Beyond the Community Romance

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History will call it the Decent Society, a new social order for the Age of Achievement for Britain. We will respect family life, develop it and encourage it in any way we can because strong families are the foundation of strong communities.

Tony Blair, Speech to Labour Party Conference 1996

There is much in this culture that dramatises wrongdoings and failures of character; personal doings become public and fights often arise when such business is discussed. Life is filled with expressions of pleasure and happiness, yet there are also constantly observable tensions and hostility. People here as everywhere do not live up to the ideals of community. But they accept that this is life's way. They see that rivalries and dissensions - between the young and the old, men and women, the friendly and the selfish (bashful) - are deeply embedded in life. These oppositions are not viewed as destructive of community, even when ideals are departed from dramatically; such contrarieties, like everything else in life, must be both ameliorated and celebrated.

Roger Abrahams, 'The Man-of-Words in the West Indies'

Are we that name?

Community, like citizenship, has become a buzzword in the race to give old words apparently new meanings, and to revive the exhausted political vocabulary of democracy in the West. In Britain 'community' is evoked by One Nation Tories, New Labourists and Liberal Democrats with about equal enthusiasm, each claiming the notion as their own exclusive ideological invention and inheritance. Even Mrs
Thatcher, that sociological agnostic, used the term to conjure up an image of the nation as a kind of big happy family threatened by black sheep within and without.

Of course community means one thing to right-wing libertarians and quite another to left-wing communitarians; when fascists talk about community they have a vision of a corporate society in which anarchist communes will certainly have no place. One group's sense of community can become another's living hell. There is probably no word in our political vocabulary which spans the whole ideological spectrum from extreme individualism to ultra collectivism with such ease, and whose rhetoric embraces so many conflicting reality principles.

Not surprisingly then, the term has become a byword for conceptual confusion and political duplicity. This is partly, I think, because during the 1980s its use seemed to have been appropriated by the New Right beyond any possible retrieve. Thatcherism's imagined community was an all too effective device to rationalise a concerted attack on those actual working-class communities, like the miners, which were the very paradigm of 'organic' solidarity. In the sphere of social policy, community care became a euphemism for mentally ill people wandering the streets, and community policing another name for do-it-yourself racial harassment. More recently we had the example of the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police reviving the early 1980s moral panic around black muggers, in the name of improving 'community relations'.

In the political discourse of the post-Thatcher era, portmanteau words, words that can be made to mean almost all things to all people, have grown in popularity as hooks to catch the floating (or sinking?) voter. The rhetoric of community has become a means for the main political parties to occupy the centrist stage at a time when more substantive ideologies and programmes have lost their hold over the imaginations of an overwhelmingly cynical electorate.

In part this move has been imposed by a large shift in public sympathies away from a discredited political culture and community centred on archaic, undemocratic state institutions; this has been accompanied by a movement towards a new kind of community and cultural politics, which spotlights the social injustices suffered by minority groups, and celebrates their achievements in struggle. So much
Beyond the community romance

for the good news. The bad news is that these movements are not always or necessarily progressive. They are just as often animated by right wing populism, religious fundamentalism, or ethnic nationalism. Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam is as heavily into community politics as, in a different context and for different reasons, are the Liberal Democrats.

There are still those who think that the politics of community is a good thing in and of itself, whatever its ideological complexion. There are still some followers of the famous Saul Alinsky principle, that if a community goes racist, it is the duty of the community activist, if not to go with it, then at least to stay with it, and not abandon the people to their own worst prejudices. But in the 1990s, in the era of ethnic cleansing, it is hard to hold on to the kind of long term optimism which underwrites this kind of populism. We are much more sceptical - or is it paranoid - about what might be lurking within the welcoming embrace of those who claim to represent The Spirit of Community. Open up the idea to inspection and you are likely to find a can of worms.

On what might still, just, be called the left, the term tends to arouse two equally extreme responses; on the one hand it is uncritically espoused as an ideal associated with sharing and caring for others, realised in particular institutions and practices of popular self government and grass roots organisation - community is the moral basis of democratic socialism. On the other, harder left, we tend to find a sneering repudiation of what is seen to be little more than a smokescreen for the maintenance of particular forms of social inequality, exclusion and injustice.

In this context the language game being played by Tony Blair takes on especial significance. It seems to involve sublimating the 'class instinct' associated with the old political community of labour within a highly moralised framework of community politics, as a means of exposing the brutalism of the hard left. Community is central to Blair's vision of one nation labourism precisely because it rewrites the particularisms which have made the party increasingly unelectable, into the terms of a universalising rhetoric of civic responsibility. But before we can judge what that move might actually entail, or deliver as a political project, we perhaps need to consider what it might potentially articulate.

The fall of the public man?
I think we have to start by recognising that, on the whole, and with a few notable exceptions, the current reach for community does express a genuine determination
privatisation of political, economic and cultural life which has taken place over the last fifteen years under the aegis of the New Right. But we have to ask what kind of public realm we are talking about - or, if you like, whose public realm. Because, of course, historically, this has been the privileged domain of a certain type of Public Man, belonging to a certain class, educated into a belief that private advantages entail public responsibilities, and primed to undertake the enlightened reform of society as part of a civilising mission to those less fortunate than themselves. If Liberalism and One Nation Toryism draw heavily on this public sensibility, so too in a different way does Labourism. The Labour ideal of public service certainly draws on a wider social base than the others, but it was essentially modelled on the same paternalistic, and indeed patriarchal principles.

Recently, Will Hutton and others have argued that the cumulative impact of individualistic consumerism has all but destroyed this culture of the Public Man: it has thrown up a new kind of professional middle class who have opted out of their traditional involvements in public life; at the same time, the material conditions no longer exist which made it possible for significant numbers of people from outside the administrative elite to have the time, energy and motivation to be 'public spirited' in this way. The insecurity and demoralisation engendered by the Thatcher years have taken their toll; and meanwhile a younger generation has grown up to reject decisively this whole model of public life. In place of long term personal commitments to voluntary service on public bodies, we have the instant gratifications of the National Lottery; the only parties young people are interested in are raves.

It seems to me that the Fall of the Public Man has been a bit overdone. Even if more middle-class people are sending their children to private schools, opting out of public pensions schemes or the national health service, voting for regressive taxation, and generally looking after their own; and even if there is a dramatic decline in the kind of direct working-class politics which hitherto sustained a more generous vision; there is still a sufficiently committed minority to keep much of public life going along the old familiar lines.

It has in any case frequently been argued that if the old Public Culture is in terminal decline that may be no bad thing: it may open up opportunities for groups who have hitherto been excluded or marginalised by its masculinism, its middle-class values, or its whiteness. There does indeed seem to be some evidence that
decade moved out of their defensive emplacements in community organisations, to occupy positions of power and influence in the mainstream of public life hitherto reserved for the Public Man; their presence has undoubtedly helped to change the ethos of public service. Just as importantly, the emergence of what are loosely called new social movements has helped to sustain an alternative public realm, in which young people often play a decisive role in setting new agendas of debate over major areas of social policy, in relation to health, housing, education, and the environment.

The question, then, seems to be whether the appeal to Community is an appropriate strategy for reorganising the public realm so that it becomes more plural, more dynamic and more open to new social forces, or whether it is simply a rhetorical device for rehabilitating the Public Man in a more genial guise. This is a crucial test for Blairism. Is the vision of a rejuvenated culture of citizenship based upon opening up new spaces of political representation for those who have been hitherto excluded from the official body politic, or is it just a glib phrase bandied about by the new prefects to curry favour with the electorate of middle England?

In judging which way the communitarian wind is blowing, it may be as well to remember the double standard which is conventionally applied to the term's use. 'The community', without further qualification, is invariably taken to imply 'the "indigenous", those people whose history has sedimented into a cultural geography of common custom, sentiment and belief, and who thereby possess certain normative entitlements. Its indeterminacy, its universalism, contains in fact a very particular determination. Whether 'the' community refers to neighbourhood or nation, and especially with the elision of the two in a nationalism of the neighbourhood, the discursive effect is either to completely assimilate immigrants and minorities of every kind, or to deprive them of membership in the polity altogether. To identify these 'special cases' it then becomes necessary to interject a specialised descriptor - the black community, the bangladeshi community, the gay community, the deaf community, and so on. What is supposed to make populations so particularised into communities is precisely their common experience of not belonging to 'the' community, by virtue of their deviation from its norms. The attempt to counter this effect by using 'community relations' as a euphemism for 'race relations' only underlines the strategy of exclusion which is practised in its
or is it something intrinsic to the term itself?

**Community as soap opera**

My argument is that the popularity of community as an item of public speech derives from the fact that it provides a space of representation in which social contradictions and conflicts of every kind can be publicly played out, yet within a framework promising to contain them. The discourse does not resolve contradictions; it dramatises them within a narrative which renders them into inevitable but essentially manageable tensions.

Perhaps the most powerful model for this process is provided by soap opera. *Brookside, East Enders, Coronation Street, Neighbours*, or *The Archers* do not simply construct clearly delineated forms of face to face community, in a sociological sense; in these programmes, issues of political difference or cultural diversity, social division and deviance - which in other circumstances might tear societies apart - serve to bind them ever more closely together. Vital matters of class, gender and race are exploited to create situations of interpersonal conflict which are grist to the soap opera's mill - they become functional elements in sustaining its dramatic unities of time and place.

The way this is done follows almost classical lines. Suspense is created by the carefully controlled irruption of the unpredictable, and audience interest is held by the way these elements are negotiated through the deployment of familiar conventions and traditional routines. The addictive quality of the story does not depend on the unravelling of a plot, but on the spinning out of many separate narrative threads into a never ending yarn. The fact that the audience knows there is never going to be a final big denouement, only lots of little outcomes, excites its desire to know what happens next. And just as the story is pledged to continue, from episode to episode, week in, year out, so too the community is guaranteed to survive crisis after crisis because that is the name of the game.

These overriding principles of containment and continuity permit all manner of social disjunctures to be explored. The type of public agendas which are taken up vary considerably according to the sociological mise en scene. You would not expect *East Enders* to deal with the same issues as *Dallas!* Yet the devices of internal tension management are very similar. Structures of social contradiction are translated into emotionally loaded patterns of interpersonal
characterology. For this purpose Soap Communities must be neither too homogeneous nor too polarised. If things become too samey and predictable the story ceases to be worth telling; if things fall apart to the point where no-one is speaking to anyone any more, then there is no longer any story to tell.

Soaps thus offer a vision of a civilised society which has devised customary ways of people rubbing along together, co-operating where possible to tackle common problems, and otherwise agreeing to differ. In the language of moral philosophy, they offer a liberal, humanistic model of community as a kind of conversation between largely reasonable individuals, who eschew extremisms in order to inhabit a mutually tolerable world. Soaps also, of course, create communities around themselves, loyal audiences for whom what happens in Coronation Street or Ambridge is as real and sometimes more important than what happens where they actually live or work.

Soaps offer vicarious participation in social worlds which may lie well outside the direct purview of the audience. That is part of their attraction. It may be a case of voyeurism, of wanting to know what life is like on the other side of the class or race tracks. But soaps also represent imagined communities of aspiration and belonging for groups who in real social terms are excluded from them. The Ardlers has a strong following amongst black and Asian listeners for just this reason. The result is that viewing communities may be pulled in from a much broader cross-section of society than the one represented in the programme itself. Audiences are drawn together across all the social divisions you might care to name, and united in a common and often passionate debate about the pro and cons of particular characters, and turns of event. The drama creates an audience in its own Rortian image.

There are a number of distinctive features of soaps which deserve more comment than they usually get from academic commentators. They are nothing if not imagined communities, yet they are by definition organised around immediate face to face encounter. They are relayed around the world yet they celebrate the power of local concern. They are structured around the classical dramatic unities of time and place, but compressed into fragmentary, self-referential episodes. In

'Audiences are drawn together across all the social divisions you might care to name'
that sense they transgress the usual distinctions between traditional, modern, and post-modern forms. Or rather recast them. For the 'traditional' community built around primary groups of family, friends, workmates and neighbours, which is supposedly being destroyed by the forces of modernity, is here being reconstructed as the crucible of a new 'post-modern social imaginary.

In Britain the soap community is still largely modelled on an idealised and essentially insular vision of the nation writ small. Its historical norm is the village, and its latter day urban reconstructions. This locale may be tied to a sentimental image of working-class culture, with its close-knit solidarities and open doors; a similar model of insular cosiness may be just as easily be applied to expatriate colonies of 'the english abroad', or to evocations of country life; more recently the focus has shifted to small, relatively closed, occupational communities - schools, hospitals, prisons, oil rigs, police, fire and ambulance stations; here divisions of labour can be held within a liberal humanitarian frame while larger issues of social justice are wrought dramatically through the life and death of characters whose individual conflicts are decided case by case.

All these *raise en scenes* have in common the fact of privileging local situated knowledge possessed exclusively by 'insiders', and the implicit (and sometimes explicit) relegation of 'outsiders' to a position of ignorance or unwelcome interference. Outsiders are almost never used in the function of a *deus ex machina* to resolve contradictions in the plot. They are either foils or 'fall guys' who enable the inside story to be better told. At one level this is simply a calculating device to encourage brand loyalty and reward regular viewers - who are thereby allowed to entertain a privileged 'inside' relation to the unfolding story line. But at another, more unconscious level, it serves as a trope for a national culture whose meanings are immediately given only to 'insiders' and which remain opaque to those who are not born and bred in this 'native land'.

One reason why soaps are so reassuring is that their sense of imagined community presumes a spontaneous process of recognition, something which does not have to be worked at, but automatically places people and events within a consensual framework where meaning is always and already guaranteed. In multi-ethnic societies, where only the most socially insulated manage to avoid the experience of finding themselves strangers in a not so promised land, that sense of easy familiarity, based on mutual toleration and respect, seems
Beyond the community romance

eminently desirable. Even, and especially, when they introduce 'ethnic' characters, soaps celebrate a principle of fictive kinship based upon an effortless process of negotiating difference. This wishful multiculturalism enables racism to be portrayed as an interpersonal encounter between voices of bigotry and reason; bigots can be made to see the error of their ways, victims set themselves up as soft targets of humanitarian concern, and the protagonists of common sense and fair play triumph.

This imaginary village is not just the nation writ small; it is also a family writ large, with its public feuds, rivalries, alliances, partings, makings ups all patterned on the intimate domestic scene. We can see this in the way conflicts are resolved. Erstwhile villains are routinely rehabilitated in the fashion of 'black sheep' being welcomed back into the family/community fold. Where the psycho-drama of guilt and reparation is not on the cards, there is only one alternative - death. Sentence is duly passed on all those characters who transgress the narrative norms - either because they have become too predictable, or have fulfilled their role in counterpointing the main characterology; they are killed, or otherwise written out of the script, in order that both story and community can maintain their moral equilibrium and go on. If life outside the 'family' and its extended kinships is just not possible, death confirms the immortality of the script.

This is not, clearly, a version of the community of nation or neighbourhood as 'one big happy family'. It certainly does not entail a vision of civil society in which all conflicts have been mediated, or resolved through adherence to some higher principle of unity. It is not about any religious sense of convocation guaranteed and shared by those of common faith. Nor does it offer any secular, ideological equivalent of spiritual harmony. The soap's signature tune may be more popular than the national, anthem but it is not a hymn to some Greater Good, or God. Nor is it about what anthropologists call communitas, a ritual celebration of egalitarianism consequent upon the temporary overturning of hierarchy in some common metaphysics of presence. In contrast to these mystical unisons, soaps portray a decidedly profane and contrapuntal reality, in which everyday conflicts engendered by difference and domination are exploited as devices to make life interestingly manageable, and hence worth narrating.

This rendering of conflicts which might otherwise undermine national unity into family disputes which implicitly uphold a kind of constitutional settlement is, I would argue, the key to the soap's success as a model of political community in the West. It is also perhaps why they travel so well to the so called 'third
world'. For here, wrapped up in the carapace of consumerism, we have a package of 'traditional values' tempered by a democratic and secular vision of modernity; taken together this seems to offer an attractive alternative to the autocratic structures of caste, clan and priestly clientage which continue to preside over both state and civil society in so many of the so called sunrise economies.

Closer to home, it is perhaps worth emphasising that the community ideal portrayed in soaps is not merely a collective representation of 'the good society'; it moves significant numbers of people to action. Soaps do not merely reflect social aspirations, they construct them. We will never know how much Brookside did to articulate demand for home ownership amongst the aspirant working class. But there are certainly a lot of housing estates built in the early 1980s boom which are the spitting image. What effect do The Archers have in stimulating middle-class flight from the city and the creation of ex-urban commuter villages? Again it is hard to say, but we do know that there are quite a few people who are disillusioned because actual village life does not live up to expectations fostered in part from media sources.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the tracks, East Enders and Coronation Street provide complementary images of an insular working class, living in an urban village of its own making, a model which is still implicitly evoked in many rhetorics of struggle against the interventions of both capital and state. According to this myth, Community is something which the working class used to have in the good old bad old days of factories and slums, but have now lost, as a result of gentrification, deindustrialisation, and urban renewal; at the same time, community is something the middle class never used to have, but have discovered in their quest for the good life beyond the rat race.

Community has thus become a special kind of cultural capital, and is increasingly the subject of a politics of envy fuelled by divisions of race as well as class. For migrants, refugees and exiles of every kind, the creation of community is both a condition for maintaining actual networks of diasporic communication with links to a real and/or notional homeland, and a site of roots resistance to various
forms of racism encountered in countries of settlement. But these efforts become quickly misrepresented through a double standard imposed by the host society. A line is drawn between model minorities who are held to have reinvented traditional values of caring and sharing, and those pariah groups whose 'anarchic and alien' ways of life pose a threat to the social fabric. Thus Asians are supposedly thriving because their sense of community is based on private, individualistic, or 'Confucian' family values; whereas Afro Caribbean structures of communal feeling are widely regarded as dysfunctional because they are public, collective and 'in your face'. Perhaps it is no coincidence that communities which are praised for their 'close knit family values' are routinely pathologised as soon as they stand up for their political rights.

It is partly because of this double standard that the debate around 'community safety' has been so easily hijacked by the New Right into a moral panic about 'black muggers'. The importance of tackling problems of street crime, racial violence, and harassment in public places became subsumed under the moral imperative of drawing a dividing line between the respectable law-abiding Asian and Jewish communities on one side and the yardies, rastas, and others who are held to characterise the 'black presence'.

This example should perhaps alert us to the fact that we are always dealing with invented traditions. The imagination of community, as a binding together of civil society through direct presence in some golden age of unmediated exchange, represents the symbolic retrieval of a situation which never existed in the first place. Moreover, as the discussion of soap opera indicated, the mythopoetics of what I am going to call the community romance, is often accomplished by means of social technologies which have in any case made face to face communication a far less decisive influence on social outcomes.

The debate on community safety also illustrates a general and perhaps equally obvious point - that the reach for Community is provoked by a sense of its absence. Increasingly, its rhetoric provides a home from home for those who feel displaced, alienated or lost in a world where the signposts of class, nation, family, religion or race have become, for various reasons, hard to read. Community is a magical device for conjuring something apparently solidary out of the thin air of modern times, a mechanism of re-enchantment for those who have become disillusioned with the sleazy manoeuvres and cheesy slogans of contemporary politics. But, by the same token, it can also offer a persuasive flight from engagement with divisions and
inequalities which have become not just more complicated, but more deeply entrenched.

This relation between political idealism and denial is central to the distinctiveness of community as a structure of contemporary feeling. Perhaps, by exploring this deeper, more unconscious, level of ambivalence we can begin to understand why so many people still cling to the term, and what there might be in the nature of this clinging that points to both its positive and negative possibilities.

**Between matrilocal and patriglobal:**
**some varieties of Community Romance**

I have suggested that, underlying the liberal humanist model of community, as the hidden limit and condition of its discursive tolerances, are the conjoint figures of family and nation. These subsist as a kind of silent undertow, twisting altruistic gestures of caring and sharing into more restrictive, and often racialised, definitions of political and cultural belonging. In its mythopoetic linkage of continuity and containment, the rhetoric of 'community' can become a fatal link between the sanctuary, the ghetto and the concentration camp. Yet what is it that makes that linkage possible?

If we think about the stereotypes of spontaneous community which continue to haunt the liberal imagination of the good public life - children playing in the street, the flirtatious conviviality of youth, women gossiping across backyard fences, old men sitting in town squares - it is clear how overdetermined these paradigms are by deeply entrenched patriarchal assumptions about the organisation of civil society.

If, for example, the community romance has largely been conceived as a matrilocal affair, it is because so many women have been confined to the home for so long while bringing up children. It is women who run neighbourhood committees, organise around issues to do with education, health care and the environment - and thereby define local cultures of citizenship, around claims to entitlement over amenity and resource.

It is not surprising then, that narratives of community romance, of which the soap opera is only the most developed example, have been modelled on the customary forms and pre-occupations of women's talk: the intense detailing of everyday incident celebrated in gossip, the conjuring of foreign adventure out of domestic accident, absence, or abandonment in fairy tales. The public men, who
often feature, and sometimes front, these 'women's activities', to give them a 'wider' legitimacy, have become increasingly redundant. But their tenancy of what might be called the patriglobal realm has hardly withered away. It is still the public men who get to do most of the jet-set travelling, who are in charge of global movements of capital, run global cities and surf the internet. Even more than their predecessors who travelled the globe to administer the old colonial empires, the business elites of today are transnational citizens, for whom the barriers experienced by immigrant labour simply do not exist. As for the more exotic side of the story, the sex tourists who visit the child brothels of the third world are only following in the footsteps of the wild colonial rovers whose exploits made the Empire into an adventure story for eminently Victorian naughty boys.

Of course there have been notable exceptions to this rule: women explorers, travel writers, anthropologists and missionaries; public men who stayed at home and busied themselves with local tasks of self improvement. But these figures, in their extraordinariness, only serve to highlight the fact that the malestream trend goes the other way.

The picture is even more clear-cut if we shift our vantage point from the bourgeois public realm to that of the working class. Again with a few notable exceptions, it has, until quite recently been the young men of the West who got to travel, as casual and migrant labourers, seafarers, apprentices, journeymen and artisans, and who thereby carried back tales of far countries, foreign habits, and exotic pleasures not to be had nearer home. For the rest matrilocalism seems to have ruled OK. (At least according to the famous study of Wilmott and Young, Family and Kinship in East London, which highlighted the practice as central to the maintenance of working-class community life. Daughters left home only to get married and have children and then lived as close to their family of origin as they could. The mother/daughter tie was strengthened rather than loosened by marriage and meant that children grew up within a strongly bounded maternal speech community, where mother’s, not father's word was law.)

Doubts have subsequently been cast on the warm rosy glow which Wilmott and Young's description sheds over this aspect of working-class life. Matrilocalism was just as likely to be a recipe for implosive family conflict, the stifling of ambition, or the suffocating equivocation of 'secrets and lies' as shown in Mike Leigh's recent film. Either way, a kinship system which pivoted on the maintenance of the mother/daughter tie created certain centrifugal pressures. It tended to not only give women
the upper hand in family matters, but also pushed their legislative role outwards into wider and more public spheres - as moral regulators of what goes on in the street, the neighbourhood, and the estate. They became agents of public propriety, responsible for defining and defending community traditions and values; it was from this vantage point that they were addressed and sometimes mobilised by improving discourses which urged them to act as civilising influences over their children and menfolk; and from here too that they echoed or turned a blind ear to the siren calls of popular racism, urging them to clean up the neighbourhood and keep it safe from foreign intrusion.

Working-class children thus grew up within a universe in which fathers, and men in general, played only a peripheral role, albeit one which enhanced their mystique as exclusive inhabitants of the promised land of manual labour associated with masculinity and its apprenticeships. To be able to make that journey, boys had first to free themselves from their mother's apron strings; or rather they had to venture beyond mother's lap, and its immediate extensions in street and neighbourhood policed by the maternal eye, in order to set out on an adventure to colonise other more exciting and dangerous playgrounds and turn them into safe dens. And so were created those exclusively masculine territories on the frontiers of matrilocal world, those little homes from home, where boys and grown men played at king of the castle and chased off dirty wee rascals, made themselves feel big and powerful as a group by constructing exclusive spaces of social combination while cutting other rival groups down to size. It was from this position that gangs were formed, and the most disadvantaged and powerless imagined themselves as a kind of local ruling class; you belonged in this microcommunity only in so far as you successfully staked your claim that the area belonged to you, and not some other rival group.

But what was this territory over which exclusive rights and prerogatives were claimed, if not an analogue of the maternal body? Because masculine prides of place remained tied to this unconscious premise, their assertion entailed an aggressive repudiation of everything to do with women's work and the feminine world. The fetishism of 'hardness', the cultivation of a body whose fighting fitness was the price of admittance to male physical fraternity, only barely concealed this achilles heel. The stake might have been symbolic ownership and control over public space or amenity, a pub or club, the right to hang out in a particular bit of street or park, but what was unconsciously being defended and attacked was always
Beyond the community romance

the mother's body. The lad struggled to become a Hard Man, but the hard man remained a mummy's boy through and through. The tattoos showing death and glory on one arm and Mum in hearts on the other were one sign of this contradiction. The figure of the skinhead, the bald bother boy, dressed to kill as a new born baby, was another.

Matrilocalism may have propelled a minority of lads into substantial adventures beyond the long emotional ami of its law, but most remained home boys, immobilised between its all too familiar frontlines and the backyards of the patriglobal world; billy liars dreaming of 'getting away', making the big break, but only getting to travel with their mates, in the safety of numbers, on a holiday trip abroad or to support their local football team. In this way, restricted opportunity structures, governed by class, were naturalised and doubled over in a gendered form of white ethnicity which was thrown up by the defensive assertion of male autonomies associated with laddish culture.

For working-class boys, then, community has been where the tug-of-war between infantile masculinism and disavowed feminisation has been played, or rather fought, out; for girls, in contrast, it has provided an arena where the struggle to avoid chronic little motherhood has fed into the active drive to extend the scope of matrilocal power beyond the safe confines of the maternal role, into erstwhile male territory. Yet whether patterned on aggressive macho disavowal or feminist assertion, the template of labour's body politic remained maternal.

The institutions of apprenticeship and the family wage, and the whole sexual division of labour which underpinned this culture, have of course collapsed, along with the occupational structures and production processes which mandated them. At the same time, the growth of single-parent households has tended to strengthen matrilocalism, which has assumed an ever larger importance in defining the boundaries of both real and imagined community. Thus, at a stroke, the boy's dependency on the maternal is increased, whilst the customary wage and labour forms which have hitherto enabled him to distance or dissociate himself from his feminine positioning vis a vis male elders have weakened. The feminisation of labour makes the customary moral economy of boyz2men communities largely redundant as a transition to work, but that does not mean that they simply wither away. A minority of young working-class men may respond by actively embracing their feminine side; normally this move is confined to a transitional phase of sexual experimentation and takes place within the protective
Soundings

frame of youth cultures which encourage some degree of gender bending. For the majority, the decline of manual labourism has served to reinforce psychic investment in ritual displays of physical hardness, from hard drinking, punishing athleticism, and aggressive dancing, to violent language, and domestic brawls. These 'labours' of masculinity are central to laddish culture, and because they are so radically disconnected from any possible sublimation in more socially productive techniques of the body, they take on ever more florid and dysfunctional forms.

In this context it is perhaps worth noting that certain types of manual work, or worker, have today taken on a hyper-inflationary value, not so much because of skill or wage level, but because they require or permit the public display of masculine communitas otherwise outlawed or made redundant. The building worker, the trucker, the rigger, the cowboy, the steel erector, the miner, the fisherman, even the garage mechanic, these heroic hard men doing dirty or dangerous jobs, are celebrated, often with strongly homo-erotic overtones - in Country and Western music, in buddy movies, in soft porn magazines and comics, in corporate advertising, and, not least, in TV soaps. This idealisation has little to do with the realities of the jobs; it is not an invitation to learn the intricacies of these particular 'rough trades'. It has everything to do with the performance of masculinity as a sexualised masquerade of working-class community. These figures are celebrated for being ruggedly individualistic, and for restoring a lost sense of physical fraternity to work processes 'undermined' by the feminisation of labour; and they speak not just to the old manual working classes but to the nation as a whole. They have indeed been invented as the standard bearers of a new white race - which is only the old lost white race of colonial frontiersmen cast in a new guise.

As the current crisis of family and nation gathers momentum, alongside the collapse of customary practices linking growing up male, working and class, imagined communities of race have provided one magical solution to these problems. Unemployed masculinities are put back to work in the construction of exclusionary territories of belonging, based on a sense of being 'born and bred' to certain privileged entitlements, now mobilised to retrieve lost prides of place. Home boys rule OK where and when ever the working class goes 'nativist'.

It is no coincidence that this new brand of popular white supremacism couples the figure of the horny young single male migrant with the rampantly reproductive 'black mamma', to create a scenario of demographic 'swamping'. This construct
speaks to a pervasive anxiety about racial emasculation, which no amount of muscle-flexing or manual labour seems to assuage. Significantly, this scenario ignores the feminisation of immigrant labour itself. Some feminists have welcomed the increased geographical mobility of working women as a progressive development, in so far as it promises to liberate them from customary ties of family/home/nation, and create the conditions for a new global consciousness of gendered oppression. But if women have increasingly begun to travel long distances across continents and seas, in search of work or asylum, or both, it has usually been only to reinforce their matrilocal position. Whether as au pair girls or domestic servants, as home workers or child carers, they have been made to carry a double burden of representation; externally they are rendered invisible and internally they are made to define the boundaries of the 'home nation', to preserve principles of continuity and containment in the culture of immigrant communities, against the threat of their dispersal.

Diasporic cultures, in fact, generate a particularly intense form of the community romance, linked to the mother's body. Narratives which centre on the theme of return to a 'promised land' organise feelings of separation and loss arising from the experience of migration, in a way which invests them with a special redemptive message. In these stories, the original suffering attendant on forced eviction from the first home/land is followed by a phase of exile which prolongs and deepens the wounds of abandonment, but is nevertheless assuaged by new principles of hope: next year in Jerusalem, Mecca or Addis Ababa. If these declaratives are to be more than hollow promises, they have to be encoded in a historical narrative which invests them with a real performative effect. Their utterance must be both a reiteration of ancient entitlements, and a rehearsal for the 'end of the story' which is the triumphant return to reclaim the lost object.

In some diaspora stories, the theme of return may be taken literally, in the form of a programme to materialise the imagined motherland in real institutions, a real territory, and usually in a state. If it ever becomes actually possible to return, the imagined community of dispersal is rapidly transformed into a real concentration of power which sets about the ugly business of purging the new body politic of all
its alien elements. Even where the journey is purely symbolic and involves a return
to cultural roots, a somewhat similar process of ethnic cleansing can sometimes
be observed at work, removing all 'anxiety of influence' in order to pursue an
authenticity of communitarian forms. Invented traditions conveyed through the
'mother tongue' are thus naturalised by association with mother's milk, and the
maternal lap becomes the privileged place where the sense of community becomes
fatally elided with the transmission of a national heritage cast in a patriglobal mould.

Thus, part of the difficulty of breaking from the problematic of the maternal
body and its disavowal in the imagination of community thus stems from
the large psychic pay-offs which derive from clinging on to it, especially in
conditions of social upheaval and rapid change. The appeal of the community
romance certainly does not derive from the ethic of altruism so often associated
with it; that is a secondary gain. Rather it offers a pattern of symbolic identification
with lost objects in a way which evokes deep rooted feelings of abandonment, exile
and loss and connects them with the desire to return home. The story line, the
myths of origin and destiny which tell the tale, move continually between Cenotaph
and Jubilee, nostalgia and triumphalism, echoing the pattern of our earliest
relationships to the maternal breast. This in turn tends to emphasise processes of
splitting in the construction of social ideology. The community becomes an ideal
internal (lost/found) object, always and already threatened by destructive external
forces, projected onto the Other: immigrants, foreigners, ethnics, gays, Trotskyites,
etc, who are threatening 'our' vision, our way of life. By a terrible irony, community
is preserved as a heart in a heartless world, only by freezing out whole populations
from its warm embrace.

One final example, perhaps somewhat closer to the bone for many Soundings
readers, may help to clinch the point. In the discourse of postwar labourism we
frequently find references to a golden age of community life, a time when doors
were always open, friends, family and neighbours were always on hand to help,
street parties and outings were the order of the day, and people stuck together
through thick and thin. But then came the war, or high rise flats, or the recession,
or immigrants, or foreign ideas like Thatcherism, or even post-modernism, and
nothing was quite the same any more; kids run wild, families break apart, dog eats
dog, drugs, crime and violence are rampant.

The nostalgia for a return to labour's 'true' origins can be given various political
articulations. The hard left version of the story suggests that if only we could get
Beyond the community romance

rid of the puny and pusillanimous figures who have usurped or betrayed the great Ideals, and replace them with real leaders who walk in the footsteps of the giants or giant killers of yesteryear then perhaps it might be possible to recover the true road to socialism, and emerge finally victorious with everything that had seemed lost for ever now once more restored.

Tony Blair's political philosophy appears, at first glance, to break decisively with this whole nostalgia trip. The direction of the story line reverses from past tense to future. Modernity becomes the process whereby Labour gives birth to itself as a morally regenerative force in the 'stakeholder society'. In fact Blairism conserves certain of the key elements of the 'golden age of community' myth, but gives them a new political twist by shifting their centre of gravity from the discourse of labour to that of nation. In the triumphalism of this happy ending, melancholic yearning for Labour's lost patrimony is transformed into a feeling of jubilation in a born again sense of national community as Labour wins the next election. The members of this community naturally comprise all those who share the common vision and identify with the forces of modernity/rebirth. En route the categories of those who are excluded has been enlarged (we might even say democratised). They now include capitalists without a conscience, aristocrats who abuse their privileges, and all those members of the middle class whose claims on the polity are not matched by their investment in it. They join the traditional cast of juvenile delinquents, feckless parents, and other denizens of the underclass in the rogues gallery of antisocial types. The rationalisation, or rather moralisation, of that Great Divide is the special 'magic' worked by the rhetoric of 'New Labour, New Britain.'

For all its opposition to the dogmatisms and closures associated with 'Old Labour', Blairism seems hopelessly enmeshed in an equally profound regression from a sense of political community which actively articulates difference to one based on bonding with a unitary and quasi-organic body politic. The big change, I've suggested, is that this is no longer modelled on the actual labour movement (that most fractious and fragmented of beasts), but on a vision of the Party as speaking up for Middle England, conceived afresh as a normative community of reason, decency and fair play. It is as if Blairism wants to arrive at the happy equilibrium promised by the Rortian plot, while writing the family quarrels (which alone make the story worth telling) out of the script. If politics is ever to become a matter of popular concern beyond the present soap opera of sexual scandal and sleaze it seems unlikely that the Blair formula will do the trick. Despite,
or rather because of, the focus groups and the sound-byte thinking, it is recipe for switching off.

It may also lead to more people switching to alternative channels. Blairism produces a certain fall-out effect amongst those have been excluded or marginalised by the mainstream political process. The liminal quest for Communitas in these groups in any case leads away from the stakeholder society, either towards the assertion of immanent and absolute difference as with separatist organisations, or identification with some source of transcendental power in the case of sects and cults.

What has been called the 'neotribalism' of contemporary youth culture also belongs within this frame, characterised as it is by a unique metaphysics of presence. A thousand young people standing in a field high on Ecstasy may not be what the communitarians have in mind, but rave culture has created a form of togetherness which is safe, non violent and seems to require little or no demonisation of the Other. I say 'seems' because The Other has in fact been transubstantiated into a pharmacological version of the maternal body, and en route taken on a globalising rather than a localising function. Ecstasy creates a womb-like sense of oneness which relies on a collective but extremely dissociated state of mind; it supplies instant oceanic gratification but precludes any real human contact or relationship. Whereas traditional Carnivals are site specific communities constructed around social rituals of masquerade, Raves represent a masquerade of communitas bound to immediate physical sensation, the same for everyone everywhere tuned in to that particular musical/drug-induced brain wavelength. This may be, as its enthusiasts claim, an instinctive democracy of the body at play, but what implications does it have for the workings of more mundane instances of civil governance?

Virtual communities ? Not in my back yard!

It is frequently suggested that the process of globalisation is making the 'old' sense of community redundant, by creating more fluid and open networks of affiliation, or else that community politics has emerged as a defensive and largely reactionary assertion of local autonomies in the face of the new spatial economy of population and information flows. These are really two sides of the same argument. I want, finally, to argue that the current transformations of 'community' remain mysterious, and their outcome undecidable, as long as they are understood in this fashion.
Those who insist on a distinctive 'post-modernist' state of culture economy and society, invariably invoke a notion of community no longer based on shared geography or history, where social interaction is not dependant on face-to-face presence, or shaped by identities derived from family, nation and the mother's body. Membership in civil society has become thoroughly deterritorialised; it no longer requires even the most notional anchorage to locality, but is organised around common interests or affiliations, abstracted from shared loyalties to family, workmates or neighbours. In the post-modern model, people can be simultaneously members of many different communities without experiencing any sense of conflict, because nothing has to be given up to join and any number can play. Whereas the 'old community' entailed a trade-off between rights and obligations, security and autonomy, the new community is essentially a communications network which people can enter and leave at will, provided they have the right credentials to begin with.

The internet is commonly cited as the paradigm of post-modern community, an interface between faceless, disembodied individuals, each bulletin board or home page a virtual encounter group where no-one need ever meet, but where the most intimate kinds of information can be made public and exchanged without sacrificing anonymity. In the language of technohype, the experience of surfing the internet is conveyed in almost mystical terms as a kind of oceanic feeling of communion with kindred spirits across the globe. The culture of the home computer is set up to replace ecstatic religion as a site of instant communitas.

In principle, the new informatics would seem to render the matrilocal/patriglobal distinction redundant. Housewives can travel the world without having to leave their kitchens; home boys can rule cyberspace from their bedrooms, even if they are afraid to cross the street. It has even been suggested that the close interface between technology and the body is creating the conditions for a permanent mutation which blurs or fuses the boundaries of both to create a new community of hybrid beings (which Donna Haraway presciently labelled cyborgs), whose lifestyles cut across all manner of dichotomous social roles.

Urban folk tales tell a rather different story however; they feature spotty
adolescents who turn into computer nerds because they cannot handle real relationships, and take out their frustration in perverse, masturbatory forms of 'computer sex'. Whatever the actual facts of the case, perhaps these stories point to the symbolic truth that we are not dealing here with a simulation of face to face community, but with the dissimulation of existing mechanisms of power through their impersonation of human interactivity as a technology of magical action at a distance.

Internet mythology entertains the phantasy of a perfect meeting of minds, realised through an entirely transparent but all powerful medium which penetrates every nook and cranny of the modern world; it is a model of community as a kind of global mindfuck which, far from dissolving gender divisions, institutionalises the phallic knowledge/power games of the public man; the patriglobal now entirely subsumes the matrilocal, as a template of communication, irrespective of whose hands are on the keyboard.

Enthusiasts for the cyborg revolution and the politics of 'new times' are undaunted by such critiques. They claim that the traditional political cartographies of left and right have been definitively surpassed by more fluid and dynamic social movements. According to this line, the language of barricades and front lines, mobilisations and 'they shall not pass' belongs to the old era, another kind of urban space, where large crowds were not just a collective pose for the mass media, but were direct agents of the historical process.

Nevertheless, in a world supposedly dominated by globalisation, where forms of political protest rooted in stable communities of local interest have supposedly been rendered obsolete, the most obdurate struggles continue to break out in and around the front doors and back yards of whatever is called home. Yet, just as surely, what is often at stake here are identities which transcend their immediate anchorage and become indices of membership in communities whose affiliations stretch across fixed national boundaries and act at a distance from one side of the world to the other.

The phenomenon of Not In My Back Yardism, which animates so much contemporary community politics, is a confused response to this new local/global dialectic. At one level it expresses a pervasive feeling that to travel hopefully is no longer better than to arrive. The goal of life is to achieve some kind of domestic security in an increasingly chaotic and dangerous world. The first priority is to prevent the intrusion of any outside force which would disturb that sense of internal
order. NIMBYism is, characteristically, the ideology of the little man or woman whose interests are threatened by the bulldozers of corporate capitalism and the state. As such its political articulation is ambiguous. It may become associated with the libertarian philosophies of the New Right, but it may also, and especially in Britain, link to certain invented traditions of the 'freeborn Englishman' still current within certain versions of home grown socialism. More usually it is a contradictory amalgam of different tendencies.

But are there any alternative channels which might give expression to a rather more encouraging vision of what 'new Labour, new Britain' might entail? In the second of these articles, which will be published in a future issue of Soundings, I will look at some of the arguments which have been put forward in support of a youthful and dynamic counterculture centred on post-fordist or postmodern forms of labour and leisure. How far do they point beyond the present identity politics, towards a sense of political identity in which differences can be validated without investing any of them with an absolute power to determine claims over amenity or resource? Is it possible that amongst all the critical babble about 'post-modernity' we might discover, heavily coded and covered in media hype, the obscure figures of a definitively new, but still recognisably working-class community struggling to be born?