ON ETHNIC "COMMUNITIES" IN NON-NATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Zlatko Skrbiš

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this paper is to question the term ethnic "community" as it is generally accepted and utilized in popular language as well as in the scholarly literature. This paper outlines a segment of research–in–progress on globalism, immigration and ethno–nationalism in second generation Australians of non–English speaking backgrounds (Skrbis 1994). In the present paper, we will examine the applicability of some attributes of the term "community" to the so–called ethnic "communities" of Australia. For the purpose of this paper, I have combined the material based on interviews obtained from second generation Slovenians, Crotians and informants from other ethnic groups. Although the paper could be perceived as Australian-specific, I shall argue that problems pertinent to Australian ethnic "communities" are much more universal than it is often recognized.

The discussion on ethnic "communities" will lead us to elaborate three concepts which will be presented in more detail later in this paper: the paradox of exclusion, the paradox of abstract inclusion, and a model of multiple fluctuation of ethnic boundaries. The discussion of "community" prompts questions of theoretical and empirical consequence. These questions may be summarised as follows: firstly, what is "community" and what is the relationship between "community" and ethnicity? Secondly, how far does ethnic "community" really exist? Thirdly, what is the link between the theory of community on the ōne hand, and empirical reality on the other.

A variety of meanings for the term "community" exists in the literature. Despite this, we are still able to identify some core characteristics of this term, such as strong social bonds, relative homogeneity of members and the emotional closeness of members (cf. Maciver and Page 1961; Bernard 1973). Students of communities are invariably concerned with the process by which community members form bonds. The introduction of ethnicity to the "community" context makes the issues more complex and leads to the following dilemma: is ethnicity a matter of organic ties between individuals

(i.e. ethnic community) or is it simply a collection of individuals with some characteristics in common (i.e. ethnic group)?

The problem with the term "community" is, therefore, a real one. Although regarded with scepticism in this paper, it is not proposed to reject the term ethnic "community" completely. We will continue to use this term in this paper but remain aware of its problematic usage. The use of the term ethnic "community" is commonly taken for granted and we propose that this use is an example of a powerful construct at work in everyday language as well as in scholarly literature. We shall question what ethnic "community" really signifies. Finally, when we apply this term to the situation of small ethnic groups in Australia, we find that the gap between construct of the "community" and real "community" is extremely complex.

"COMMUNITY" AS AN ABSTRACTION

Margaret Stacey (1969, 134) wrote that it is *"doubtful whether the concept of "community" refers to a useful abstraction"*. As early as mid 1950's, Hillery introduced some confusion into field of community studies when analysing the meanings of some 94 definitions of "community" and concluded that *"all of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis there is no agreement (1955, 117)"*.

Tönnies (1963, 33-37), who introduced this term into sociology (but not the underlying idea), had always identified community/Gemeinschaft with "organic life", "intimate", "private", "mother and child" relationship and the like. Community was identified with closely knit networks of people of a similar kind, with intimate relationship, with face–to–face relationships, and was seen as serving the needs of its members with warmth, strength and stability. These are the characteristics we will use in the analysis at hand.

It is not our intention to become too deeply involved with community theorizing. What we need to acknowledge is the fact that the term "community" is not value–free and that despite numerous definitions of the term, there has always been some emotive stirring occurring whenever the term was used (Tönnies 1963; Redfield 1962). We should also note the heavy normative loading of the term. Numerous paradoxes emerge if we follow the traditional definitions and usage of the term "community"– it may describe everything from collections of "red–headed persons" or group of "suicidal maniacs" (Macfurlane 1977, 633) to the "nation–state" or the "prison" as community (Stacey 1969,135-136).

THE NON–QUESTIONING OF THE REALITY OF ETHNIC "COMMUNITY"

To illustrate the extent to which we may talk of ethnic "community", let me emphasize two aspects that require greater elaboration.

Holton (1989, 201) stresses that: While some authors emphasize that ethnic communities are not homogeneous, such reservations are generally only used to draw attention to internal differentiation *within* the community, rather than as a means of suggesting *limits* to the community itself.

This quiet acceptance of the real existence of ethnic "communities", as discussed by Holton, is responsible for dubious approaches to social reality. Encouraged by this taken–for–granted reality, researchers ask questions on "patterns", "core values" and "typicality" of different ethnic groups in Australia. What these approaches actually presume is that all individuals from particular ethic backgrounds have an equal share in participating in ethnic cultures which are, by and large, defined through "ethnic" clubs, "ethnic" congregations, "ethnic" schools, and other like institutions (cf. Holton 1989, 202).

Smolicz (1979), a founder of the theory of core values argues that each ethnic group has certain core value (such as language and family structure). The difficulty of this approach lies in the very foundations of the theory since it presupposes the *existence* and *transmission* of these core values. The process of the transmission of these core values could only be possible if an ethnic group is understood as a perfectly functioning community. Without the notion of the existent community, founded on its "core values", the theory becomes meaningless as "community" can hardly be anything but a hypothetical nation. The hypothesized core element of one culture ceases to be the core element if not transmitted among all members.

An example of the nexus between the non–questioning of the reality of ethnic "communities" and the empirical filed–work undertaken by a social scientist is the argument of Donohoue Clyne in her discussion of the retention of ethnicity among children of Yugoslav migrants in South Australia. She stated (1980, 80):

As the Slovenes do not have the religious–political divisions of the Serbian community, nor the nationalistic aspirations of the Croatian Club, they have established a closely knit and extremely stable community.

We should like to challenge the notion of *"a closely knit and extremely stable community"*. My empirical research shows that this has not been the case in South Australia. I have been unable to perceive a sense of "community" as defined in social theory. However, for heuristic purposes, we may talk about two loosely defined groups of people: one centred around the club and the other around the church. Membership space in the different compartments of the South Australian Slovenian "community" has always been loosely defined. We also do not negate the possibility and actual occurrence of intra-"communal" movements and the participation of many individuals in different formal and informal groups and institutions considered to be elements of the broader "community", i.e. participating in both hubs of the community.

We suspect that this particular example based on the Slovenian "community" could be supported by many others. We face a contradictory situation if we try to proclaim a highly conflicting and divided ethnic group as a "community". Donohoue's elaboration, is not only based on non–existent and unquestioned reality but also presupposes (and operates within) the constructed myth of *"the functioning Slovene ethnic community"*. It appears that she framed social reality into a clustered entity called a "community" simply to avoid the point of confusion which would inevitably occur if she acknowledged the segmentation and factual divisions in the ethnic "community" space.

ETHNIC "COMMUNITY" BOUNDARIES IN AN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT AND THE SEGMENTATION OF ETHNIC "COMMUNITY'S" SPACE

The issue hidden behind "community" labelling is the problem of determining its circumference. At this point we should accept not only Fredrick Barth's notion of an ethnic boundary but also his belief that the ethnic boundary (in a social rather than a physical/geographical sense) which defines a group, is more important than the cultural values and behavior it encloses (Barth 1970, 15). What is the social boundary which demarcates the inner and outer world of an ethnic "community" and – most importantly – who sets them up? In other words, what is meant by words "Croatian ethnic community", "German ethnic community", "Dutch ethnic community", etc.? Is this just a type of "administrative labelling" (Jayasuriya 1990, 105)? Do we mean people of one particular background who identify with and participate in the ethnic group organizations such as clubs, churches, retirement homes,

sport clubs, etc.? Or, do we mean the entire population of one particular ethnic background (i.e. all the Slovenians, all the Dutch...) living in a particular geographical area? These questions have no agreed answer and by asking them we start to move in a vicious circle, for two obvious reasons:

Firstly, if we use the term "community" referring to those who participate in an organized life of the community, we automatically exclude a substantial part of the population of a particular ethnic background which does not take part in organized community activities. This is, what we will call *the paradox of exclusion.*

Secondly, if we have in mind the entire population of one particular background we do not take into consideration that many of these people – maybe even a majority of them – may have nothing in common, and, therefore, they, by definition, do not constitute the community. This is the type of construct that most writings on ethnic "communities" refer to. We shall call this type of situation *the paradox of abstract inclusion* (see table 1).
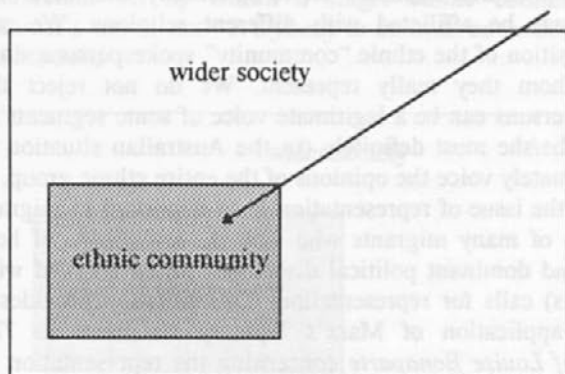

Table 1: Abstract inclusion external view on ethnic community.

The proposed paradoxes are not simply a matter of academic comment. Although the wider society perceives ethnic "communities" as homogeneous entities, we are proposing a model which simultaneously recognizes the

creation of the delusion of homogeneity by the wider society as well as the internal stratification of a "community".

The problem of representation

Research shows that in reality it is very hard to locate an ethnic "community". Let us stress, however, that ethnic "community", no matter how imagined, is a significant factor and source of support to many migrants in an alien environment. In consequence, we should ask an important related question: who is in a position to be a legitimate representative of a particular ethnic "community", or rather, of its construct? Persons fitting these types of roles immediately come to mind: a president or a spokesperson of the club, a priest and/or so-called "spokespersons" of the ethnic "community". The president of a club or its spokesperson rarely voice the opinion of an entire community (whatever the "community" may stand for) because the club is just an institution with a limited membership. Some ethnic groups have more than one club; often they are in discord or even conflict with one another.

There are similar problems with the priest. Even if we are talking about ethnic groups which are seemingly homogeneous through a common religious affiliation, we can not assume that all its members are either religious, let alone active church members. More commonly, members of a single ethnic group may be affiliated with different religions. We can likewise dispute the position of the ethnic "community" spokespersons since it remains unclear whom they really represent. We do not reject the possibility that spokespersons can be a legitimate voice of some segments of the "community", but he/she most definitely (in the Australian situation at least) can hardly legitimately voice the opinions of the entire ethnic group. It is clear, however, why the issue of representation is so important in migrant environments. Position of many migrants who lack the knowledge of host society's institutions and dominant political discourses (often coupled with lack of languages skills) calls for representation. This situation provides a classical ground for application of Marx's lapidary statement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte* concerning the representation of the proletariat: *"Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden."* Or in other words, according to Jupp (1984, 187) that *"there are always aspirants to leadership who emerge from ethnic groups."*

Multiple fluctuation of boundaries

To answer the question *"Who sets up the boundaries of the ethnic communities?"*, we propose the model of *multiple fluctuations* of boundaries. It designates the space of ethnic "communities" in relation to the ever changing situational factors. It takes into consideration national "permanent" boundary definitions and the processes of redefinition which take place within the ethnic groups. Ethnic "communities" are generally perceived as groups that have clearly defined outer realities. Inner boundaries are not recognized. These, however, may be as strong as those demarcating the outer boundaries: the space between the in-group (the ethnic "community") and the out-group (the host society).

The acknowledgement of this phenomenon proved to be of foremost importance while conducting field-work in the Slovenian and Croatian "communities". *Boundary-shifting* was the most prominent and constant process within both organized "communities". It is dependant upon loyalties, interests, envy, gossip, scandals and demands that take place within a group at any given moment. Indeed, the boundaries are many (see table 2). They do not necessarily coincide with the organizational frameworks of the particular ethnic "community"; they may be based upon, and sustained by special hierarchies set up within a single ethnic community organization. In Simmel's terms, not *"everybody is considered immediately as "belonging" (1950, 368)"*.
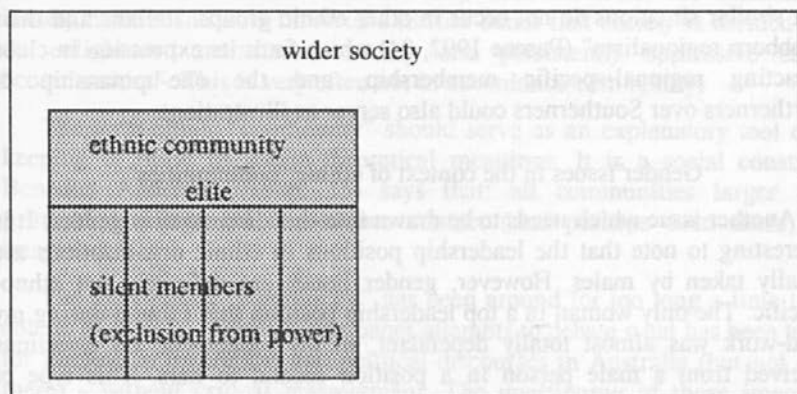

Table 2: Internal view on ethnic community.

The example that comes to mind is the influx of new members into the Croatian Clubs in Australia due to the current war in their homeland. These new members are often suspected of being former supporters of a communist Yugoslav government and members of the so-called Yugoslav Clubs. No matter what the truth behind these assertions may be, there is a boundary set up which distinguishes between the old, established members and the new, incoming members. This boundary also defines - among other things - the extent to which one's "loyalty" to Croatianism and Croatia is "measured" by others in the "community" (Skrbiš 1994).

In respect to the Slovenian "community" in South Australia, its institutions are divided and have two loosely defined centers. The communication between these two can be at times reduced to a minimum and even when it occurs it usually ends up as a misunderstanding or develops into a new conflict. The point needs to be stressed that there is always the possibility and actual occurrence of intra-"communal" individual flexibility. While conducting my field-work, I was told by individuals from "both sides" that "their" particular arguments were the right ones. Whenever challenged by my comments, such as, commented, *"Oh, I didn't know that"* or *"I am surprised to hear that"*. I was openly told that this was so because I did not frequent their (correct) side of the "community".

A priori community labelling prevents the acknowledgement that segmentation of apparently uniform community space does take place. If we concentrate on the Slovenian and Croatian "communities" it does not mean that similar situations do not occur in other ethnic groups. Italians and their "stubborn regionalism" (Pascoe 1992, 94) which finds its expression in clubs attracting regional-specific membership, and the one-upmanship of Northerners over Southerners could also server as illustrations.

Gender issues in the context of ethnic "communities"

Another issue which needs to be drawn into this discussion is gender. It is interesting to note that the leadership positions in ethnic organizations are usually taken by males. However, gender issues are definitely not ethno-specific. The only woman in a top leadership position that I found during my field-work was almost totally dependant, in my judgement, on directions received from a male person in a position second to hers. This type of situation reveals not only the problem of representation, but also the gap between the *formal* and *real* hierarchy within the ethnic organization/group/community.

An example which derives from a second generation Italian individual/informant is an illustrative description of the situation of many ethnic "communities". A prominent first-generation Italian migrant was talking to an audience about how easy it was for him to establish himself in Australia. My female informant who was in the audience objected on the grounds that he had neglected to state that he migrated with higher education and good English language skills, that his wife devoted all her time to the family, and that his situation was atypical for Italian migrants i general. Prefacing his response to her with *"Ma, figlia mia"* (literally translated: *"But, daughter of mine"* meaning *"But, my dear young lady"*), he had immediately presupposed a hierarchy, and his response, furthermore, was patronizing and sexist. Furthermore, he established as a father figure, a male-power person. Not only gender is at stake here; generation gap, educational attainments, political beliefs, class, alternative life-styles, no-conventional appearance, and other factors may also cause a range of responses including rejection and exclusion from the "community" and lead to permanent conflict (cf. Czarnacka and Fiut 1987, 327-28).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is not to slander the ethnic "communities". They are divided, segmented, hierarchical and potentially narrow in outlook just as much as the institutions and "communities" within the wider society. A belief that ethnic "communities" are radically different from the mainstream society more than likely involves a further belief that society is divided into an enlightened mainstream society and persistently oppressive ethnic "communities". This is very often not in accordance with reality.

The term ethnic "community" should serve as an explanatory tool only, keeping in mind its subtle theoretical meanings. It is a social construct. Benedict Anderson (1986, 15) says that: all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.

The term ethnic "community" has been around for too long a time to be able to dismiss it. However, this paper attempts to debate what has been taken for granted in theoretical and political discourses in Australia (but not only there) - without critical reassessment. The questioning of those imagined ethnic "communities" may lead to much more complex issues, such as the politics of service delivery and vote bargaining for example.

A sociological understanding of the term "community" implies a high degree of inclusivity, and an homogeneous grouping of people. This can cause serious misunderstandings. This may be seen in the process by which a society is segmented and divided along the ethnic lines. Fears of this sort are present in different debates and may lead to incorrect and questionable generalizations. Problems with this approach are indicated in Chipman's critique of Australian multiculturalism (1980, 4):

Support for the values of some communities means support for a sheltered, separate, limited and thoroughly sexist upbriging for daughters, for example. It means, for some communities, inculcating racial and ethnic mythologies theoretically irrelevant to the future of Australia, but politically, and literally, explosive if developed here. It means, in some cases, perpetuating the notion of the duty to kill to conserve family or blood honor. It means that the sixteen-year-old daughter of ex-Calabrian peasants should not be allowed to go to the disco with her Australian classmates...

Using the "hidden" potentials of the term "community" ("migrants are all the same", "oppression is the rule"...), he was able to find a support for a stereotypical construct of an "imprisoned" young Italian girl, constrained by the chains of the a priori patriarchal community (Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skrbis 1993). Chipman's argument is one-sided and does not leave any room for resistance to traditional social codes of the children and presents the situation of young Italian women as unanimously difficult, constrained and in contradiction with the "modern times". He also overlooks the possibility that many girls may accept with understanding many parental codes and, indeed, find sufficient satisfaction within the so-defined social world.

What is, therefore, to be suggested is not the invention of a new term, more neutral than "community" but the avoidance of the perpetuation of the myth of a homogeneous, conflictless (and yet oppressive to the individual) ethnic "community", in relevant discussions. This requires both theoretical clarification *and* empirical analysis of the centers of cohesion and conflict within ethnic *groups*.

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POVZETEK

ETNIČNE SKUPNOSTI V TUJIH OKOLJIH

Zlatko Skrbiš

Kdorkoli se ukvarja s problematiko etničnih skupin v Avstraliji, slej ko prej naleti na ponavljajočo se retoriko. Eden izmed pojmov, ki se najpogosteje uporablja v tej zvezi je "etnična skupnost". Najdemo ga povsod, v vsakodnevnem jeziku kakor tudi v jeziku politikov in tistih, ki se z "etničnimi vprašanji" soočajo na strokovni ravni. Osnovno vprašanje, ki se takoj postavi je: ali resnično vse etnične skupine "tvorijo" in "živijo v" skupnostih? Kako je takšna skupnost definirana in kdo jo reprezentira? Ali so meje slovenske(ih?) skupnosti v Avstraliji definirane s članstvom v klubih in

verskih ustanovah? Tovrstna vprašanja so bila doslej premalokrat kritično zastavljena, še posebej pa so pomembna zavoljo manipulativne moči, ki jo ima etiketa "skupnost".

Pri analizi tega vprašanja je koristno opozoriti na razliko, ki jo sociologija definira s pojmoma *Gemeinschaft* (skupnost) in *Gesellschaft* (družba). Historični prerez pojma "skupnosti" v sociološki misli kaže na eno ponavljajočo se značilnost: skupnost je vedno definirana kot relativno kohezivna in nediferencirana tvorba. Še več, v delih mnogih sociologov figurira kot ideal in nostalgična referenca.

Paradoksalno je, da se pogoste reference na ti. etnične "skupnosti" v Avstraliji po pravilu nanašajo na ljudi, ki delijo isto etnično poreklo. Biti Slovenec, bi po tej logiki pomenilo avtomatsko pripadati avstralsko-slovenski skupnosti. Že bežno soočenje s tem vprašanjem nam torej kaže na prozornost logike etiketiranja, ki je v ozadju problema. Vprašanja družbenega razreda, socialnega sloja, generacije in spola ostajajo tej logiki povsem tuja in ne nazadnje odveč, saj kalijo navidezno "monolitno strukturiranost" družbe.

V avstralskem kontekstu so etnične "skupnosti" po nepisanem pravilu identificirane z organizacijsko strukturo določene populacije iste etnične pripadnosti (cerkve, klubi, športna društva...). Raziskovanje, ki je podlaga temu članku potrjuje težo Benedicta Andersona, da gre za "namišljeno skupnost". Temu, da je etnična "skupnost" (poudarek je na skupnosti!) produkt lastnega "namišljanja", je treba dodati še to, da je hkrati tudi kreacija vladajočih diskurzivnih praks in širše družbe katere član je.