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Community and Special Obligations

The 1938 movie *Boys Town* tells the story of how the young hoodlum Whitey Marsh learns about democracy, authority, fair play, and friendship from the other boys in the town and from its head, Father Flanagan.[1] *Boys Town* was based on the founding of a real Nebraska orphanage, whose iconic statue shows one boy carrying an even younger orphan child on his back. The motto of Boys Town, which accompanies this image, is "He ain't heavy, he's my brother." The articulation of "my brother" helps outsiders see the act of lifting another boy (physically or metaphorically) as an obligation to be embraced, rather than as an encumbrance to be avoided. More generally, the answer to the question of "who counts as my brother?" or "who is a member of my community?" is central in a democracy where citizens debate about to whom the government should allocate resources.

This book provides empirical evidence for what has largely remained a theoretical discussion, showing how ordinary Americans imagine their communities, and the extent to which their communities' boundaries determine who they believe should benefit from the government's resources via redistributive policies. How do people draw the boundaries dividing Us and Them, and how do they represent these "pictures in [their] heads" (Lippmann 1965)? Where the boundaries of communities are drawn depends on who someone believes to have a quality in common. This quality in common may be locality, nativity, belief, or activity, among others, and individuals may have multiple communities. The decision to help only those within certain borders and ignore the needs

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[1] Spencer Tracy, who played Flanagan, won an Academy award for the role.

of those outside rests, to a certain extent, on whether and how people translate their sense of community into obligations.[2] A man can feel that he belongs in a community, for example, without necessarily feeling that he has any duties to fulfill as a result of his membership; even if he does feel a sense of obligation to others in his community, he may still choose not to act on their behalf (and, instead, deal with any feelings of guilt that may arise from his inaction).

Questions about political obligation and entitlement are key to understanding the motivations behind the stability of and relationships within political entities: what duties does a citizen owe to his or her state, and conversely, what does a government owe its citizens, as a result of their implicit social contract (see, for example, Klosko 2004)? Despite the importance of these questions, there has been little empirical research on individuals' sense of responsibility toward one another. On the one extreme, individuals cannot kill one another indiscriminately; yet at the other extreme, being a Good Samaritan, although praiseworthy, is not legally required. Within the bounds established by a state's laws – and in the large, gray expanse between narcissism and altruism – whom people choose to help is left to their discretion. Although a sense of morality certainly does not require the presence of a sense of community, it is more likely that a man will risk jumping into a river to save his drowning friend than to save a stranger. Attitudes about redistributive policies are also, in essence, attitudes about who should be helped.

Social scientists tend to rely on concepts such as self-interest, group interest, and ideology in their models for explaining how people decide on whose behalf they should act and who has a right to public services and shared resources. In essence, current understanding about what motivates redistributive behavior boils down to three statements: (1) we want to help ourselves, (2) we want to help those in our groups, and (3) we want to apply our values – such as egalitarianism or individualism – and ideas about the role of government widely, not just to a small subset of the population. In this book, I argue that these distinctions are not as clear as they appear to be because the applicability of each depends on boundaries that are subjective and blurred. Self-interest may include one's immediate family, but it could also apply to one's more distant relatives and friends. Group interest – whether it is used as a

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[2] Theorists often assume that obligations are derived from membership (Macedo 2008). However, because reality does not always live up to theory, it is an empirical question whether people do, in fact, believe that membership automatically implies obligations.

proxy for self-interest or as a spur for action irrespective of one's own desires – also depends on how one imagines the boundaries of one's group or groups; does a white man, for example, really want to help *all* white men and *only* white men? Even ideology, which often encourages individuals to apply a set of beliefs broadly, is almost always constrained in practice by boundaries: egalitarians seek equality of opportunity (and often equality of outcome) for all Americans, but it is rare that they seek an adjustment of the American standard of living that would match that of Malawi or Yemen. Thus, while the concepts of interest and ideology have utility, underlying these political motivations is the drawing of community boundaries.

what is a community?

The definition of "community" has always been contested. Beginning ostensibly with Aristotle (Friedrich 1959; Yack 1993) and continuing in contemporary works, scholars have used the term to describe entities that vary so much that no common set of necessary and sufficient characteristics of community can be found (Ladd 1959). Much like the debate over the meaning of "self-interest," "community" is either defined so broadly that it encompasses everything and everybody, or so narrowly that many commonly recognized communities are excluded. Not surprisingly, then, debates over the role of community in politics often come back to disagreements over its definition. For example, in a critique of communitarianism, Jeremy Waldron writes, "What is this community and who is this 'we' we keep talking about?" (1993, 193).

Rather than adding to the already voluminous debate among political theorists about communitarianism (see, for example, Chapman and Shapiro 1993, Corlett 1989, Sandel 1982,), this book responds to Waldron's question by using data to explore the meaning of "community" as it exists in the minds of ordinary Americans. Social scientists study concepts such as anomie, symbolic racism, and constructivism with little expectation that average citizens think of their lives, attitudes, or actions in those terms. These concepts are unlikely to show up in everyday conversations. However, "community" *is* a part of ordinary language, and it is unclear how its common usage is related to its role in social science research. Whether liberals or communitarians are "right" is a separate question from the empirical question of how citizens perceive their own communities.

The definition of community that I use in this book draws on the classic work of Benedict Anderson on nationalism, stressing the subjectivity

of the concept. Anderson describes a nation as an imagined commu-
nity: "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations
will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear
of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their community"
(italics in original) (1983, 6). This definition of an imagined community
can be applied much more broadly. Although it may apply to a nation,
it can also be used to describe many other geographic entities, such as
one's state or city. Even one's neighborhood is an imagined community.
While it may be possible for someone to have met and even know all the
individuals who live in the many blocks surrounding her own home, she
will have a particular image of her neighborhood community. This image
probably does not coincide with how the local city council officially
defines her neighborhood, and the image almost certainly is not the same
image that her neighbors have of their neighborhood community. One
neighbor may imagine her community to fall within the confines of major
thoroughfares around her home; another's image may be restricted to the
circle of neighbors with whom he is acquainted; and yet another may
think of her neighbors as individuals who live close to her in proximity
but with whom she does not imagine any sense of community (Wong
et al. 2005).

Anderson's definition of imagined community can also apply to social
units or groups. For example, when one thinks of the African American
community or the Chinese American community, it is very clear that
members will never meet most of the others in their community. And
one Chinese American's image of this community is unlikely to overlap
perfectly with the image in another's. One member's image may include
anyone who would describe themselves as Chinese; another's imagined
community may only include those individuals who are "culturally"
Chinese (e.g., individuals who are fluent in a Chinese dialect and eat
Chinese cuisine); and yet another's may be restricted to those who are
American citizens.

This definition of imagined community can include families – because
an individual may not have met all the members currently alive, much
less have full information about generations past – and even a university,
where a professor will probably not have face-to-face interactions with
all the faculty, staff, and students present (Tamir 1995).[3] The important

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[3] Tamir provides these examples as reasons why Anderson's definition of the nation as
an imagined community is too broad. Her argument about the overly broad applicabil-
ity of the notion of an "imagined community" to a nation underscores its suitability

feature of any community is the image that individuals carry in their
heads, not the issue of acquaintance with all other members. Tamir writes
"If the condition for a community to be considered imagined is that the
only way to perceive it as a whole is to refer to its image, then all social
groups, even the smallest, are imagined communities" (421). She refines
this definition by arguing that it should not be applied to communities for
whom the distinguishing characteristics are

…independent of the feelings and perceptions of the agents – age, gender, race,
income, or place of birth…[Instead, a nation's] existence cannot be deduced from
certain objective features, but rather from the feelings of communion among
its members, as well as from the existence of a shared national consciousness.
(1995, 422)

I would revise this definition to state that all social groups *could b*e imag-
ined communities. Even the borders of groups defined by age, gender,
race, income, and place of birth are fuzzy, and members of these groups
may have an image of a community based only loosely on these char-
acteristics: one's image of a community of senior citizens may include
individuals below retirement age (Koch 1993); one's image of a feminist
community may include only some women and not others (Lorde 1984);
one's image of the Chinese American community is complicated, as I
mention above; membership in a community of middle-class Americans
is claimed by many whose objective income would place them well below
or above the median income (Walsh et al. 2004); and while birthright citi-
zenship is the law in the United States, it is not the case that all Americans
would include anyone born on U.S. soil as a member of the national com-
munity (Citrin et al. 2001; Pear 1996).

   I have one final distinction to make. What Anderson and Tamir seem
to assume, at least with the nation as an imagined community, is that
the community's members all share the same image and feelings. I would
argue this assumption is both unlikely and unnecessary. An imagination
is not shared. In the case of a nation, it is very likely that a Jew residing in
a West Bank settlement does not have the same image of or feelings about
her nation as does a Jew residing on the Upper West Side of Manhattan,
even if both were born in Israel. Similarly, Americans residing in Guam,
the Fond du Lac Reservation, and Boston will very likely have different
notions of their nation as well. And individuals who hold the very same

   as a concept that can be applied to a wider variety of social groupings. Similarly, her
   argument that "deliberate forgetfulness and misrepresentation of historical facts" are
   inherent in nation building can be applied to other types of communities as well.

image of their nation may have vastly different feelings of communion with other members: some would die to protect their nation, while others would fail to see why it is worth defending.

This does not make the nation or any other community any more or less "imagined"; if anything, it is more realistic and accurate to assume images of communities will vary from individual to individual, even those claiming membership to what they believe is the same community. After all, while we can share the fruits of our imagination, we are now – outside the arena of science fiction fantasy – unable literally to share our imaginations and consciousnesses completely with each other.

Therefore, I use the following definition for community: *it is an image in the mind of an individual, of a group toward whose members she feels a sense of similarity, belonging, or fellowship*. This definition does not assume that these imagined communities will have political outcomes; feelings of comradeship or fraternity do not necessarily translate into any particular attitudes and actions. What I test and show in this book is that self-defined membership can lead to an interest in, and a commitment to, the well-being of all community members (and only community members), regardless of one's own interests, values, and ideology.

THE "GLUE" AND BORDERS OF IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

At their core, all discussions of "community" emphasize a shared place or spirit as the "glue" that holds its members together. And, as Toennies writes in his classic *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, geography and social ties are often intertwined:

> Community by *blood*, indicating primal unity of existence, develops more specifically into community of *place*, which is expressed first of all as living in close proximity to one another. This in turn becomes community of *spirit*, working together for the same end and purpose. Community of place is what holds life together on a physical level, just as community of spirit is the binding link on the level of conscious thought. (Toennies 1957, 27, emphasis in original)

Whether both locality (geography or Toennies's "place") and social relations (sentiment or Toennies's "spirit") are necessary is contested. MacIver and Page (1952), for example, note that "the mark of a community is that one's life *may* be lived wholly within it" and that "the basic criterion of community, then, is that all of one's social relationships may be found within it" (8–9, emphasis in original). Their clear definitions, however, become problematic when the discussion moves from more abstract arguments about theoretical communities to concrete applications.

Churches and business organizations, MacIver and Page argue, are not communities, but prisons and immigrant groups are. It is not obvious how one's entire life can be lived in an immigrant group – unless one pictures a completely segregated and self-sufficient immigrant ghetto – and one could imagine nuns in a convent, for example, living with all of their social relationships within the church. Nevertheless, although their particular configuration of requirements is problematic, I want to underscore that MacIver and Page emphasize both the geographic and relational aspects of the concept.

This dual emphasis appears in more recent scholarship as well. Spurred by the growth of planned communities and the concerns expressed by scholars of "New Urbanism," a new discussion of community is taking place in the field of city and urban planning (Duany et al. 2000). In their book on gated communities, for example, Blakely and Snyder delineate five separate elements of community: shared territory, shared values, shared public realm, shared support structures, and shared destiny (1997, 33). These elements can also be grouped by their focus on place and spirit: shared territory and public realm reflect the borders and interior space of a place, while shared values, support structures, and destiny reflect a community of spirit or relations.

Not all scholars insist that both shared locality and shared sentiment are necessary and sufficient conditions for community. However, no one would argue that these two broad categories – geographic and relational communities – are mutually exclusive. In research where community is explicitly conceived of as simply territorial or geographic, scholars often focus on how neighborhoods, towns, cities, or regional characteristics affect individuals (Baldassare 1992; Frug 1996; Keller 2003; Oliver 2001; Putnam 1993). Nevertheless, in their discussions, what would make a city a vibrant "community" – and not simply a municipality of solitary TV addicts burrowed deep in their dens – would be the presence of relational ties among its residents. When scholars understand community as "concerned with quality of human relationship, without reference to location," the focus shifts to groups like professional or religious organizations, or to social networks (Bellah et al. 1985).[4] However, the "habits of the heart" that Bellah and his colleagues describe are commonly exhibited by people who share a geographical area, such as a neighborhood or

[4] Although trying to separate sentiment from place is difficult in practice, it is a necessary distinction in order to avoid "reducing communities of all kinds to instrumental associations" (Miller 1995, 66).

a local church. Finally, a community may consist of a grouping of people who share common interests and who may never physically encounter one another (see, for examples, Meyrowitz 1985 and Smith and Kollock 1999 on electronic or virtual communities). One might argue that this community is located literally at one's fingertips, although this is clearly not the same notion of proximity that Toennies had in mind. The purpose of this brief discussion was not to provide a comprehensive review of the literature. Hillery (1955) identified 94 definitions of community, and the count can only have increased dramatically over the past fifty years. Instead, the snapshots of past research simply highlight the importance of both a shared locality and a shared spirit as the possible glue of community.

Just as there are contrasts between geographic and relational communities, both types can be objective (aligned with official, fixed demarcations or categories) or subjective (existing only in the minds of individuals). Although borders between cities or census race categories can be seen as objective, or at least commonly recognized, there is also a great deal of subjectivity in people's images of towns and races.[5] New York City, with its limits legally defined by maps drawn by City Hall, is a different community from the "New York City" depicted in Saul Steinberg's "View of the World from Ninth Avenue," with New York forming both the center and the bulk of the entire country. However, the latter community exists only in Americans' imaginations (and on the cover of the *New Yorker*) and cannot be found on any map; where "New York City" begins and ends is in the mind of the viewer. Similarly, for some Americans, the "black community" is a relational community composed exclusively of African Americans as defined by the census; for other Americans, the boundaries of the "black community" are drawn to include only those individuals who adopt "black culture," who engage in "black politics," or who "look black."

The American national community straddles all four possible combinations: objective-geographic, subjective-geographic, objective-relational, and subjective-relational. Its land is geographically defined by fixed boundaries drawn on maps and defended by force when necessary; it is also a community with a protean outline, depending on whether territories, commonwealths, and states not part of the continental United States

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[5] Although I do not place quotation marks around the word "objective" every time it appears in the text, the quotes are always implied, especially when "objective" is applied to group membership.

are part of the picture of the nation in people's imaginations. The national community is relational, with officially recognized citizens composing the community's formal membership; it is also a subjective relational community, founded on shared American ideals, hopes, and dreams, with boundaries drawn in the minds of its residents as to who belongs as part of the American community. An American-born citizen who burns the flag may be seen as un-American, for example, while a foreign-born permanent resident – like the record-breaking baseball player Sammy Sosa – may be welcomed with a ticker-tape parade into the fold of the American community as one of Us.

Of course, subjective communities can overlap with objective lines, and I do not assume that they have to be different. One reason for why people's imagined communities may coincide with objective communities is socialization and norms, often instilled from childhood. Although the definition of communities as imagined emphasizes the role of the individual as the imaginer and agent, it does not therefore diminish the importance of states, institutions, and politics. Obviously, how the state defines geographies, members of the nation, and races will affect how people imagine these groups as potential communities. Furthermore, political parties, unions, churches, and other civic organizations also affect people's perceptions of who is similar, or with whom else they belong. Nevertheless, the ultimate decision will be made by an individual, at least when it comes to deciding how certain community boundaries may or may not play a role in affecting judgments to help others. Current social science research overemphasizes the political effects of membership in objectively defined groups – e.g., African Americans, Southerners, and first-generation immigrants – by ignoring the effects of imagined communities.

While governmental policies often deal with objective community boundaries – including district lines, definitions of race laid out by the Office of Management and Budget, and constitutional and congressional definitions of citizenship – people themselves use the pictures in their heads to make decisions about who should benefit. The average American cannot name the chief justice of the Supreme Court (Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996), much less what the OMB's Directive 15 says about race or what the phrases *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* represent. Nevertheless, most Americans are able to express strong views about who should benefit from affirmative action or what makes someone "truly American." In other words, people's perceptions of community boundaries are probably more important than objectively defined borders for determining how

individuals make decisions about who should benefit from government resources.

There is no assumption that an individual must like all the other members of her imagined community, although obviously it would be quite common to like them. After all, that would make the decision to spend effort and energy improving the lives of community members much easier. A family is a relevant analogy: I may not like all my relatives, but because they are family, I may feel some special obligation to them. I can, of course, choose to redefine my family so that a black sheep uncle, for example, is dead to me. And I may only reluctantly agree to let a disliked aunt borrow my money or car. But as long as I imagine a relationship with a person, then I may feel some tie and pull. So, although I will distinguish likeability from community in the empirical analyses as an impetus for acting on behalf of another individual, I also assume that likeability can be expressed commonly about the members of an individual's community.

One final implication of my particular definition of community is how members of a community are defined. Who belongs as a member is all seen from the perspective of the imaginer, be it the state or an individual. The state's perspective is oftentimes interpreted as the "objective" definition of community membership, but it is, nevertheless, simply a product of the imagination of the state, embodied as anything ranging from a single bureaucrat to the explicitly shared mind of Congress. Although the state's definitions of who belongs as a member of a community have the backing of laws (and force), they are no more "natural" or "right" than the definitions of any ordinary American.

POLITICAL EFFECTS OF COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES: EXAMPLES

Because communities are not simply descriptive units of organization, they may have tangible effects on their members and nonmembers. They matter in politics because they are not simply containers; the glue that a person believes holds him in a community leads to different attitudes and behaviors than would prevail if this same individual were unencumbered by membership. Marshall's (1973) classic trichotomy of citizenship into civic, political, and social rights highlights the varying benefits granted to different members of the same national community; only by achieving all three sets of rights does a legal citizen become a full citizen or a full member of the community. Where community boundaries are