

Opening chapter and front matter of Heckscher, C. Trust in a Complex World: Rebuilding Community. Oxford University Press, in press (scheduled September 2015).

**TRUST IN A COMPLEX WORLD:
REBUILDING COMMUNITY**

Charles Heckscher

Draft: January 2015

PREFACE: A NAVIGATIONAL OVERVIEW

Almost no one, as far as I can tell, reads books starting from the beginning and reading in a straight line till the end. It may therefore be useful to have a map.

I would highlight three chapters in particular. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the arguments and main concepts. Chapter 4 sketches the nature of an emerging community that could, perhaps, enable us to better live and work together. Chapter 7 explores the current deep social divisions and the possibilities for overcoming them. (Chapter 8 may also be useful as a brief summary.)

The main text generally avoids engaging in academic debates. There are, however, extensive endnotes for those issues, including when possible reviews of research evidence for the claims that I make. Chapters 9 and 10 also turn academic, developing a theoretical frame and sketching survey results.

The basic sequence of the argument goes like this:

Chapter 1 - Understanding Trust and Community

argues for the importance of community in general as the foundation of trust, essential to resolving the enormously complex problems we face. It also outlines the three basic types of community: the traditional, which builds trust on moral conformity; the modern, or associational, which insists on individual moral independence; and the interactive, or “rich”, which embraces interdependence and seeks mutual understanding.

Chapter 2 - Past: Associational Community in the Modern Era

tells the story of community in the modern era, from the Renaissance to the present. Driven by the impulse for freedom from the shackles of the traditional order, it rebuilt trust on the basis of voluntary association and moral equality. The extension of this basic sense of right into every aspect of life, from politics to civil society to intimate relations, took centuries of struggle, and invention.

Chapter 3 - Present: The Decline of the Modern community

criticizes “communitarian” arguments that we need to revive tight institutions of family, neighborhood, and nation to fend off growing isolation and disengagement. While trust in many familiar institutions has seriously eroded, reviving old forms will not solve the problem. Familiar communities are attractively warm and supportive, but they are also narrow, failing to incorporate the broad diversity which has become a part of social consciousness, or to create necessary levels of cooperation.

Chapter 4 - Future Emergent: Rich Community and the Interactive Sensibility

sketches emergent rich communities in both the face-to-face and virtual worlds based on a perspective that challenges the modern idea of individual moral independence. This view, which has slowly developed over the past century or more, is that we are inherently defined by our relations, and have duties to recognize this interdependence. The spread of the internet has given the interactive sensibility a recent boost by making communication across boundaries much easier.

Chapter 5 – Future Anticipated: Working Out the Rich Community

explores some of the implications of this emergent sensibility for identities and social institutions. Many of these have barely begun to be worked through: notions of postmodern identities, of fluid and open groups, of interactive values – understanding, sharing, learning; of new economic systems based on sharing; of political systems based on deep participation and discourse, and economic systems incorporating collaboration and sharing.

Chapter 6 – Collaboration: Working Together in a Rich Community

takes up the problem of *acting together* in such a diverse, fluid, open world. This requires a shift from bureaucratic formality to collaboration. Bureaucracy organizes through obedience to rules; collaboration involves continual interactivity, mutual adjustment, and learning. Collaboration seeks to maximize the contribution of diverse people, rather than ignoring their diversity and demanding uniform obedience.

Chapter 7 – The Contest for Legitimacy

interprets current political events in terms of the conflict between two conflicting responses to the changes: the conservative impulse to clarify and stabilize the boundaries of community in order to rebuild security and confidence; and the progressive impulse to broaden relations, to embrace the richness of cultural diversity. The struggles over the great challenges of our time – the threat of climate change, the problem of economic equity, the spread of deadly weapons in the hands of terrorists – are framed by the differences in these sensibilities.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

summarizes the difficulty of this transition, its potential promise, and the hard work to be done.

Two chapters follow for specialist readers:

Chapter 9 – Theoretical Framework

lays out a general theoretical frame for the preceding arguments, based in three traditions: social systems theory (exemplified by Talcott Parsons), developmental theory (exemplified by Jean Piaget), and dynamic theory (central to Karl Marx, and greatly advanced in recent decades by complexity theorists).

Chapter 10 – Survey

describes a survey which explores the shape and scope of the interactive sensibility, and which is referred to at various points in the main text.

CHAPTER 1: TRUST AND COMMUNITY

After church on a recent Christmas eve, my family – my wife and I, three children, and a few of their friends – gathered in the living room, with the tree brightly lit, the presents glistening in their wrappings, the yule log blazing. Immediately everyone pulled out tablets and phones. The room filled with the hushed sounds of tapping and swiping. I joined in for a time. But then I remarked, a bit peevishly, how strange it was that no one was talking to each other at this most communal of holidays. My daughter said, “No, Raj and I are having a great conversation!”; Raj was sitting on the other side of the room.

I have found that many people are horrified by this vignette, seeing it as a typical instance of the erosion of community and human connection. But in this case at least, it wasn't. For what happened then was that we all began talking vigorously together: about the internet, about society, about family. And as we explored, we found that the people in the room had been engaged with conversations with dozens of people all over the world, in China and Europe and Africa, old friends and new contacts, about what they were doing and feeling. They could also have side conversations with those present, as my daughter did with Raj, without sneaking off to the kitchen or the “man cave”.

In the “old days”, widely seen as good, we would have talked exclusively to each other within the nuclear family. We would have recreated patterns that we had experienced many times before – patterns of alliance, of jealousy, of resentment, of affection; stories often told, rituals often performed. The conversation might well have been halting and uncomfortable as we tried to avoid the paths of conflict that we all knew too well; at best, it would have reinforced existing loyalties. If we extended a bit by placing phone calls to absent grandparents and siblings, the content of the calls would be highly formulaic, each year strongly echoing all others. We would end up feeling as we did every year: warm and happy if our family was a mostly happy one, miserable if it was like most of the families in literature.

But on this Christmas we had with us many people whom we did not know at all – not physically present, but certainly affecting the dynamics. The network of interaction had become more dynamic and more dense. Instead of a few interconnections, we had many dozens; in addition to repeating the rituals of the past, we were reaching out to new people, including ones with radically divergent traditions. We were constructing our Christmas differently from the year before.

This was, in embryo, an example of what I will call a *rich* community. It was rich in the specific sense that it included people from diverse cultures, engaged in personal discussions that ranged over many experiences, opinions, and values. It was different from a traditional holiday gathering because the circle was open, with porous boundaries: it did not assume that we all shared some quality or perspective. It looked more like a set of overlapping circles than a tight group. But it also consisted of more than polite formulas or instrumental exchanges. The familiar realm of personal space had spread beyond our living room to an unbounded world.

This can be very confusing and destabilizing, and it can undermine trust. We can't count on the people in the room to pay attention: they have competing demands. We might get angry at this and demand that they all put down their phones. Or we might withdraw ourselves, as I began to do. But in this case we, at least, we had a deeper experience by including the many outside

conversations that were going on, and making them part of the fabric of relations that night. The sense of community was, to a tiny degree, *expanded*.

The issues concentrated in this little story ripple throughout the globe. Everywhere, as in our Christmas gathering, people are experiencing new kinds of interactions with people who have long been foreign to them – people in other nations, of other races, of other cultures. This tendency has been growing for a century or more; the internet has only catalyzed and accelerated it. As these diverse views interact, are grave dangers of fragmentation, conflict, and reaction. But there is an opportunity for unprecedented enrichment of human understanding and mutuality. But there now exists as well the possibility of building a community of interest, for the first time, that is wide and strong enough to bring us together to work on the complex problems of our age.

The central question I am addressing is: Can we expand trust, in a time of increasing conflict and paralysis? Or rather: Can we build trust, *for the first time*, wide and strong enough to bring us together to work on the complex problems of our age?

Trust has classically been built from the bottom up – from stable families, neighborhoods, local associations, then layering up to a set of generally harmonious duties to region and nation. From this perspective, the demands of dispersed, cross-cutting relations weaken the sense of community; what is needed is to focus first on those closest to us.

The answer I propose is sharply different: that we need to make rich relations work on a large scale by moving outward from family and close friends across many groups and cultures. We need not merely to *tolerate* those who are different from ourselves, while keeping our distance, but to strive to *understand* them by entering into their worlds. What we experienced a little bit in our living room needs to develop into widely reliable expectations.

We have to make rich community work because society is increasingly fluid and complex. At work, at school, in the marketplace, we deal increasingly with people very different from ourselves. We hear a buzz of conflicting voices in our ears to a degree unprecedented in history. Many of them are demanding respect. White males are widely expected to sympathize with the plight of black people who feel threatened by the police, or of women who feel excluded by conversations about sports. Jews, Muslims, Christians, gun owners, gays – a cacophony of voices is demanding not merely to be tolerated, not merely to be treated with abstract equality, but to be *understood* in their particular needs and aspirations. We can't escape those demands.

We have to make this community work, moreover, because we face grave systemic problems that require wide support and cooperation – problems at a global scale, needing varied knowledge and expertise. We can no longer focus on our local, tight communities and traditions. We have to include others in the conversation in order to work together effectively on common problems.

This requires a basic shift in the sense of what a community is, and what we owe it – to radically oversimplify, a shift from tolerance to understanding. It requires expanding and enriching the community, rather than falling back on homogeneous groups, and collaborating people very different from ourselves. All that is, at best, terribly difficult.

This book is an exploration of the obstacles to trust in a complex world and the possibilities for building it. It begins by trying to explain why we are having so much trouble living together

now, and why the modern solutions of tolerance, civility, and systems rationality are failing us. Starting in chapter 4, it elaborates how a rich community might work, and how we might build it. It takes up, in chapter 6, the challenge of bringing diverse groups to work together around shared purposes, drawing lessons from the rapid advance of complex collaborations in business and elsewhere. Finally, it explores the current polarizing conflicts based in the fierce reactions to the growth of complexity those who want to preserve their existing communities and ways of life, and suggests how movements could be built to expand community rather than narrowing it.

The importance of community

I am driven first by a sense of alarm. A highly interdependent and complex society needs more trust, but we have less. Many of our key institutions have weakened: people throughout the industrial democracies vote less, trust each other less, divorce more. And these contribute to our inability to deal with systemic crises that threaten our shared futures.

We face critical problems that require worldwide cooperation on complex solutions, yet we drift further and farther from agreement. The environmental crisis is growing rapidly more dangerous, but we have made little progress in confronting it. Economic growth depends on a high level of global openness, but since 2008 protectionist pressures have been rising in one country after another. Economic inequality has risen sharply throughout the advanced industrial world. The dispersion of existing nuclear weapons creates a very grave danger of random attacks, while the development of new scientific weaponry could easily make the atomic bomb look like a minor problem. Even the opportunities created by innovation are fraught with great risks. If we manage to greatly extend human life, which some now see as imminent, how will we deal with the enormous social dislocation that must result – jobs not opening up for young people, families struggling to work out places for aged grandparents, growing wealth-based divisions in life expectancy? If we develop ever-more intelligent robots – and we seem to be at a point of great acceleration – what will we do with all the people displaced from their jobs?

Many have expressed a fear that the institutions of democratic decision-making have reached a state of exhaustion, unable to manage the complexity of the problems they face. Confidence in the great institutions that have pulled us together in the past, especially national governments, seems to be falling throughout the advanced industrial world. No international body has approached anything like widespread credibility. More and more groups are withdrawing into self-protective shells – regional secessionism, border-closing reactionary movements, religious fundamentalism.

The issues I have touched on are not essentially technical, and cannot be dealt with through technological fixes. They are, rather, problems of trust and understanding, of community. The difficulty is not in finding solutions – there are plenty of solutions; it's that we cannot get people to work together on them. Every possible path arouses passionate feelings from varied groups about what is important, who is to blame, who should take the lead. We lack a unifying sense of right and a enough feeling of solidarity to hold us together through difficult times. In the face of complexity, we have fragmented.

This book is also born of hope, though I must admit from the start that the hope is tenuous. It is based on the fact that there has been important progress in recent decades in building

communities that are more complex and wider in scope than those of the past, communities shown in microcosm in our Christmas gathering. Some have worked to embrace people of widely varying backgrounds and beliefs: these include ecumenical religious groups, multi-party community dialogues, peace and reconciliation processes, even some online discussion boards. A few have managed to build real agreement on planning and policy through engagement of many stakeholders. And in some perhaps unexpected places there has been extraordinary progress in bringing together diverse talents around common purposes. I think of the open source software movement, which has managed to create highly complex systems of code from the efforts of dispersed and independent contributors, sometimes outdoing even the most powerful corporations. And I think of the changes within some corporations, as they have moved from hierarchical command structures to the mobilization of flexible problem-solving teams.

These developments of the last half century have involved great social invention. A range of techniques and structures have been developed to manage the process of creating agreement out of difference – indeed, of building differences into a positive force for collective creativity, rather than a negative force for discord. Some groups, – not just marginal utopians, but groups at the core of competitive corporate life – have begun to master the use of consensus-building methods through collective visioning, brainstorming, analytic problem-solving, and shared accountability. Fifty years ago meetings were run by someone at the front of the room, either giving directions or calling for a show of hands; now these meetings are more and more run in discussion circles, with a shared record constructed from the dialogue on an easel or whiteboard to which everyone has access. This has resulted in demonstrably better decision-making and implementation, as well as higher commitment and satisfaction among participants.

The rise of the internet has greatly magnified the potential of these techniques. It takes an effort now to remember how recent the widespread use of the internet is – surveys place it around 2005. Yet in that incredibly short span tools have sprung up that enable group contribution to common tasks from around the globe. It is amazing that people of different professions can get together in a room to thrash out a difficult problem, such as the design of a new product or a health-care delivery system; it is even more astonishing that this can happen, as of the last few years, without the room, as people from around the world work with each other using a bewildering array of emerging online tools.

The internet is only a platform, not a solution. It can as easily breed hatred as understanding. But it does tend to enrich connections. It becomes much more likely than before that people will be aware of the enormous diversity of human beliefs and experiences, and it becomes much easier than before to reach out to some of those people. It's *possible* to remain isolated on the internet, but it's harder to keep the walls up: even if you've drifted into a cult, it's more likely that an old flame or high school buddy will find you. In general, people are using these new communications technologies to develop far more links of many different kinds. Research suggests that they do not reduce their face-to-face contacts, but they at least double them with active connections that they would not have maintained with older communications technologies, and they are far better able to revive "dormant" ties with long-lost friends.

The internet merely accelerates a trend that goes back over a century, which has seen more and more people become more and more connected to wider circles. And this density of connections makes possible, I will argue, the creation of communities of a new kind: ones that are open,

diverse, fluid, and participatory. It may make it possible in the long run to increase understanding across boundaries of all kinds, and to enable diverse people to work together on the difficult problems we face.

It takes a long time, however, to build a community, and the process can easily go wrong. Community-building requires that people put their faith in ideas and institutions that have not yet proved themselves, and that they have good will to work through the inevitable disagreements and failures. The alternative, which is common enough, is a vicious spiral in which crises spawn ever-more-vicious battles among groups seeking to maintain their beliefs or their perquisites while the whole ship sinks. History is full of cases of such mutual destruction.

The relations in our Christmas living room embodied both the alarm and the hope. On one hand, we were not very “together”: the people in the room were pulled in many directions. On the other hand, we were stretched in what was, at least partly, a constructive way to combine new and old relations, family and friends, Americans, Africans, and Chinese, into a rich fabric of interaction. There was potential for a much wider range of understanding, for better conversations, than at our usual holidays; but if it failed we might withdraw into scattered pursuit of quick and easy contacts.

What is community?

A community is group of people who trust each other. Trust, in turn, is confidence that other people will act, in the future, in ways we think are right. In a world of great change, that involves more than rule-following: it requires belief that others will act properly even in future situations which cannot be foreseen – that they have a *generalized* disposition to do the right thing.

Community therefore depends first of all on a *shared sensibility*, or sense of right – so that I can be confident that what I think is right is also what you think is right, which in turn means that I can be confident that you will act as I think is right when needed in the future. Thus the first key task of community is to instill and enforce that shared sense of rightness in its members.

For this reason the community must penetrate into the personality of individuals and become part of their deepest motivations and values. It must provide an integrated framework for individual development – paths from birth to death, with meaning and hope, keeping them aligned with the general orientations of their fellow-members. Thus the nature of identity is closely intertwined with the nature of community.

We often think of community as warm and personal and familial. But it is not always so: communities must sometimes make hard decisions, punishing deviants and deciding disputes among members. Sparta was a community, but not a warm one. Thus we cannot define community simply in terms of good feeling; it is any group in which what people expect from each other is clear and can be relied on.

Once a community expands beyond a few people, we must add: it is a set of institutions that give people reasons to trust each other. Churches give us confidence that those we are dealing with have been brought up hearing the same moral lessons as us; public schools give us confidence that they have heard the same civics lessons. As societies become more advanced, institutions become more sophisticated in building the shared sense of right. Regular mechanisms of socialization, reputation, decision-making, sanctioning, dispute-resolution, and distribution give people good reason to think that if they play their part, others will play theirs

– and things will work out over all. In successful communities all these institutions, and many more, work together in concert to create, reinforce, and reward the common values.

In the current period trust has been undermined by the increasing scope and complexity of relations and social problems. In the face of dramatic new developments in science, politics, social relations, many of us are unsure of our own sense of right, to say nothing of confidence in others'. This moment in this sense similar to the transition from the premodern era to modernity, which also involved the deconstruction of deep beliefs and the construction of new ones shared across societies: a decline in the legitimacy of kingship, a rise in democracy; a decline in traditionalism, a rise in individualism. The transition between those two patterns of belief was centuries long and fiercely contested, marked by vast disruptions of webs of trust, including violent conflicts and revolutions. That history gives us a taste of what is likely to be in store during the current era, unless perhaps we can anticipate better than our forebears.

Community and self-interest

There is a persistent view in the West that community doesn't matter, or is meaningless, because action is really based on individual calculations of self-interest. This perspective goes back at least to the 16th century and has animated much of economic thought. It's a peculiar idea because it remains attractive despite the fact that most of the time it's obviously false. In some restricted settings we act as rational calculators – when comparing two types of milk at the supermarket, say; but much more often we act at least partly for other reasons. We act because we believe a goal is just, or because we want the approval of friends and family, or because we feel bound by duty, or we feel deeply attached to a tradition. From those perspectives, following mere self-interest is seen as shameful.

Napoleon, one of the great motivators, is said to have observed: “No amount of money will induce someone to lay down their life, but they will gladly do so for a bit of yellow ribbon.”¹ This is an appeal to communal motives, deriving from relations to other people and shared moral beliefs. Such motives are essential foundations both of personal identities and of stable groups. They give meaning to life, and they give reasons to trust in others.

Often, in our materialist age, analysts ignore the problem of meaning, and assume we would be happy if our material needs were met. But we all know from experience that this is not true, and many scholars have shown it as well. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim made the case in terms of the management of wants: if we didn't have moral constraints, there would be no limit to our appetites, and we could never feel satisfied. Freud, similarly, saw connectedness to others as giving strength to the ego, enabling it to tame the otherwise insatiable id. Economic research has shown no long-term relation between GDP growth and happiness.² Material prosperity contributes to well-being, but it is clearly insufficient.

Nor does material self-interest actually help much in understanding how people respond in many current debates. The environmental movement has a powerful argument from self-interest, backed by deep scientific data, but it is not accepted by those who are deeply attached to their own beliefs and world views. Anti-immigrant parties may build their arguments in part on claims that new arrivals are taking jobs and lowering standards, but their strongest motivations include maintaining a particular vision of moral worth or a shared “way of life.”³ Researchers have been astonished to find that information does not convince people on controversial issues: they block out scientific arguments that conflict with their sense of identity and self-worth, or actually distort information to conform to their existing beliefs.⁴ That is not a

surprise, however, to those who understand that we are deeply shaped by our relations to others, our upbringings, our beliefs and sense of identity – that is, by our connection to community.

The idea of society based on self-interest runs into an inescapable problem: what every purely rational individual really wants is for *everyone else* to play by the rules, but not themselves. If everyone else sticks to the rules and you don't, you get an enormous edge. When we buy a loaf of bread, we trust that the baker used the right ingredients and did not contaminate it; otherwise, we would bake the bread at home. But a truly rational baker would seek ways to cheat – to cheapen the ingredients without getting caught. If people were really pursuing self-interest, they would seek ever-more clever ways to fool the sanctions; the law could catch only a few of the cheaters.⁵ The upshot is that I would be reluctant to buy bread. I need to believe that the baker *wants* to make a good loaf – that is, I need to trust him.

What ends up happening, when shared moral constraints break down, is degeneration into spirals of retaliation. Someone tries to get away with something, someone else retaliates, and then there is no rational reason restraining everyone else from joining in the carnage.⁶

This is what happens in economic crises. In 2008 many economic writers said the crisis was “just” a matter of loss of trust, as if this was a factor so unexpected and unpredictable that we could not deal with it. But it was in fact a classic case of a spiral of mistrust, triggered when people realized that others were manipulating the rules; it led to the inevitable responses of cynicism – “every man for himself” – and withdrawal, unwillingness to play in a game with no clear rules. This spiral has happened over and over historically; although we haven't done very well in understanding it, that doesn't make it less real.

Thomas Hobbes, in the 17th century, put it best. When there is no trust among people, he wrote:

“...there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁷

For society to work, we have to count on the fact that most people, most of the time, *want* to do the right thing, and that their idea of the right thing is the same as ours. These dimensions are too often ignored in discussions about economics and policy. If we can understand the bases of trust, we can understand a great deal about how society works, including these seemingly “irrational” aspects: Why it is so difficult to achieve agreement through reasoned discussion; why do people so often resist change that is in clearly in their self-interest; why they disagree about basic, seemingly objective, facts.

Why, then, has the idea of society based on rationally self-interested individuals been so lastingly attractive? Paradoxically, because it meets a non-rational need. The modern era (as I will elaborate in chapter 2) has been based on the claim that we are all morally independent and equal. We really *want* to believe that: it was the basis of freedom, of the escape from the strictures of tradition and status in premodern societies. In order to hold that belief, we have to find a way to argue that society can be held together without violating our independence. The doctrine of individual self-interest seems to solve that dilemma. But it is empirically false, and increasingly clearly insufficient on theoretical grounds. In a world of intense interaction, we are

all more aware that we are not independent but interdependent; and that awareness is slowly forming the nucleus of a new sensibility.

Community, money, and power

Some argue that what really counts is money and power. How can we even think about community, when the rich are getting steadily richer and increasingly dominating politics? This view gained momentum recently from the dramatic rise in inequality across the advanced economies.

Money and power are material bases of social relations, but they can't work for long without community support. When they are used in ways that are widely seen as unfair, as violations of shared beliefs, they trigger withdrawal and cynicism, and may escalate into resistance and conflict. But what allows inequality to grow now is that most people think it's right, or at least sort of right – they believe that the rich have earned their wealth, that they create jobs, that they benefit everyone. Those who oppose inequality, meanwhile, do so because they believe it's *not* right.

In other words, this is an argument between moral sensibilities. Facts about money and power have no social effect unless they become attached to values, beliefs, meanings, and relations. Change comes from movements, which are people working together around shared passions. It is never nearly sufficient to trot out rational arguments or scientific evidence. One can imagine many technically effective ways of dealing with the growth of inequality, such as Thomas Piketty's proposal of a global wealth tax – but as he himself admits, there is zero chance of getting agreement on it.⁸ In these arenas, the people whose commitment is needed see the problem too differently, and mistrust each other too much, to act effectively in concert.

The problem to think about – a motivating question for this book – is how basic sensibilities and relations develop, what sustains them, and how they change. We cannot deal successfully with the problem of inequality, or climate change, or any of the other great social problems we face, without answering those questions.

Analyzing community

The communal point of view tries to understand others not just as calculating individuals, but as actors embedded in relations and cultures, and actively building patterns of belief that make sense of their world. Compared to the precise mathematical models of economists, we have little precision in this domain. We certainly cannot predict that a certain policy will increase trust by 3.6%, as economists claim to do with capital flows or productivity. But the economists' formulas work only as long as people work within constant fixed rules, thinking only of material calculations. As soon as passions enter the picture, things go haywire. That is what happens in panics and bubbles, and it reduces economists to lamenting human irrationality.

To understand community we need an approach that tries to understand people's choices based on their sensibility or point of view, rather than treating them as automatons following fixed rules. A community is defined by a shared sensibility; as analysts we need to understand what that is. That is particularly difficult for communities other than our own, where we have an intuitive feel. The best approach to this problem is still that of the great German sociologist Max Weber, who analyzed societies in terms of contrasting "ideal type" patterns of meaning. Ideal types do not predict specific actions, but they do help us *make sense* of social action through *verstehen* – understanding.⁹

I will trace the transition we are going through by contrasting two ideal-type sensibilities: that of the *associational* community seen in the West since the Renaissance, and that of an emergent *rich* community. This contrast helps explain many of the great challenges and disruptions of the current era, and it should also help think about how to build in building bridges across divides, and in building wider collaboration around complex problems.¹⁰

On race relations, for example, the classic modern sensibility focuses on the right to be left alone in private life; this framing expects arms'-length tolerance and civility, but it does not expect us to interrelate deeply in schools or neighborhoods. The emerging "rich" communities focus instead on interdependence and expect real understanding of what it feels like to be of a different race. Instead of expecting others to be mainly autonomous, consistent, and rational, they expect everyone to share a commitment to inclusiveness, and to seek actively to engage with others. These orientations run deep in character and institutions, and cannot be changed simply through rational argumentation.

The difference between these senses of right – between the classic modern community and the emergent rich community – helps understand differences in points of view in other controversies, ranging from multiculturalism to immigration to inequality changing family patterns. It should help both cognitively, as a satisfying way of organizing the confusing mess of experiences we all encounter; and also practically, as an aide in building bridges across divides, and in building wider collaboration around complex problems.

Dimensions of community: Relations and values

Community consists of two aspects, to which I will consistently return. The first, is the pattern of reciprocal expectations among different people and groups: a parent expects a child to be down in time for supper, and the child expects the parent to cook the meal. I will call this aspect *relations*. In lasting groups, relations consolidate into stable roles that everyone agrees on – roles of husbands and wives, merchants and customers, teachers and students. In a healthy community, the roles form a web of relations that complement each other in a harmonious whole.

The second dimension is that of *values*, beliefs held by *all* members of the community, whatever their role. Whether one is husband or wife, merchant or customer, teacher or student, there are some things that everyone expects of each other. In modern societies, those values include tolerance, integrity, and civility.¹¹

Values are taught throughout childhood in families and schools, and so become part of the way people think about themselves. They form a reliable basis for motivation: people can't violate their values without violating their own identities. Values are abstract; they have to be worked through for particular roles and relations. We may all believe in hard work, but that means something different for a teacher than it does for a merchant; and a community has to work through what that means for each of these and for all the other roles in society.

Values also provide a needed fuzziness in guiding social relations. When new situations come up, or when people disagree about rules and contracts, they need to be able to refer to more general principles. These principles are necessarily ambiguous, leaving room for argument and interpretation, while offering some guidance for people working through unforeseen problems.*

* This theoretical frame, which is drawn heavily from Durkheim and Parsons, is elaborated in chapter [theory].

The development of community: three types

In the current transformation of community, the *relational* shift is towards increasing diversity: more and more people are brought into close contact with wider circles of people different from themselves, whom they must make an effort to understand. The accompanying *value* shift is from an expectation of tolerance and civility to an expectation of understanding and sharing.

These intertwined evolutions have been gathering speed for over a century, as people have come into wider and deeper contact with each other through the spread of travel, leisure, higher education, and new communication technologies. The emergence of the internet has greatly accelerated the increase in density of relations. These contacts lead to new views of what is important and what is good, which in turn deeply affect policy debates on the great challenges of our time such as climate change and inequality.

This emergent “rich” community is a third great type in human history, following the “associational” communities of the modern era and the “traditionalistic” communities of premodern societies.¹²

The traditionalistic is the simplest. The easiest way to achieve trust in a large group is to assign roles and stick to them. Over time people will grow used to those relations and will become more and more confident that they are “right”. There will be little friction or lack of clarity about duties. This is a good general description of premodern societies – a strong form of community that is highly stable and secure.

But as people crowded together in denser interactions, with more resources, they started to innovate – creating new exchanges among each other, changing their roles, inventing new relations. The problem of whom to trust, and on what terms to cooperate, became much more difficult. This is what happened in modern *associational* societies – chiefly Western societies since the Renaissance – as commercial relations developed, and as people broke out of the status roles defined by birth. Many people began making unpredictable choices, which destroyed traditionalistic bases of trust and cooperation. New levels of violent conflict broke out between groups with different ideas of right.

In order to organize relations, without forcing everyone back to traditional roles, people first agreed – after a long period of violent conflict – on the value of tolerance. They separated their private from their public lives: in the latter they put aside their personal religious and cultural beliefs and acted with civility and reasonableness. In this public sphere they behaved followed abstract roles and rules; these framed *systems* – markets and bureaucratic organizations – that produced powerful cooperation even though individuals focused on their own interests. Thus they could avoid bumping into each other in unpredictable ways: most of the time they acted within their spheres and according to the rules, and everything worked out by the magic of systems.

This modern compromise of abstract tolerance and civility still shapes most of our institutions, but it is breaking down. Individuals are still making independent choices, but they can’t keep from constantly colliding. This is in part because they are interacting more than before – interdependence is high – and in part because these interactions are producing accelerated learning and innovation. The rule-based systems struggle to keep up. People keep coming up with new ideas that don’t quite fit, or clever gimmicks; regulation and systems start to fail. More and more people want to try new things but feel that the rules just get in the way of common sense. They want to work things out as they go, but not just within a small private

sphere of trusted associates – they need to involve a much larger universe of people who are affected by what they are doing or whose help needed for its success.

This is to an increasing degree the experience of members of late-industrial, “post-modern” societies. Systems are frequently failing us – government regulation and impersonal markets are unable to prevent severe unintended consequences. Private choices constantly affect people outside one’s personal circle, and outsiders are constantly butting in. Even families, which have been since the Renaissance the ultimate “castle”, are in in intense and constant contact with the outside through media and commerce; outsiders feel increasingly emboldened to cross the moat, challenging their neighbors about how they treat wives, children, pets. If we have different views about climate change, we can’t just agree to disagree: those who see an imminent threat demand changes in behaviors from everyone. If we don’t like the way in which other ethnic or religious groups behave, we can’t just avoid dealing with them: they demand, as a matter of justice, to be let into our clubs, to be integrated into our schools, and to have their symbols treated with respect on the public stage. We are caught in ever-more evident, ever-more demanding networks of interaction and interdependence. Indeed, we seek them out. On weekends we withdraw less to self-contained zones of neighborhood and family: we engage in activities – traveling, visiting malls, surfing the internet – which make manifest our connection with far flung communities.

Durkheim called this an increase in “dynamic density”. It has been widely observed that the increase in density of interactions in the commercial cities of Europe was a key driver of the social revolutions in the early modern period. I suggest that the increase in density coming from globalization, new communications technologies, and increased interdependence throughout the world is driving a disjunction of a similar scale today, requiring a reframing of relations of similar complexity.

Dynamic density has reached a point where systems are not enough. It no longer works to set up automatic mechanisms that work without the intentionality of the members, where we can all go our own independent ways and trust (as long as we follow the rules) that everything will be ok. People need to pay attention to the consequences of their actions. If they are going to cooperate, they need to agree on how to manage those consequences and relations. But for the most part we don’t know how to do it.

Rich community and collaboration

The rich community creates the possibility of bringing values back in from the margins of social life to the center, as a subject that can be discussed. It’s dangerous, as we learned in the terrible religious wars of the 16th century and are learning again today in religious conflicts around the world. But when people can sit around, as in our Christmas living room, after an Episcopal service, and communicate freely and simultaneously with Confucians in China and Catholics in France and Muslims in Mauritius, there is both a desire and an opening for the widening of understanding instead of conflict.

This impulse has given rise to accelerating initiatives in cross-cultural dialogue. The Catholic Church has been opened, despite resistance, to ecumenical movements and discussions. South Africa and Rwanda, torn in the past by intense racial and tribal violence, have sought to heal through processes of “truth and reconciliation”. Other divides – Palestinians and Jews, Indians and Pakistanis, immigrants natives – have led to a host of formal conversations aimed at better understanding. These have not resolved the conflicts, but they have often managed to lessen

conflict, to bring value differences into the realm of discussible issues, to enable people to come together at least on some pragmatic steps.

The problem then is to turn this into cooperative actions that can deal with the challenges we face in common. Over the past half-century there has been considerable development of the capability for *collaboration*: bringing together people with diverse skills and views around common purposes. Task forces or stakeholder groups can – when properly organized – combine from across the globe, or bring together historic adversaries such as unions and management, environmentalists and businesses. Unlike the purposive actions of the past, these collaborations do not depend on being part of the same nation or tribe. Purpose can – when properly organized – create trust on its own without the familiar links of lineage or region.

The idea of working together seems simple but requires a deep rethinking of institutions. The combination of decentralized initiative with coordinated pursuit of shared goals is not part of our tradition. It will take sustained effort to clarify how this could work and to build support for this vision of society.*

Conclusion

The core arguments of this book are that the dangers of conflict and fragmentation are indeed great; that the positive potential of [interactive-rich](#) relations could save us by creating a new level of understanding and respect across cultures; but that the road is at best a difficult one.

Emerging communities of diverse, densely interacting groups sharing their cultures could point the way to overcoming barriers that have long divided nations, races, and religions. But we don't yet know how far this can go, or whether it can provide a sufficient basis of trust for working together on the great challenges of our age. It's something of a race, with the stakes being humanity. The knitting of new relations of trust takes a very long time, especially on large scales. The building of new institutions, and the winning of support for them, is arduous. It will not be done without great conflict. Meanwhile the threats grow more intractable. The hope is that we can learn fast enough to work together on them rather fragmenting into warring tribes.

* For examples of how current communal divisions are affecting debates on important issues like climate change and inequality, see chapter 7, p. XXXff [some issues]

ENDNOTES

¹ Quoted in various places without attribution, probably apocryphal – but too on point to pass up.

² This is known as the “Easterlin paradox” (Easterlin and Angelescu 2009). Some dispute the finding but it has generally held up well across many studies.

³ It is sometimes argued that even altruism is self-interested, in the sense that it meets some need of the altruistic person. That, however, reduces the concept of self-interest to a tautology, and thus robs it of all analytic utility. If we restrict it to *material* self-interest, as economists generally do, then we can as scientists calculate the likely behavior of another person; but if we allow all other motives into the frame, that determinacy is irretrievably lost. That leads towards sociological analytic methods based on understanding, rather than determinist or positivist approaches.

⁴ (Nyhan et al. 2014; Kahan et al. 2013).

⁵ Economists have been paying increasing attention to non-rational aspects of human behavior. Kahneman won a Nobel Prize for his work (with Tversky) pushing the field in this direction (Kahneman 2011). But they continue the essential direction of classical economics, of trying to identify the universal characteristics of individuals in order to build social models. They merely modify the claim that all humans are rational to a claim that all humans are rational with common quirks. They consider very little the ways in which social relations and institutions may affect choices.

At least two major theorists, however, have been accepted into the economists’ fold for trying to integrate communal aspects in the theory: Amartya Sen and Elinor Ostrom. The problem is that the more they do it, the more they sound like sociologists, with all the indeterminacy of that field: without the assumption of individual rationality, they cannot make determinate predictions. I must confess, if only in an endnote, to some bemusement at seeing the economic profession lauded for starting to struggle with issues like social process and inequalities of power, which sociologists have been working on for well over a century.

⁶ This is the essence of the so-called “prisoner’s dilemma”, which is a thorn in the side of economic theory. Axelrod (1997) argues that in the long run, with many iterations, cooperation is rationally preferable to defection for every individual; but this is contested, and it is hard to see how this could work unless without the creation of some shared social norm.

⁷ (Hobbes 1651, chap. XIII, p. 66 - “Of The Natural Condition Of Mankind As Concerning Their Felicity And Misery”)

⁸ (Piketty 2014)

⁹ There is a great deal of debate on the nature of an ideal type. I am working from Weber’s usage, but I want to stress a couple of aspects. First, ideal types are not *logical* unities deducible from first principles; rather, they are *patterns*, similar to *gestalt* patterns, which can be understood. Logic is only one dimension of the way people organize and pattern their worlds. I believe this is entirely consistent with Weber’s notion of *verstehen*. Ideal types are also not necessarily observable in the real world: people act in inconsistent ways in different contexts and are able to tolerate quite a lot of “mismatch” in their behavior, in part through defense mechanisms like repression or disassociation.

¹⁰ One might identify a fourth type of community: the “band of brothers”, in which people negotiate continuously in good faith, as friends do. This works, however, only for very small groups, and even there is quite vulnerable to defection and disruption. So it is not very helpful in thinking about societies, and I will largely leave it aside.

¹¹ For the most part I will treat values together with cultural orientations (“mindsets”). They should be distinguished for some purposes – see chapter 9, p. xxxx [“Values (in Parsons’ framework) are closely connected”]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Axelrod, Robert. 1997. *The complexity of cooperation: Agent-based models of competition and collaboration*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Easterlin, Richard A., and Laura Angelescu. 2009. *Happiness and Growth the World Over: Time Series Evidence on the Happiness-Income Paradox*. SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.
- Hobbes, T. 1651. *Leviathan*. Ed by. J. C. A. Gaskin. J.M. Dent and Sons.
- Kahan, Dan M., Ellen Peters, Erica Cantrell Dawson, and Paul Slovic. 2013. *Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government*. SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.
- Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Nyhan, Brendan, Jason Reifler, Sean Richey, and Gary L. Freed. 2014. Effective Messages in Vaccine Promotion: A Randomized Trial. *Pediatrics* 133, no. 4 (April 1): e835–e842.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Trans by. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.