

Dr. Julian Baggini

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Goodbye Cohesive Communities, Hello Successful Neighbourhoods

Has anyone ever evoked the metaphor of ‘the social fabric’ for any reason other than to suggest it is falling apart? That’s all it has ever seemed to be doing, and political commentators, sociologists and politicians all seem obsessed with re-stitching it. The terms of the debate vary – ‘community cohesion’, ‘broken Britain’, ‘sustainable communities’ – but the preoccupations remain the same. Left and right seem to agree that we live in a fractured, atomised society which threatens the communal ties on which civil society depends.

And yet, here we are in the second decade of the 21st century and still somehow the country hangs together. Give or take the odd recessionary bleep, we live longer, healthier, wealthier lives as each year goes by. Does this deter the doomsayers? Not at all. Like prophets of millennial apocalypse, or old-school Marxists, they continue to insist collapse is still inevitable, it’s just the schedule is running a bit late.

That is not to say there are no problems facing us, in terms of the cohesion of communities. It is simply to warn that analyses of the problems and their likely consequences do not have a good track record. Given that, we have little reason to trust prescriptions for what we should do about it.

To do better, we first need a better diagnosis of the problem. For this, we need to get over various forms of nostalgia that lead people to overstate our losses and understate our gains. Social stability meant that if you were the son of a miner, you’d almost certainly be a miner yourself, condemned to one of the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs imaginable. The left often romanticises the solidarity of the working classes, but close in-groups also require out-groups. After the Second World War, for instance, local unions often strongly resisted attempts by the National Coal Board to get Polish soldiers who had fought with the Allies during the Second World War working down the mines. The right is also hampered by bucolic myths of a time when everyone was happy in their place, forgetting the massive inequality and lack of social justice on which such ‘golden ages’ depended.

To lament the decline of traditional communities without praising the increase in many personal freedoms is to tell only half the story. One of the main reasons why people don’t know everyone on their street, for instance, is that many more people are getting much more education, and move as a result. People who live close to where they are born often simply haven’t had the opportunity to do anything else.

For these reasons, it is important when thinking of community cohesion not to set up a return to a lost idyll as the goal. But if we try to re-imagine community from a blank slate, we can easily end up with a hopeless utopianism. Post-war tower blocks and council estates are proof of how well-intentioned projects that look wonderful on paper can have unforeseen results in reality. So we are caught between the dream of a past that never was and the dream of a future that never can be. How can we navigate between these two seductive siren calls?

It might help to get the terminology right. Words have powers that we are often not even aware of. How we speak creates assumptions that may hinder more than help, as a short trip through the lexicon of this particular debate shows.

Start with ‘cohesion’. I’m always suspicious of anyone who advocates a word that has an opposite no-one would dream of championing. Is anyone in favour of social disintegration or civic incoherence? I didn’t think so. But that does not mean we all agree on what ‘cohesion’ is and why it is good.

It seems to me that by ‘social cohesion’ we minimally mean, to return to our first metaphor, a social fabric that holds together. But potential exemplars of this vary enormously, from very tightly-knit communities to much looser ones. This is how it should be. It should not be the goal of policy-makers to determine just how closely interwoven the lives of citizens are. People should be allowed to be as independent as they want to be, consistent with society holding together.

Similar thoughts arise when you consider the word ‘community’. It evokes warm feelings of village fetes, neighbourhood watch schemes and communal allotments. But, again, this kind of close living with others is not for everyone. Public bodies should certainly allow such communities to flourish, but it is not their business to turn every street into prime exemplars.

If you actually look at which communities are closer-knit, it becomes even clearer that this is not always and necessarily rooted in something good. Take two areas I have some experience of. Maltby is a former pit village on the outskirts of Rotherham. Unemployment is high, and virtually every social indicator is low. Yet on many counts, it has a much stronger community than most places. A large proportion of people who live there were born there and many people know each other. Many, if not most, want to live there. But few would think its residents are better off than

those in the new estates of nearby Bramley. No-one over ten was born there, because the streets are younger than they are. People know few of their neighbours and there is little communal life. Yet most are content to live there, in homes they own and are proud of. Neither is a model community. But it is striking that in many ways, the worse of the two areas is much more of a 'community' than the better.

What we need to do, I propose, is to strip away from our ideas of 'cohesive communities' many of the prescriptive value-judgements it implies about what the good life is. Let us think not of 'sustainable communities' but simply 'successful neighbourhoods'. What do these look like? First, people want to live in them. Second, they can do so without major problems. Third, their doing so does not create problems for others elsewhere. Any area that ticks all three boxes is surely healthy enough for public bodies to leave them pretty much alone to live as they choose. Such areas will come in different forms, which is as it should be. There is no such thing as one model for a successful neighbourhood that would suit everyone, so it doesn't matter if most policy makers would never choose to live in them.

If we have successful neighbourhoods, then what we require from cohesion will follow. The social fabric will hold together just as long as people can live happily where they want to, without cost to others. How much 'community' such neighbourhoods will create is an open question. One thing is for sure: we cannot turn the clock back on the social changes that have led to increased individuality, and nor should we want to. The problem is not individualism as such, but only the kind of selfish egotism that leads people to deny their responsibilities to others.

One final thought. The focus on communities can also lead people to overstate the extent to which solutions to problems of cohesion can be found locally. To create successful communities, it is not enough, however, to focus on the local. National policy matters considerably. If, for instance, fiscal policy leads to growing differences between rich and poor, then it becomes increasingly difficult for the have-nots to be content, when they can see others doing even better. It is hard to be happy where you live if you can see that others elsewhere are racing ahead in terms of quality of life. Successful neighbourhoods are parts of successful towns, counties and countries. We need to be sure that any 'empowering' of local communities is not, in fact, a relinquishing of responsibility by the centre.