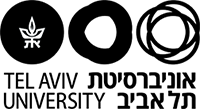
Tel Aviv University

Gershon H. Gordon Faculty of Social Sciences

School for Social Sciences, Government, and International Relations

**Research Proposal – Performing Community Roles in the Modern Era**

**What roles did the community perform for the individual, does modern society perform these roles, and if so – to what extent?**

Yinon Kadishzon Yannai

TZ no. 316083567

[yinnonk@mail.tau.ac.il](mailto:yinnonk@mail.tau.ac.il)

First semester, 2023-2024

March 15, 2024

**Introduction**

Social institutions mediated between the individual and the authorities, throughout most of human history, on various issues: political, economic, cultural, and ethical. One of these institutions, which played a central role during the pre-modern era, was the community. The modern era, with its individualistic ideologies, viewed this traditional way of doing things, with its institutions and traditions, as both primitive and restricting people from developing as individuals. The current situation within modern society, however, is one of uncertainty and alienation, where the individualistic outlooks clearly do not fulfill the individual’s needs (Nisbet, 1953).

This situation, and the desire to find a sense of belonging, led to a renewed interest in the term “community” and its suitability to the modern era both in the general society and in the research literature. This connects to the perception that the weakening of the community came alongside the construction of modern states, which are based on individualistic notions. Within this framework, the State centralized political activities that used to exist within the communities’ institutions. Treating the community like an institution that was destroyed by modernity, to which some wish to return today, lent a utopian touch to the community's image as one that could cure the illnesses of modernity. This laid the foundation for the dangers of 20th-century fundamental ideologies such as Nazism and Fascism. Nevertheless, and despite differences in its definitions and the ways in which it was viewed throughout history - from ancient Greece to the modern era – the sense of belonging that the community represented was a significant component of its image throughout history and played a central role in keeping society a unified group (Delanty, 2003).

In this study, I wish to lay the ground for a response to the question: Which functional elements, that had supplied the sense of belonging and the individual’s needs within the traditional community, are not available in modern times? I will carry out this study, based on a broad survey of research literature, in two main parts – theoretical and empirical. The theoretical part will survey the differences between the community’s traditional philosophy and modern political philosophies. My goal is to characterize the functional elements that society supplies. The empirical part will examine test cases that represent modern philosophies to see whether and how they implement elements traditionally supplied by the community– and to what degree of success.

**Literature Review**

The field of studying communities, Communitarism, is a small but well-based field within political science. It is also an important field within sociology studies. However, these two fields use the term ‘community’ in different ways.

From the standpoint of sociology, a ‘community’ is the name given to a geographical framework of people who live near each other and maintain social connections. Political science adds other dimensions that attribute normative roles to the individuals within the community. This view focuses on the community as part of the social foundations of politics (Delanty, 2003). In any case, there is no consensus regarding a definition for the term even among political scientists. Robert Bellah (Bellah et al., 1996) describes the community as a type of belonging that is based on desires and beliefs and not on territorial location or any particular institutional structure. By contrast, Selznick (Selznick, 1992) describes the community as a social experience – one that not only involves a gathering of individuals, but also includes active participation, loyalty, solidarity, and mutual obligations.

The sociologist Robert Nisbet (Nisbet, 1953) describes the community and its process of degeneration by integrating the sociological standpoint with the normative perspective of political science. He describes the community as a factor that holds a functional role within the individual’s life, one that mediates between the individual and the power structures in society. He claims that when one observes the power structure within the State, the central question is not what characterizes the system, but rather, in what way is that power expressed within the system and how does it shape the system. In the past, the community was designed to enable it to impart its culture and to define relationships between individuals and society, to lend meaning to the lives of the individuals, and to create the interrelations necessary for existing within it. This, while creating mutual loyalty between the individuals within the community and between these persons and the community itself. Nisbet also describes the process that society underwent at the beginning of the modern era, with the rise of individualism, out of the belief that individuals will independently supply their own needs. He claims that the current situation, as sociology describes it, of loneliness and ethical and spiritual insecurity, is the result of individualistic ideologies, on the one hand, and of the ebbing of the community in the modern era, on the other. Therefore, he claims, although a wide range of support sources for the individual exist, there is no good substitute for the role of the traditional community within Western society.

Political science theory also speaks of the importance of the community and relates to opposition to the concept of individualism. In his book “The Malaise of Modernity,” Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2016) describes man’s dialogic nature, explaining how people develop by using the rich language they learn from both people and society, together with its values and weltanschauung. This concept emphasizes the problem inherent in leaving a person to develop on his own, by himself – he cannot really do so, since he is dependent upon society for his development. Taylor therefore emphasizes the importance of a strong society, one which can help the individual develop and attain self-actualization.

The Communitarian concept claims that the individual can be understood only while taking her social, cultural, and historical context into account. The community in which the individual develops and which shapes his identity is important, as identity is based on the community’s history and culture. In addition, the community is not only a collection of individuals but is also independently valuable, dictating the individual’s construct of values as well as his perception of justice (Avineri & de-Shalit, 1992). According to Amitai Etzioni (Etzioni, 2019), those values are expressed in the perception of a “communal good.” This perception coheres with the importance given to the individual’s autonomy, such that it balances between the two. This balance changes over time and is unique to each community, according to its culture and history. These values also create a social order, as opposed to the rigid order of State laws; this is a “soft” order that dictates borders and social norms for the individual. This stance attributes agency to the individual, but it is not absolute and is dependent on his social connections and the social order within which he lives.

Alexis de Tocqueville lists the problems that arise from life without community. In his book “Democracy in America,” de Tocqueville (de Tocqueville, 2008) compares the unions and activism in America to the political indifference of European citizens. According to him, the strong sense of community in America leads individuals to feel responsible for events around them that directly influence them. By contrast, individuals in Europe do not have a strong sense of community and are therefore indifferent to the conduct of the central government. This is because they do not feel connected to the place, or because they have no role or need to be responsible – unless events impact them directly. He predicted that the rise of individualistic ideologies, and the demand for quality among citizens, would lead to the development of a centralized government that would make it difficult to maintain community unions in America. This will create a process that will make its citizens’ conduct closer to the indifference he witnessed in Europe.

The trend of political indifference seen in Western democracies today is related to de Tocqueville’s predictions. The structure of modern life leads people to focus on the present, and on immediate drives, while believing that they are too insignificant to have the power to influence events in society. Furthermore, focusing on the present stems from a self-perception that views every moment as unique and not as part of a chronological continuum, which separates the individual from the wider political process and bolsters the indifference that de Tocqueville predicted (Chowers, 2002). In addition, the structure of modern life also affords incentives for individual conduct vis-à-vis State institutions instead of relying on community support, such as financial actions (Vallejo & Canizales, 2023).

The community supplies its members with a basis for forging their identity and the norms by which they live. The dissolution of the community in the modern era, while substituting it for an individualistic life order, damaged the perception of the communal good in favor of focusing on the self. This focus, together with the lack of faith in the individual’s ability to have any impact, led to indifference to politics and to the society in which people live. My goal in this study is to examine how the function of community is performed, if at all, by modern social and political structures.

**My Contribution to the Research**

The research literature establishes both the role of the community for the individual and the significance of its demise. However, individualistic political philosophy does not provide an adequate answer to the question of whether alternatives were created for the role of the community. In addition, regarding its practical implementation – there is no adequate explanation for why these alternatives fail, if they exist. My goal, in this study, is to answer these two questions, and hopefully suggest a plan for reintegrating the community into modern society, both theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, I intend to relate not only to the significance of local authority but also to its connection with the normative role of the community as a social institution. This will allow an examination of the different types of government that exist today, based on representative test cases and the political philosophies that they express. This is designed to determine the way thinkers approach the function of the community in the past (even if not for the community itself) and to see whether other mechanisms fulfill those functions today. I will also be able to recommend a way of integrating the role of the community into political theories, thereby improving the theories and rendering them more comprehensive.

From a practical-empirical standpoint, and based on the theoretical analysis, I intend to examine representative test cases that demonstrate the success of the functional alternative to the community – if such a thing exists. Given the description of social deterioration, as brought in the literature review, I assume that these alternatives, if they exist, do not fulfill their roles well. My contribution lies in examining the community as an institution by comparing it to both the traditional case and to the various modern test cases.

**Methodology**

I intend to carry out the study by dividing it into two parts – theoretical and empirical.

In the theoretical part, I will examine the ideologies and political philosophies that shaped modern society. I will do this in two stages. First, I will precisely define the community’s normative role, based on the pre-modern historical case and political philosophy that characterized and explained the political structure of the time. Second, I will functionally examine modern political philosophy in comparison with other functions that society fills, to clarify if and how these philosophies performed the role of the community in an alternative manner.

In the empirical part, based on the theoretical characterization, I will choose test cases that apply modern philosophies while focusing on alternatives for the functional roles performed by the community. This process can be carried out in several ways. First, each test case will be examined historically, noting the political and social-cultural changes that the population underwent, from conducting itself as a traditional community to current modern conduct. This will allow me to map out the factors that influenced the process and change in applying the social functions of the traditional community, as continuously as possible.

Second, I will examine past surveys that were conducted on the populations of the test cases, for questions relevant to examining the functions mentioned above. Given similar questions in different surveys, I will be able to carry out a chronological comparison of the realization of these functions and how the situation impacts the societies I examine.

Third, I will carry out an active empirical study by using surveys of the test-case populations, to test the research variables more precisely. I will carry out this comparison by examining test cases of varied populations, which include relatively similar cultural elements, but with more community-like characteristics (for example, Israel with the Haredi and Arab sectors as more community-like groups). This will allow me to isolate the parameters that interest me by relating to these community-like groups as control groups for the more general population.

**The Character and Source of the Idea**

My desire to research the topic of community and its impact stems from looking at my own identity and the situation within Israeli society today. Since adolescence, I have been in the process of trying to understand my identity. As part of this process, I am trying to understand it within the Israeli context, while examining the way in which other people in society construct their own identities.

My observations show that many people do not have a clear identity, neither externally nor, very often, even toward themselves. As described in the literature, this situation leads to alienation, a lack of belonging, and uncertainty, which contribute to the deepening of tensions in society.

The reason I chose to focus on the community is my experience growing up. I was raised in a secular home, which respected tradition and instilled in me a sense of Judaism but also encouraged critical thinking. Another major element that characterized my childhood was the fact that I spent most of it being home-schooled. This method of education, for my siblings and myself, created a heightened sense of family cohesion which corresponds with feelings of community, as I learned to name it later in life. Having my parents take an active part in this education – both pedagogical and ethical - significantly contributed to the forming and consolidating of my own identity. This method of education, and its divergence from the rest of society, afforded me a kind of outsider’s viewpoint when trying to explain the differences between society and myself. This study is part of the process whose goal is to understand the conduct of a society to which I do not really feel like I belong, and to explain this gap.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

I wish to examine several questions and hypotheses within this study.

My primary goal is to trace the functional role that the community traditionally performed and to examine how it is fulfilled, if at all, in modern society. This raises several critical research questions. The first is, What social institutions are responsible for performing the functional role that was filled, in the past, by the traditional community? A second, follow-up question is, To what extent do these social institutions succeed in performing these functions?

Another research question relates to the degree to which the centrality of the government structure (a total government as opposed to stronger local institutions) impacts the success of performing community functions. I hypothesize that local administrations with greater power, which are closer to its citizens (local administrations are closer than governmental ones, municipalities are closer than local administrations, etc.), will better perform the functions of the community. The reason for this, which is another hypothesis, is that the more local the administration, the more politically active the individual will be, as he hopes to influence it.

In light of how the literature presents the social role of the community, another research question is whether and how modern culture, as promoted by the social-political establishment, promote and emphasize the importance of the social functions that the community fulfilled. My hypothesis in this case is that due to the centrality of individualistic ideologies in the modern era, the culture today neither promotes nor ascribes importance to community functions.

**My Expectations from the Research**

My goal in this study is to trace the functional role that was traditionally performed by the community and to see how it is fulfilled, if at all, in modern society. This leads to several expectations that relate to the results of the study and its consequences.

First, I aim to understand the individual’s functional needs that were filled by the community. Given the indications of social decline and the current situation of uncertainty, loneliness, and alienation, I expect that this study will allow me to identify the factors whose absence led to the human condition described above. By analyzing and comparing the situation in the traditional community with that of modern society, including their differences, I will be able to map out the functional deficiencies in each society. I hope that this study will form a basis for improving society and offering a practical response to problems and the sense of loneliness and alienation that afflict individuals.

Second, more theoretically, I envision this study becoming a basis for developing a new political philosophy. This theory would fill the political needs of modern society but also the functional needs of the individual that were traditionally performed by the community. This will lead to a more comprehensive political philosophy that will hopefully help fulfill the needs of the individual and of society. In addition, I hope that this study will serve as an example of a process of developing a type of philosophy that integrates empirical comparative research, bolstering it by anchoring it to reality and human needs.

**Bibliography**

Avineri, S., & de-Shalit, A. (1992). Introduction. In S. Avineri, & A. de-Shalit, *Communitarianism and individualism* (pp. 1-11). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. (1996). *Habits of the Heart* (2nd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chowers, E. (2002). The Physiology of the Citizen: The Present-centered Body and its Political Exile. *Political Theory, 30*(5), 623-759.

Delanty, G. (2003). *Community.* Taylor & Francis Group.

Etzioni, A. (2019). Communitarianism: A Historical Overview. In W. Reese-Schäfer, *Handbuch Kommunitarismus* (pp. 705–730). Wiesbaden: Springer.

Nisbet, R. A. (1953). *The Quest for Community.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Selznick, P. (1992). *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Taylor, Ch. (2016). *Mu’akat hamoderniyut* (Heb.). Jerusalem: Hamerkaz Haakademi Shalem.

De Tocqueville, A. H. (2008). *Hademokratiya beAmerika* (Heb.). Jerusalem: Shalem.

Vallejo, J. A., & Canizales, S. L. (2023). Ethnoracial Capitalism and the Limits of Ethnic Solidarity. *Social Problems, 70*(4), 961–980.