

Preface

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The uses of the term “community” in English are striking by their frequency in everyday conversation. A noun adjunct in many compound nouns (“community service,” “community manager,” “community centre,” etc.), the term evokes a sense of proximity, bonding, and togetherness characteristic of what is considered positive in collective interactions at a level which is perceived as close, familiar and local. Yet “community” is often invoked to the point of being naturalized as unquestioned common sense, and its uses are seldom consciously examined or interrogated.

This issue of *Leaves* continues and develops the exchanges initiated by a conference—“Community in the English-Speaking World—the Concept and its Uses in Social and Political Discourses”—organised in September 2019 by the research group CLIMAS (EA 4196—Cultures et littératures des mondes anglophones). The main objective is to address the apparent success of the term “community” and to examine closely how it functions as a conveyor of specific ideological meanings.

Whether in the vocabulary of social workers or political figures, in the analyses of social scientists, in the spheres of charity work, or in online groups of people with a shared interest, “community” seems to be imbued with positive, reassuring associations with what is neighbourly and recognizable. “Community,” as Raymond Williams underlines, is both “the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships; or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships” (Williams 75). “Community” is used by scholars as a conceptual tool defining a social group interacting on the basis of shared interests, values, representations, language, cultural practices, with or without being bound to a specific geographical space; it is also used in an empirical manner as a descriptive tool which seems to conjure up an ideal level of social organisation characterized by proximity and a disposition to care. The word seems to be able to articulate simultaneously the levels of the local and the global: especially following the rise of the internet which has strengthened the possibility for new “imagined communities” to flourish beyond the national community whose symbolic representations were examined by Benedict Anderson.

What is it that makes “community” such a successful and enduring concept? This issue of *Leaves* brings together contributions which seek precisely to interrogate the uses made of the term in political discourse, in the social sciences, in the language of institutions or in the terminology of organisations. Far from being an obvious or common-sense term, could it be

that “community,” beneath its cosy, fashionable connotations, is a word which may be reductive, generalizing, or even misleading and manipulative?

Works cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities. Reflexions on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 2nd ed., Verso, 1991.

Williams, Raymond. “Community.” *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana, 1983.