and overriding their sometimes perfectly appropriate childrearing and domestic economy practices. An example was the emphasis that social workers placed on separate sleeping arrangements for baby, which compares curiously with the most progressive medical advice today urging parents to keep new infants in bed with them.

This identification of one type of community with often-resented expertise has persisted. In the 1970's a black immigrant from Barbados in the West Indies compared his experience of village life back home, where the word community was never used, with the constant use of the word by experts in Britain who said “I am it.” And these people are lifted and carried shoulder high, and people go and report to them, and these people are responsible to a man, not to a community. That’s not a community, it’s a locality. I feel that our little village had a lot on other places, because we could trust each other, because we felt that sooner or later, “I’m going to need you, and if you can’t trust me, I can’t trust you. And if you can’t trust me, you’re going to say ‘now bugger off’ when I really need you.” The thing about “community” is that it’s a posh name like sociology. It looks like the Blairite penchant for community will be the newest chapter in an older story.

Exclusions from Working-Class Community: Gender

Compared with elitest views of community, both the informal and formal versions of working-class community seem more inclusive and democratic. Indeed sometimes as in the case of the early socialists, they espoused the aim of inclusiveness, and even named their last organisation, The Association of all Classes of all Nations – you can’t get more inclusive than that. But there is always a tension at the heart of community which theorists in Cultural Studies and anthropology are currently exploring. The anthropologist Anthony Cohen has put the matter clearly when he identified community with identity – community is what a group of people subjectively feel they belong to. They are the insiders and assume that there are outsiders and borderlines which distinguish one from the other.

“Community” thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a relational idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities. The rhetoric of labour movements often identified the outsiders as other and antagonistic classes. This was, certainly the case with the trade unions and their positioning of employers, certainly the case with British socialism which considered capitalists and priests as oppressive and selfish, not because of their individual personalities but because of their social position and the ideologies they espoused. But it is necessary too to disclose the cracks in labour’s universalist project, or put another way, to discover those actually excluded from the vision of “the universal family which the term “Community” signifies.” Working-class communities of different kinds have excluded some working-class people in more or less conscious ways. While there have been many grounds for exclusion, I will discuss two of the most common: gender and ethnicity.

Women were pillars of informal working-class communities of poverty and place, often managing in ways quite invisible to and unrecognised by their menfolk. Hannah Mitchell, self-educated socialist and feminist regretted that she had not insisted on her husband ‘sharing the domestic responsibility, because I found that he never really valued my contribution to the housekeeping which was often as much as his own’. But when it came to labour movement communities, women were not always there or even welcome, especially the more formalised and bureaucratic the movements became. Trade unions tended to respond to capitalist employers using women and children to undercut men by positioning women in the private sphere of the home and by demanding a “family wage” which would look after a fictive dependent wife and children, rather than by inviting women into union and campaigning for equal pay. Friendly Societies were sometimes not very friendly to women unless they were women’s Friendly Societies. Most members were male and payments to women (in the form of widow’s benefits) came through the men’s membership and contributions. The regular club nights which pleasurably created feelings of solidarity were mainly all-male occasions. This trend continued right into the welfare state where the male-provider version dominated in Britain, where contributions entitled wage-earners to benefits for themselves and dependants, and where most contributors were men.

The British Co-operative Movement, whose retail side was most buoyant, depended on women shoppers but only created a women’s section in 1883. This Women’s Co-op Guild revealed the extent of male ignorance of women’s needs as family managers. Thus while the men members preferred high quality, high prices and high dividends, the women, especially poor wives bought in small quantities before each meal, at low prices regardless of the quality of the food, and preferred shopping at ‘trust’ shops were credit was available. The Guild’s General Secretary, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, continually argued that the movement could only become an inclusive community and win ‘our poorer neighbours’ by creating accessible People’s Stores with low prices and dividends, cooked take-away food (and even co-op cafes and clubs as eat-in venues), penny bunks and loan schemes, women store managers and campaigns to recruit women members: ‘it is they we have to persuade to buy’. Some People’s Stores were founded, notably in Sunderland on Coronation Street with Davies herself as manager, but they remained controversial with men in the movement.

Socialism is the most tantalising case to consider, because British socialism has been more sensitive to gender oppression than other varieties like Marxism. What Engels dismissed as utopian socialism, seemed from a woman’s point of view more realistically aware of gender issues, and oppressive patriarchal power. Compared with other labour movements at most points in the 19th and 20th centuries, socialism tended to make more opportunities available to women. Women were presumed to have a common nature and the same rationality as men; they took up roles, e.g., as lecturers and educators in the movement. Nonetheless, at the same time, there existed an almost automatic tendency for movements to position women as wives and mothers in the family even in the early socialist movement where the critique of patriarchy was most developed. This common sense excluded certain categories of women, most notably single women, from a dignified place in the socialist community. We can wax lyrical about brotherhood and mateship until the cows come home, but if this working-class or labour movement community does not adequately include or value half the human race, then its claims to universality are to say the least a bit diminished if not demolished.

Ethnic Exclusion

Just as recent feminist work has turned the spotlight onto the dark side of gender exclusion, so too labour historians in Britain and Australia have become sensitive to the way in
which ethnicity has cut across class solidarity and provided the basis for supportive communities of working men and women, which exclude other working men and women, indeed define them as inferior. In Britain most research has been done on the Irish in this regard, and latterly on immigrants from the black Commonwealth nations where what is now called race coincides with “foreignness” and creates a condition of double jeopardy or double prejudice. In fact, for most of the nineteenth and twentieth century ethnicity was called race. The Irish, for example, were likened to less developed human types with ape-like features or as a ravishing beautiful damsel in distress and in need of rescue and protection from a masculinised Britannia. Of some Irish working men to support the wrong side—like Daniel O’Connell above’. British labour hostility was often directed to the propensity of some Irish working men to support the wrong side—like Daniel O’Connell above’. British labour hostility was often directed to the propensity to prioritizing ethnic loyalty above class. But more recently, in relation to black migrants, the overt racism within the labour movement is manifesting itself in more worrying ways, mobilising old stereotypical images of savage street people with an in-built tendency to criminality and violence. In the 1960’s, when I first moved to Britain, Labour collided with racist changes in the immigration laws. I remember Ray Gunter, trade union leader and then Minister of Labour in the Wilson government, raise Powellite fears at Labour Party Conferences, of being swamped by immigrants at the workplace, in the welfare services and on the streets. The recent scandal about the way the police dealt with the racist murder of a black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, who was presumed to be the villain rather than the victim, only gathered momentum because of the unremitting efforts of his parents who were self-improving, respectable folks not the stereotyped dysfunctional black family. Black people feel deeply that they are excluded from the ideology and the reality of white labour communities, as evidenced by the title of Paul Gilroy’s key work, There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack.11

Community in the New Millennium

The global fact that people move around by choice or by force means that any idea of community as being stable has to be jettisoned. Even the supposedly exemplary settled communities, like small mining villages in Britain, have begun to disintegrate with the closing of the pits, and another wave of internal migration is underway. Then there is the colossal fact of the huge international migrations that have accompanied the dissolution of the empire, and the continual terrible sequence of wars which create never ending streams of refugees seeking a better life or indeed life itself.

Right at the moment there are millions of displaced peoples (and dislocated cultures) who inhabit multiple identities. They belong to their imagined Homeland, to which they will probably never return, as well as belonging to their new place of settlement (or national community) and often to an ethnic community or multiple communities within it. The real question for labour and community and indeed for human beings more generally is how will we ever embrace it. Like him, we might begin to sing ‘a love-song to our mongrel selves’.

Endnotes

7 Critéri, 29 March, 5 April 1834.
8 Labour Co-Partnership, Sept. 1907, p. 137. Thanks to Pete Guerne for this reference.
10 Williams, Culture and Society, p. 315.
14 ‘Once there was a way’, lifetime’s, no. 4, Manchester, Institute of Advanced Studies, n.d., pp. 4, 15-16.
18 For the exceptional Owenite moment in 1834 when mixed recruitment to unions and equal pay were demanded see, B. Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century, Virago, London, 1983, pp. 95, 112-16.
19 M. Llewelyn Davies, Co-operation in Poor Neighbourhoods, Women’s Co-operative Guild Sectional Conferences, 1899, Kirkby Lonsdale, pp. 6-7.