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# The idea of a sexual community

Jeffrey Weeks

*Jeffrey Weeks explores the many - and complex - meanings of community.*

Community, argued James Baldwin, 'simply means our endless connection with, and responsibility for, each other'.<sup>1</sup> And, as Raymond Williams once remarked, the term community is one of the few words which never has negative connotations, and is used pretty promiscuously in a host of political constructions across the political spectrum. It attempts both to express social realities and to offer an aspiration towards something better, more inclusive and tangible. In the form of contemporary communitarianism, the pursuit of community suggests a revulsion against the coldness and impersonality, the instrumentality and narrow self interest, of abstract individualism with its associated marketisation and commodification of human bonds. The idea of community, in contrast to social atomisation, suggests that men and women should be members and not strangers, should have ties and belongings that transcend the monad.

As such it has become a key idea in the debate on the post-modern world. Zygmunt Bauman has suggested that it has come to replace reason and universal truth in post-modern philosophy. There are no values or ethics that are not community based, it has been argued; for communities embody certain traditions

1. James Baldwin, *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 1986.

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- many of them, it has to be said, recently invented, but no less potent for that.

Communities are not fixed once and for all. They change as the arguments over time continue, and as other communities exercise their gravitational pull. But at the same time, the social relations of a community are repositories of meaning for its members, not sets of mechanical linkages between isolated individuals. A community offers a 'vocabulary of values' through which individuals construct their understanding of the social world, and of their sense of identity and belonging. Communities appear to offer embeddedness in a world which seems constantly on the verge of fragmentation.

A major problem, of course, is that a particular definition of community may undermine a wider sense of community embodied in the best of humanist traditions. The strongest sense of community is in fact likely to come from those groups who find the premises of their collective existence threatened, and who construct out of this a community of identity which provides a strong sense of resistance and empowerment. Seeming unable to control the social relations in which they find themselves, people shrink the world to the size of their communities, and act politically on that basis. The result, too often, is an obsessive particularism as a way of embracing or coping with contingency. And as critics of community have pointed out, social pluralism and the proliferation of associations do not necessarily mean variety for men and women personally: embeddedness means people can get stuck.

The challenge for modern advocates of community, therefore, is to imagine community without either neo-tribalism or self immolation. The key issue, I would argue, is not whether community, but what sort of community, and what sort of identity, are appropriate at any particular time. Michel Foucault distinguishes between three concepts of community: a *given community*, a *tacit community* and a *critical community*:

a given community arises from an identification: 'I am an X'. Tacit community is the materially-rooted system of thought that makes X a possible object of identification; and critical community sees this system of thought as singular or contingent, finds something 'intolerable' about it, and starts to refuse to participate in it.<sup>2</sup>

2. Cited in J. Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan and the Question of Ethics*, Routledge, London and New York 1991.

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In the contemporary world, 'given' - or traditional - communities are losing their moral density as old values crumble and uncertainty rules. The latent sense of community that can be detected under the procedural republic of liberalism may provide the necessary support for a wider sense of solidarity, but in it lurks the danger that the communal values that are discernible will be conservative and exclusive - as indeed I believe Amitai Etzioni's communitarian advocacy of a strengthened spirit of neighbourhood and family must be. A critical community, on the other hand, results from a problematisation of a given or latent identity. It is open to new experiences and ways of being, which make new subjectivities possible. At its best, I shall argue, the idea of a sexual community as it is evoked in contemporary radical sexual political discourse embraces this notion of a critical community.

**'Community is one of the few words which never has negative connotations'**

**I**n this article I want to look at four key elements contained in the idea of a sexual community: community as a focus of identity; community as ethos or repository of values; community as social capital; and community as politics. I shall draw most of my examples from the best documented sexual community, the lesbian and gay community, with other examples as necessary. There are, of course, many problems with this choice. First of all, it presupposes a unity which is not necessarily there. The differences between gay men and lesbians are well rehearsed; there are many other differences: between rich and poor, white and black, North American and European, urban and rural, right and left, and so on. There is no reason to think that people who share one characteristic necessarily share others - but then, that is a feature of all communities. Secondly, it may understandably be argued that there are certain key elements of the lesbian and gay community that make it unique: stigma, prejudice, legal inequality, a history of oppression, and the like. But that, I would suggest, is what makes it a valuable path into understanding the nature of contemporary communities. The idea of a heterosexual community, much used recently in the literature of HIV and AIDS, is pretty much an oxymoron. Precisely because heterosexuality is hegemonic in our general culture, a general heterosexual community does not exist, though of course there are specific heterosexual communities (and as I have suggested, much of contemporary communitarianism assumes as a given that heterosexuality is the very definition of community).

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In other words, it is because homosexuality is not the norm, is stigmatised, that a sense of community transcending specific differences, has emerged. It exists because participants in it feel it does and should exist. It is not geographically fixed. It is criss-crossed by many divisions. But a sort of diasporic consciousness does exist because people believe it exists. And this belief has material and cultural effects.

**T**o put it another way: a web of narrative, a proliferation of stories, has developed in a particular set of historical circumstances, which gives meaning to the idea of a sexual community for many people. The effectiveness of sexual narratives or stories, as Ken Plummer has argued in his important book, *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), depends on an ability to tell them, and an audience to listen to them. In recent years we have been witness to the emergence of large groups willing to tell their stories ('coming out'), and the construction of a mass audience for many hitherto implausible narratives, emanating from the private worlds of everyday life. And it is from the conflicts of everyday life that many of the greater conflicts of society are generated; and certainly the new narratives of sexual minorities have both subverted and challenged many of the narrative certainties of contemporary life. But there are other forces that are also shaking the foundations of legitimising value systems: the emergence of dissident sexual communities is only one index of the jumble of stories now bombarding us. In understanding the idea of community embodied in the new sexual cultures we can also begin to understand the complexities of communities in the post-modern world.

As a way into this question, let me now turn to the four elements of the idea of sexual community that I mentioned earlier.

### **Community as a focus of identity**

It takes two people to make a lesbian, the American feminist Teresa de Lauretis has wittily remarked, and this underlines a profound truth. Sexual identities in the modern world, like other identities, can only ever be relational, shaped in a world of difference. But identities do not exist on an even plane. They are severely marked by a hierarchical ordering, in which lesbian and gay identities are subordinate.

The historical evidence is now massive that, despite the polymorphous nature of sexuality throughout history and across all cultures, the binary division in our

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culture, between the norm and the perverse, or in practice between hegemonic heterosexuality and dissident homosexuality, has a history, and a recent one at that. Despite the existence of distinct homosexual networks, meeting places, even nascent 'communities', for want of a better word, which are recorded in various European cities since late medieval times, it is only over the past century or so, coincident with the hardening of the binary divide, that distinctive homosexual 'forms of existence', with sexualised identities, communities and sexual political movements, have emerged. A sense of identity, shaped in a sense of community, and articulated through political movements, has been, I would argue, a dominant motif only since the late 1960s.

**T**he social movements concerned with sexuality that have emerged since the 1960s, the feminist and lesbian and gay movements especially, implicitly assume that it is through social involvement and collective action that individuality can be realised and identity affirmed. The new movements can be interpreted as a revolt against the forms of subjectification that the contemporary world has given rise to, a challenge to the technologies of power which define individuals in particular ways and pin them to particular subordinated identities and locations in society. They reveal the complexity of modern social relations, and the intractability of the contradictions and tensions these produce. They simultaneously offer alternative possibilities.

At the heart of the new movements is a rejection of imposed definitions, and a struggle for social space in which new identities can be forged. There is of course a historic irony in this process. The identities are being shaped on the very terrain that gave rise to domination in the first place. Racial and ethnic minorities historically challenged racist structures by affirming their racialised identities ('black is beautiful'). Feminism has historically affirmed the rights of women by asserting the positive qualities of femininity. Lesbians and gays reject the pathologising of homosexuality by 'reversing the discourse', and affirming pride in being homosexual. In the process, there is a search for a hidden history, a narrative structure which seems to express the truth of repressed or oppressed experience. But a better way of seeing what is happening is to understand it as a social positioning, where difference is asserted as a positive quality rather than an inevitable or naturalised divide.

Movements such as these are not simply expressing a pre-existing essence of social being. Identities and belongings are being constructed in the very process of

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organisation itself. They are effective in so far as they can speak a language which brings people into the activities, alignments and subjectivities being shaped; and the most effective language available is the language of community.

Like a movement, which both grows out of and creates a sense of wider identification, a community must be constantly re-imagined, sustained over time by common practices and symbolic re-enactments which reaffirm both identity and difference. A national community may be sustained by allegiance to the flag, national days, the ritual of elections or monarchy, by victories in war, war memorials and military pride, or by the less harmful ephemeral hysteria of athletic competitions or the soccer World Cup. A black community may re-enact its difference through defence of its territory against racist attacks or the symbolic presence of the police. It may also re-enact and celebrate it in carnival, the inversion of the daily humdrum existence where reality is turned upside down, the streets become the property of the oppressed, and the repressed experiences of the community can return, triumphantly, for the day. In the same way, sexual identity and community are expressed through annual events such as Lesbian and Gay Pride; or the losses of the AIDS community can be mourned and the lives of the dead celebrated through candlelit vigils and the sewing of memorial quilts. Without such re-imaginings a community will die, as difference is obliterated or becomes meaningless before the onrush of history.

**C**ommunity stands here for some notion of solidarity, a solidarity which empowers and enables, and makes individual and social action possible. Sexual dissidence is ultimately dependent upon the growth of that sense of common purpose and solidarity represented by the term community. The appeal to the authenticity of one's sexual experience that has been the symbolic token of many of the pioneers of radical sexual change becomes culturally meaningful only in so far as it speaks to, and evokes an echo in, the experience of others in a latent community that is on its way to becoming a critical community. With the development of a sexual movement with a sense of its own history and social role, the idea of community becomes a critical norm through which alternatives are opened up.

#### **Community as ethos and repository of values**

Mark Blasius, in his recent book, *Gay and Lesbian Politics*, has argued that the lesbian and gay struggle has produced a sense of community and identity which

provides the context for moral agency, and hence for the emergence of a lesbian and gay ethos enacted in everyday life. The lesbian and gay ethos, Blasius suggests, can be understood 'both as coming out and as integrating one's homoerotic relationships within all of one's social relationships'. In practice, though inevitably a prolonged and often anguished practice, that means a challenge to compulsory heterosexuality and the construction of an erotica 'that decenters genital sexuality and de-essentializes gender'. That in turn, Blasius argues, is the grounding for lesbian and gay politics in its various forms. I shall take this text as an example of the arguments being made for the ethical values of sexual community.

**B**lasius's most important contribution lies in his exploration of the underlying system of values that he sees as existing in the lesbian and gay world. Two significant trends are described: the shift from 'sexuality' to 'the erotic', which in Blasius's argument implies the displacement of traditional hierarchical patterns of the sexual in favour of plural forms; and the emergence of a 'new ethic' which embraces the erotic and is built around not so much an orientation, preference or lifestyle as a sense of self-identified and collectively invented community. They are in a real sense simply two aspects of the same cultural shift: a move towards the evoking, or inventing, of new identities, belongings and forms of intimacy.

Blasius suggests that the gay and lesbian community offers a sense of belonging, an ethos based on erotic friendship 'characterised by reciprocal *independence* .

Erotic friendship is an ethico-erotic relationship productive of equality; the participants (whatever they name themselves - lovers, exlovers, fuckbuddies, partners, etc) are inventing themselves and become the conditions for such self-invention of each other.<sup>3</sup>

He concludes that, in doing this, lesbian and gays are pioneering an art of living through one's erotic relations, and thereby introducing something new onto the historical landscape.

I agree with that formulation: the dense interconnections, networks, relationships, experiments in living, new forms of loving and caring (above all in response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic), which have been the outstanding

3. Mark Blasius, *Gay and Lesbian Politics: Sexuality and the Emergence of a New Ethics*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1995, p219, p221.



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achievements of lesbian and gay politics since the 1960s, provide the grounds on which new value systems are developing. But have we said everything when we have said that? The recognition that the basics of a new relational ethos do indeed exist does not in itself answer that fundamental question of 'how should we live'; on the contrary, it poses it in a new way, and this, I feel, is downplayed by Blasius.

**W**e all know how difficult it is to live up to the standards we have communally set for ourselves. Erotic desire can undermine the firmest resolutions. Fear and jealousy and betrayal are not abolished because we disapprove of them. A commitment to safer sex has not stopped unsafe practices. Friendship can turn to hate, and love, like desire, can die. There is a danger that in celebrating the new ethos of lesbian and gay life we may aspire to a utopianism that frail, mere humans can scarcely live up to. So as well as celebrating eros and the possibilities of community, we need to begin to spell out what an art of life, an ethos based on reciprocal independence, means in practice. Are certain forms of behaviour better than others? Are some things right, others wrong, some things true and others false? These are hard questions, because they suggest prescriptive rather than freely chosen answers. The challenge facing us is to avoid prescription and proscription at the same time as we invent forms of conduct which maximise human autonomy and freedom of choice whilst affirming our need for one another, the importance of the human bond. Again, the much used notion of community is an attempt to encompass that objective.

### **Community as social capital**

The sexual movements of recent years have both encouraged and built on a sense of community, a space where hitherto execrated sexual activity and identities have been affirmed and sustained. Such a validation of community has been at the centre of the response to HIV and AIDS by the group most affected in the West, gay men. It has made possible a social and cultural response whose aim is to promote survival, defeat stigma, encourage community and develop self-esteem, the *sine qua non*, in Simon Watney's formulation, of a regime of safer sex. At the same time, the absence of a sense of community around sexual issues amongst other groups affected by the epidemic has been a critical factor in limiting the development of a culture of safer sex and personal responsibility.

For historical reasons, the earliest collective response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic came from the gay community, first of all in the USA and subsequently

throughout the West, and even in the developing world. In the absence until the mid 1980s of coherent governmental or international responses, activists schooled in the lesbian and gay community established the first and enduring organisational responses to the epidemic - organisations such as Gay Men's Health Crisis in the USA and the Terrence Higgins Trust in the UK. These organisations pioneered practices of safer sex, rooted in community experience; developed models of care and mutual support, such as 'buddying'; acted as advocates for people with HIV and AIDS; lobbied, successfully, for a more strategic governmental response; and to some extent became key partners, even agents, of government in responding to the crisis.

**T**hese new voluntary organisations embodied a key philosophy developed initially in the sexual communities from which they sprang: that of collective activity and of collective self help (ironically, though from a different starting point, echoing the philosophical attitude of New Right critics of welfare). As one member of Body Positive, a support group for people living with HIV and AIDS, has commented, 'Self help is about taking control of your own life in your own hands and solving your own problems through helping others in the same situation'.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on self help in relation to the new epidemic was at first a matter of *faute de mieux* rather than principle, a community response to the absence of government response in a climate of prejudice and fear. This grass roots mobilisation proved, however, immensely influential in the ideologies of the many other community based HIV and AIDS organisations that subsequently sprang up (my own research has shown that by the early 1990s well over 500 HIV and AIDS voluntary agencies existed in the UK, embracing all the major categories at risk). It represents, in the phrase used by Wann, a significant accumulation of social capital by the communities most at risk from the epidemic.<sup>5</sup>

Wann's argument is that a variety of social skills exist in the various communities that now make up an ever more complex and pluralistic culture, and that these are being deployed in a variety of community based activities. These provide a major resource in the sub-political spheres of social life that are ignored

4. R McCorry, 'On Self Help', *Body Positive*, no 181, 1995. This section on the HIV/AIDS voluntary sector is based on research from an ESRC-funded project, 'The Voluntary Sector Response to HIV/AIDS', which I co-directed with Peter Aggleton. The quotations are from interviews conducted with members of voluntary agencies.
5. M. Wann, *Building Social Capital: Self Help in the 21st Century Welfare State*, Institute of Public Policy Research, London 1995.

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by the last ditch defenders of traditional statism but are being exploited by the market individualism of the New Right (as can be seen in the ways in which the purchaser/provider split in social welfare provision in part depends on the existence of voluntary activity whilst refusing to accept the radical challenge frequently offered by community action). Community based activities represent an attempt to gain control of the conditions of one's life, as again can be seen in the activities of the HIV/AIDS organisations.

**I**n the early days of the epidemic, community based activities were rooted in a growing awareness of personal threat. As a respondent put it, 'We were all in it together...we were desperately in need of support with friends dying...and so we worked together.' Subsequently, the emphasis became more explicitly political, in the notion of self empowerment; this underlay not only the gay based AIDS organisations but also those that developed amongst women, black people and other threatened minorities. Hence such comments as: 'I think that is very bad for people's immune system, to be kind of dependent', 'it's more important to help people understand how to go about doing things rather than just taking over and doing things for them'. Of course, in practice, it became very difficult to maintain this commitment: self help groupings became service delivery organisations; professionalism replaced voluntary action; statutory funding tied agencies to formal procedures and stricter notions of accountability. Many voluntary agencies have become not-for-profit bodies closely linked to statutory requirements, and ties with the originating communities have often become strained, if they have not been severed. But the essential point remains: the developments occurred in the first place because of the social capital accumulated by hitherto marginalised communities.

### **Community as politics**

For the movements concerned with sexuality what matters more than a single set of goals or a defined programme is the symbolic focus of the activities of the movements themselves, their struggle to gain control over the conditions of life. They cannot therefore be judged solely in terms of their political effectivity in attaining this or that legislative shift, important as this often is. Their ultimate importance lies in their cultural and informal impact on the lives of the individuals who align with them, and are addressed by them as active subjects.

The term 'movement' conveys some of this sense of informality but perhaps

carries too strong a suggestion of a cohesiveness in organisation which is only spasmodically present. As Alberto Melucci has argued, social movements are normally "'invisible" networks of small groups submerged in everyday life'.<sup>6</sup> They tend to be concerned with individual needs, collective identity, and a part-time 'membership', and constitute laboratories in which new experiences are invented, and tested, in which reality is re-described, and individuals can develop alternative experiences of time, space and personal relationships. They attempt to shape a new 'grammar' of everyday life rather than political programmes.

One of their key functions is to translate actions into symbolic challenges that upset the dominant cultural codes, and reveal their irrationality, partiality and illegitimacy as products of power and domination. So they have a dual role: to reveal the macro and micro forms of domination that constitute modern life; and to demonstrate the possibilities of alternative forms of life that are not simply pre-figurative of some imagined future, but are actually being constructed in the here and now.

**S**o the practical activities of such movements characteristically subvert conventional views of political activities. Consciousness raising, networking, carnival, festivals, candle lit processions both affirm a sense of collective being and challenge conventional patterns of life, transmitting to the system a picture of its own contradictions. They illustrate both the complexity of power relations, and the possibility of subverting them.

**'What matters is the symbolic focus of the activities of the movements themselves'**

In this way, despite their informality and *ad hoc* nature, these movements can in particular circumstances become active participants in the domain of politics. They regularly make demands on the conventional structure of politics, often couched in uncompromising terms. They also lean towards a politics of direct action, avoiding in most cases the forms of representative democracy. Contemporary social movements are frequently unstable in both their composition and strategic thrust, and there can be no *a priori* guarantee of their progressive nature. During the 1980s, as many feminists have ruefully noted, the women's movement was strongly divided over its attitudes to pornography, with a number of anti-porn feminists making common cause with far right moralists and

Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, Radius, London 1989, p6.

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social authoritarians. Interestingly, and ironically, some of the neo-fundamentalist movements of recent years are themselves, in the delay in the triumph of their universalist hopes, explicitly redefining themselves as social movements with the same claim to social space, and to difference, as other, overtly progressive groups. The Christian Coalition in the USA, for instance, has achieved remarkable success in influencing the right wing of the Republican Party by playing down their Christian fundamentalism and stressing their more acceptable defence of traditional family values.

Politically, radical sexual communities and their associated movements point in two different directions at once - or at least embrace two distinct political moments: what I call the 'moment of transgression', and the 'moment of citizenship'.<sup>7</sup> The 'moment of transgression' is the moment of challenge to the traditional or received order of sexual life: the assertion of different identities, different life'Styles, and the building of oppositional communities. In its recent form it has given rise to 'queer polities', which has sought to break with what has been perceived as the caution of contemporary gay politics with its integrationist approaches. The 'moment of citizenship' is precisely this movement towards inclusion, towards redefining the polity to incorporate fully those who have felt excluded. Its characteristic emphasis has been on the claiming of civil rights, formal equality - and most recently, in continental Europe at least, on the demand for 'partnership rights' for same sex couples. On the surface at least they seem radically different strategies, and find expression in different organisational forms: for example, in the UK, in the differences between the confrontationalist politics of Outrage! and the lobbying approach of Stonewall.

There are, however, closer similarities than there might appear between the two strategies. As Elizabeth Wilson has written:

we transgress in order to insist that we are there, that we exist, and to place a distance between ourselves and the dominant culture. But we have to go further - we have to have an idea of how things could be different, otherwise transgression ends in mere posturing.<sup>8</sup>

7. See Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity, Cambridge 1995, pp 108-23.

8. Elizabeth Wilson, 'Is transgression transgressive', in Joseph Bristow and Angelia Wilson (eds), *Activating Theory: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Politics*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1993, p11.

The claim for citizenship is one possible way in which 'things could be different'. The notion of citizenship has been historically coloured by its familial and exclusively heterosexual connotations: the citizenship models embodied in the post-war welfare state were explicitly built around the nuclear family and a traditional division of labour between men and women. To claim full citizenship for dissident sexual minorities is to argue for the transformation of the concept. This is what I take Ken Plummer to have in mind when he proposes a new notion of citizenship, what he terms intimate citizenship. Intimate citizenship, he suggests, is concerned with those matters that relate to our most intimate desires, pleasures and ways of being in the world. Some of these relate back to more traditional ideas of citizenship. But intimate citizenship is much more concerned with 'new stories': questions relating to control of our bodies, feelings, and relationships; questions of access to representations and spaces; and the problems and possibilities of choice. In other words, issues that have been previously deemed to be outside the concept of social citizenship, because they were part of the private world, are now becoming part of public debate - precisely because it is only through public change that the protection of private space can be guaranteed. The achievement of intimate citizenship, in turn, however, is predicated on the existence of the shared identities, values, social capital and political belongings that we know by the term 'community'.

The notion of citizenship has been historically coloured by its familial and exclusively heterosexual connotations'

### **Conclusion: Community as necessary fiction**

I have argued elsewhere that the idea of a sexual identity is a fiction (because it is based on the cultural construction of plausible narratives to make sense of individual lives).<sup>9</sup> But it is a necessary fiction because it offers the possibility of social agency in a context where equal access to social goods is denied. In the same way, the idea of a sexual community may be a fiction, but it is a necessary fiction: an imagined community, an invented tradition which enables and empowers. It provides the context for the articulation of identity, the vocabulary of values through which ways of life can be developed, the accumulated skills by which new possibilities can be explored and hazards negotiated, and the context for

9. Jeffrey Weeks, *op. cit.*

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the emergence of social movements and political campaigns which seek to challenge the existing order.

**T**here are, of course, dangers. The new elective communities can be as exclusive and stifling as traditional ones. Social pluralism and a proliferation of communities do not necessarily guarantee variety or autonomy for all members. The co-existence of different communities depends upon a recognition that the condition of toleration of one's own way of life is a recognition of the validity of other ways of life. That, in turn, requires that communities guarantee a freedom of exit and of voice for their members. The communities built around sexuality are no less likely than others to develop their own norms which may exclude as well as include.

But having said that, it should also be acknowledged that in the contemporary world, with its deep sense of uncertainty around values, the idea of a sexual community has developed because of a conviction that it is only through the enhancement of a collective identity that individual autonomy can be realised.

That is not all that could be said about the idea of community in general, or about sexual communities in particular. But it is enough, I hope, to illustrate my main point: in the contemporary world, the idea of a sexual community is both a necessary and an inevitable one. We cannot do without it.