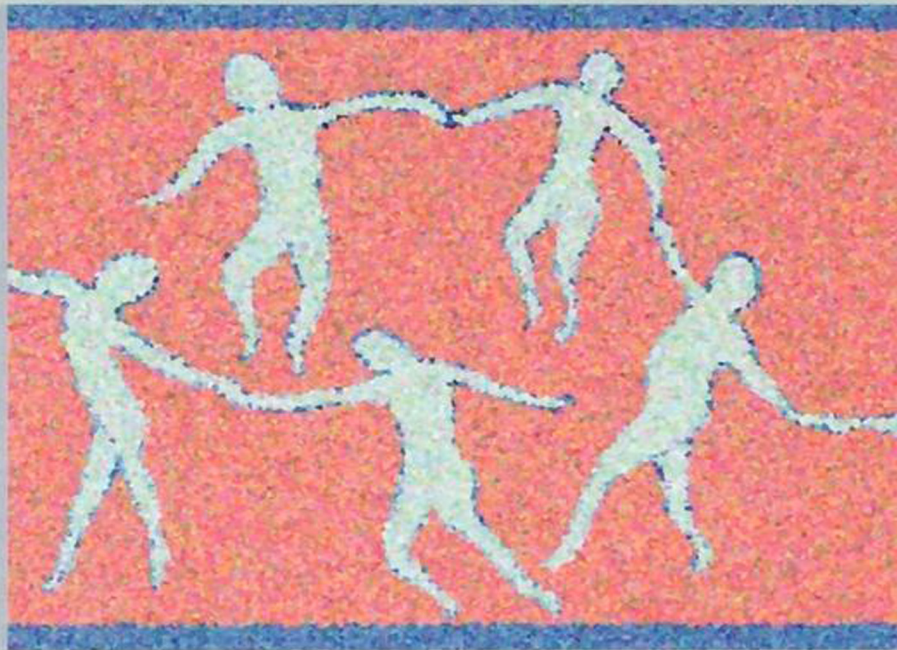


Rethinking Friendship

Hidden Solidarities Today



Liz Spencer AND Ray Pahl

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For Robin, Josh and Luke,
Helen, Sara and Kaye, and in
celebration of our friendships

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FOREWORD

This is a marvellous book about a marvellous subject. Social theorists often seem most comfortable with more abstract issues than this: the vast and impersonal processes of globalization, or economic change. But most of us live our lives closer to home, both literally and metaphorically, and it is in the intimate private space of friendship that we find some of our greatest joys and greatest disappointments.

While we know a lot about what is supposedly happening to the family, we know far less about the nature of friendship today. Part of the reason may be that, as with so many of the most vital social phenomena, there are acute problems of definition. And part of the reason is that this is a world that is beyond the reach of policy and government.

All of this makes this attempt to stand back and make an assessment of what is happening to friendship all the more valuable. It belongs in a long tradition of sociological study of the bonds of community. Much of that tradition assumed that the grinding forces of modernity and industrialization were smashing the intimate relationships that made life worth living, leaving us atomized, insecure and anomic. The world of mutual commitment was being replaced by a world of impersonal transactions.

But the picture painted here is much more interesting than that. It shows the sheer variety of relationships we have with friends – some absolutely vital to our ability to live, others sources of fun and entertainment; some carried with us from childhood, others acquired and discarded casually. It shows that there is little evidence for sweeping claims of decline and decay, even though there has undoubtedly been a change in the patterns of friendship, driven by bigger changes such as the large-scale movement of women in the workforce or the spread of the telephone.

The detailed analysis also quietly confirms what we know from other research on happiness and well-being about the importance of strong

networks of family and friends. Without them we are more likely to suffer from mental illness, and indeed physical illness too. In later life friends become even more important than family in keeping us healthy.

One of the many virtues of the book is that it provides a longer historical perspective. The authors remind us of the fluidity of daily life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the complex ways in which class and gender framed how people thought about their friends. A historical perspective also provides a salutary reminder that more than a century ago, when the telephone was first coming into cities, there were many forecasts of the death of community. The more recent villains of the piece are television, the Internet and computer games: yet these too probably do as much to aid as to harm sociability, and the Internet has certainly proved to be a very powerful tool for people to sustain their friendship networks over longer distances.

Much of the book stands in the best traditions of empirical British sociology, particularly those incorporating careful and meticulous ethnography. Drawing on qualitative material and using their own words and stories, it gives an accessible and intriguing account of people's personal social worlds. But it also provides an important set of arguments about theory too. The recent theorists of social capital have tended to give the greatest prominence to relatively formal kinds of mutual involvement, in particular, membership of civic organizations. These have traditionally been seen as more virtuous than circles of friends gathered together for pleasure or mutual help. But here the authors rehabilitate the informal *schmoozers*, who may not join anything formal but who nevertheless may play a critical role in holding friendship networks together and, indeed, in holding communities together, below the radar of any official measures.

This book should appeal to a number of different audiences, from general readers fascinated by friendship to policy makers concerned about community, social capital and social inclusion. I hope that many researchers will be inspired to continue the task of observation and reflection, digging deeper into the micro-worlds of everyday life. The greatest value that any social science can have is to look at something familiar and show it in a new light. This book does that admirably.

GEOFF MULGAN
Director, The Young Foundation
London

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We owe a debt of gratitude to the many people who have provided inspiration, insight, commentary and practical help throughout the creation of this book. Foremost among them are Jane Ritchie, one of the stars of qualitative research, who carried out some exquisitely sensitive interviews, and gave wise and invaluable feedback on the manuscript, and Robin Sadler, who not only contributed to the study on which the book is based, but also coped with seemingly endless disruption, affording priceless support and encouragement.

Particular thanks are also owed to the following: Karen O'Reilly, for inspiring such stimulating discussion when we were submitting our proposal to the Economic and Social Research Council – her ideas heavily influenced the focus of our study; Graham Allan, for showing long-term enthusiasm for our research and giving thoughtful and detailed advice on the manuscript; Mark Vernon, for casting a philosopher's eye on aspects of our analysis and argument; Geoff Mulgan, for writing a foreword; and Brian Spencer for generously reading and commenting on the entire book, with the interests of the general reader at heart. We are also grateful for the support of friends and colleagues when we were developing our methods, and for the many thought-provoking comments we have received throughout the extended period of this project. Given the nature of our topic, many people have enthusiastically engaged in discussion with us and, while we are unable to acknowledge everyone individually, we appreciate all those who helped us develop and refine our ideas.

Janice Webb deserves a special thank you. Not only has she been involved throughout the project, showing great interest in the study, and preparing the manuscript with infinite care and patience, but she has also been more like a professional PA in dealing with the media and countless other matters connected with our joint enterprise. We

warmly appreciate her generous and willing support, and unfailing good humour.

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We acknowledge with gratitude the support we have received from Ian Malcolm, our editor at Princeton University Press, who encouraged us to stick to our beliefs about the overall conception and thrust of the book. While defending our approach against strongly held counter views from an anonymous reader substantially delayed publication, we readily admit that the struggle has been worth it. We would also like to thank Jon Wainwright at T&T Productions Ltd for his meticulous care and commitment during the production process, and for showing such respect for our concerns about the overall feel of the book.

Finally, we express our heartfelt thanks to the people who took part in our study, generously giving us their time and telling us their stories. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION

A faithful friend is a strong defence, and he that hath found such an one hath found a treasure. . . . A faithful friend is the medicine of life.

— Ecclesiasticus

This book is about friendship in its rich and varied forms, but it is also about the role of friendship in contemporary society. Not only do we investigate and describe relationships between friends, we also examine the relevance of friendship for current debates about social integration and the state of community today. Using the findings of our study we reveal the persistence of *hidden solidarities* and question some of the gloomier analyses of our times.

We began with a problematic involving both public issues and private troubles. In the private sphere, there are fears that relationships today have become fleeting and transient, that people have become socially isolated. Depression and other mental health problems, for example, have been claimed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be the most rapidly growing form of ill health in recent years.¹ In the public sphere, politicians and policy makers have been alarmed by a supposed lack of civic responsibility and a retreat into self-absorbed individualism. Our interest in friendship, therefore, has been fuelled in part by a feeling that, although friends have been studied at the level of individual relationships, the role of friendship in providing a kind of social glue has largely been ignored. Consequently, we set out to examine friendship in depth and to rethink its broader sociological and political significance.

FRIENDS, FRIEND-LIKE TIES AND PERSONAL COMMUNITIES

As part of our study of friendship we have, of course, probed the nature and quality of relationships between friends who are not related to

each other by blood or marriage – but our study is not confined to these non-kin ties. Because friendship may be found between spouses, partners, siblings, cousins or parents and their children, we have also explored friend-like qualities in a broader set of social relationships. We compare cases where friends and family play rather similar roles with cases where they occupy a distinct and separate place in people's lives.

So this book is about friendship in its broadest sense, but it is also about friendship in the context of the significant others who inhabit our micro-social worlds. We call these sets of significant others *personal communities*², and examine the role of friends and friend-like ties within them. Because of this focus, our book deals with those friendships that are considered important in people's lives; our research does not tell us much about the dark side of friendship, about unsatisfactory, competitive or destructive relationships, though this is undoubtedly an important theme. Our study has also focused on adult friendships, rather than friendships among children, adolescents, and in old age, since these have been the subject of many other studies.

FRIENDSHIP IN THE WIDER SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Given our interest in the role as well as the nature of friendship, we have set our findings against the backdrop of contemporary fears about a decline in the quality of personal and communal life. Perhaps it is part of the human condition to claim that things 'ain't wot they used to be'. Perhaps it is a way older generations claim authority by asserting that the quality of social life has deteriorated markedly since their youth. Perhaps governments need to create a degree of dissatisfaction and unease to justify the continuation of their power and authority over us. Perhaps, finally, we are indeed living in a world which can be shown – with the aid of hard empirical evidence – to be in many significant and important aspects qualitatively different from a better world we have lost or may be in the process of losing.

It is not hard to show that, for as long as recorded history, there has been a perennial concern with the way people live, which has provided the motivation and the power of priests, shamans and prophets. Now, in a more secular age, social science has added new voices. It is true that the traditional vocabulary of sin, falling from grace, and the hope

of salvation still has considerable resonance in many quarters – some would even argue that the idea of the loss and recovery of community lies at the heart of Western millennial thought³ – but a new vocabulary of social disorder and disruption emerged with the rise of social science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, the development of various rigorous research techniques has made possible the generation and collection of empirical evidence to support or, indeed, refute such perceptions of social ills. However, as we shall see, much depends on what is measured and on how we interpret the evidence.

Our aim in this book has been to challenge the views of those social theorists and commentators who have adopted an overwhelmingly pessimistic, if not despairing, response to the society they describe. Inevitably, this has meant that we have concentrated on commentators who take the most negative readings, giving less attention to others who have questioned such dark interpretations. However, lest some accuse us of Panglossian complacency, we recognize that our stance is more one of modification than of complete rejection. To claim that society is eternally enduring and unchanging would be absurd. However, we feel that there has been a serious misunderstanding of the dynamics of micro-social worlds, and particularly of the role of friendship and trust. Such issues have not figured greatly in the magisterial sweep of theorists of social change, who have, perhaps, concentrated more on identifying the overarching spirit of the age.

Of course, we recognize that there are good reasons for this. Detailed ethnographies of different social groupings and communities did not develop until well into the twentieth century. Initially, these were little more than elementary social surveys, spliced with gossip, and it was only with the rise of a rigorous social anthropology that a more nuanced and subtle understanding of the complexities of micro-social worlds could emerge. One only has to read the essay by William Foote Whyte, reflecting on his classic study, *Street Corner Society*, which he began in 1937, to see how untrained he was, and how ‘baffled’ he felt on finding his way into an inner city ‘slum’. Whyte recalled that, at that time, studies of ‘the community as an organised social system did not exist’.⁴ While the collection of detailed ethnographies still remains relatively sparse, these kinds of studies unquestionably provide a more rooted view of society than was available to earlier generations of social commentators, particularly those of the nineteenth century.

We also believe that the broad sweep of classical social theorists should be challenged because of the dramatic and exciting developments in historical demography and historical anthropology over the past forty years.⁵ Evidently, the founding fathers of social science did not have the detailed understandings of families and communities in former times which are now available, but, even today, some contemporary social theorists show little recognition of this body of knowledge in their work, relying on unspecified notions of traditional society when referring to the past.

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

It is important to recognize that the empirical findings reported in this book take the form of qualitative rather than quantitative data. We adopted a qualitative approach partly because, in attempting to rethink the contemporary salience and significance of friendship, we had to confront the fact that there is no clear agreement on what precisely the term 'friend' means. In some studies this problem is simply ducked. For example, people may be asked how many friends they have, or invited to give details about frequency of contact with their three closest friends, or the age, sex, occupation or ethnicity of those friends, but the word 'friend' is not defined, nor is any check made on how the term is being used. This is why it is difficult to make sense of conflicting statistics about the average number of friends we are supposed to have nowadays, and why we, perhaps, should take with a pinch of salt claims made by some in the public eye that they have the names of over a thousand 'friends' in their email address books.

Alternatively, in other studies, people are asked to define in detail what they mean by the term 'friend' and to list the qualities they associate with friendship. In most cases, however, these qualities refer to some general or idealized concept, or to cultural stereotypes, rather than to actual flesh-and-blood relationships. Our challenge, therefore, was to look at friendship in depth, to establish how people use the term, and to examine the content of particular relationships. A qualitative approach also gave us the flexibility to explore the complexities of friend-like ties, where categorical labels like brother, sister, parent, cousin, colleague or neighbour might mask additional friend-like qualities. Through open-ended, in-depth interviews, we were able to identify cases where family members are also considered to be friends, and, indeed, where friends take on a family-like status.

In the main study we conducted a total of sixty interviews with men and women of different ages, at different stages in the life-course, from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and living in different parts of Britain, including the northwest and southeast of England as well as the Welsh borders. With this purposively selected sample, our aim was to paint as broad a picture as we could in order to understand the nature of friendships and the diversity of people's personal communities today.⁶ We made a special effort to include some people who were at risk of being socially isolated, as well as those with robust personal communities, and interviewed two young people brought up in care, a woman with mental health problems, a man who suffered from aphasia following a stroke, and a young man with drug and alcohol problems. We did not, however, interview homeless rough sleepers, travellers, asylum seekers or international jet setters, so our study may fail to capture the personal communities of the most isolated or the most global citizens.

Given the rich diversity of cultures and backgrounds in Britain today, we also had to make some key decisions about the range of ethnic groups we could incorporate. We concluded that it would be better to understand a few situations well, rather than spread our resources too thinly, and, consequently, we interviewed people from white British and from black African and Caribbean backgrounds. Although this means we have no data for other minority ethnic groups, because of the way we present our evidence, readers from other backgrounds should be able to judge the extent to which our findings are applicable to them.

The fact that our data are qualitative has implications for the kind of evidence we portray, and for the way readers should judge its wider relevance. In each of the chapters that describe our findings we present two different kinds of material: a set of analytical concepts and cases which illustrate these ideas. It is important to stress that the themes and concepts presented throughout the book have emerged through clear and explicit procedures of analysis, which are fully explained in the appendix. If these themes and concepts have resonance, we believe this is because they reflect people's experiences; but their easy acceptance should not mask the fact that they have been rigorously devised. There are no numbers, percentages or statistical tables. Although we aim to identify recurrent patterns, we do not rely on traditional variable analysis, where the aim is to account for most rather than all of

the variance. On the contrary, we are interested in the range and complexity of people's situations and relationships: this means we also investigate the outliers, since apparently atypical or negative cases can sometimes hold the clue to patterns which recur in the data.

Readers may well ask whether British data can have relevance for other societies, particularly the United States, which is sometimes considered to be the embodiment of an individualized, isolated society. They may further question the wider relevance of a nationally focused qualitative study. We argue that our study does indeed have broader relevance, precisely because it is qualitative and because of the nature of generalization within qualitative research. In small-scale, purposively sampled studies, the reader makes a qualitative judgement about the wider applicability of the findings based on the detailed description of concepts and cases. Essentially, the reader decides whether the concepts have wider analytical or explanatory power by looking in detail at both the setting of the initial study and other settings where the findings might be applied, by comparing those contexts, and by judging whether the analysis and interpretation found in the initial study can help make sense of other social milieux.

We are not making any claims about the frequency or ubiquity of any particular kind of friendship or personal community, simply that a range of types and patterns exists. We are mapping the territory, if you like, and the reader's main concerns should be: Can I recognize the map? How well does the map fit my situation or are some parts of the map less relevant? Are some parts of the map missing? By giving details of how the concepts and patterns were identified, and illustrating each with cases from our research, we enable the reader to check the wider applicability of the map. It is important to remember that, even in the case of a large quantitative study carried out in Britain, there could be no automatic generalization to other countries, since a British sample would not be representative of other populations. In this case, the reader would still have to make a qualitative judgement about the transferability of findings, and might well have less detailed information on which to make such a judgement.

A GUIDE TO THIS BOOK

From conversations with our colleagues, friends and families, we have gathered that the subject of friendship and personal communities fascinates others and well as ourselves. We have therefore written this

book with both a general and an academic audience in mind. To make it more accessible to general readers, we have tried not to clutter the main text with too many references to the literature. For academic readers, however, we have put a great deal of very detailed information, as well as many interesting references, in the endnotes for each chapter.

A guide to individual chapters, however, might help different readers navigate their way through the book. Chapter 1 explores some of the main concerns that have been expressed about the state of society today, outlining some of the moral panics over the quality of our social life as we move through the twenty-first century, and making the case for a detailed study of people's micro-social worlds that focuses on the role of friends and friend-like ties. Chapter 2 gives an account of some of the factors that influenced the way we carried out our study, and gives an initial picture of the kinds of personal communities we identified. Both these chapters inevitably contain some discussion of theoretical ideas, but we have tried to keep this discussion interesting and accessible. Readers who are mainly interested in learning about friendship may prefer to skip this part of the book and begin with chapter 3, perhaps returning later when they have satisfied their curiosity.

Chapters 3–6 present the main body of our findings, illustrated through case descriptions, but putting more technical matters and references in the notes rather than the main text. Chapter 3 explores the nature and diversity of friendship and introduces the idea of a friendship repertoire, or the range of different types of friends that people have. Chapter 4 looks at friendship over the life-course and at different patterns of friend-making. Chapter 5 examines friendship and family relationships, exploring the notion of suffusion and the extent to which family and friends play distinctive or overlapping roles. In chapter 6 we then take the ideas discussed in earlier chapters and present a set of seven different kinds of personal community. Chapter 7 addresses the question of how personal communities may in general be shaped by factors such as age, gender, social class and geographical mobility. Finally, in chapter 8, we consider the wider implications of our findings, returning to debates about community, social capital and social integration. Again, these two final chapters incorporate some references to the literature, but we hope that our overall discussion of these key themes will appeal to both our audiences. For those who would like to know more about how we carried out the study, there is a full appendix.

The order in which the authors' names appear should not be taken to imply that one of us has made more of a contribution than the other. It is simply that we have written a number of papers together on this subject and Ray Pahl's name has appeared first on other occasions. It is true that we have made different contributions, but these reflect our different strengths and interests. Liz Spencer has spent thirty years conducting and championing qualitative research and passionately believes in its power to inform and illuminate. She has taken major responsibility for the analysis and presentation of our findings. Ray Pahl has a breadth of knowledge and scholarship that has enabled us to set these findings against an expansive backdrop, incorporating recent historical and anthropological as well as sociological debates.

Finally, as long-term friends ourselves, we welcomed an opportunity to work together and to pursue a long-held interest. In Ray Pahl's case, friendship is a subject he has already investigated and written about over a period of more than thirty years; for both of us it holds a personal as well as a professional fascination. A grant from the Economic and Social Research Council, and a home at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, enabled us to carry out the research on which this book is based.⁷

The Fragmentation of Social Life?

Debates about the waxing and waning of 'community' have been endemic for at least two centuries. 'Declensionist narratives' – postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall – have a long pedigree in our letters. We seem perennially to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages.

— Putnam

... the rupture of community leaves men preoccupied by the nature of friendship, the allowable bonds of intimacy, the canons of discretion and the limits of loyalty. To traditionalists, in such an age of change, real friendships, confidences, and loyalties can appear as, at best, shards of community that once existed but now is dead, as pieces of jetsam afloat on the seas of economic and political egoism.

— Nisbet

With the possibility of greater levels of diversity in people's experiences and a heightened emphasis on life-style issues, friendships may be recognized increasingly as one of the main sites of activity giving life meaning.

— Allan

As we embark on a new century, is it the case that community has fractured, that people in the Western world are selfish, isolated and irresponsible, turning away from public and private responsibilities? Or is it possible that our pessimism is overstated, even unfounded, that we are, perhaps, looking in the wrong place, basing our concerns on the decline of old solidarities rather than being alert to the possibility of

new forms of social cohesion? Are friendships simply 'shards of community', 'pieces of jetsam afloat on the seas of economic and political egoism', or 'one of the main sites of activity giving life meaning'?

In this chapter we explore debates about the nature and quality of social life, citing the critical analyses of commentators who have drawn mainly pessimistic conclusions about the state of society, before going on to review alternative prognoses and examine some of the available evidence. We begin with nineteenth-century thinkers such as de Tocqueville, Durkheim, Tönnies and Simmel, and move on to more recent contributions from Zygmunt Bauman in Britain, and Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, Robert Putnam and Manuel Castells in the United States. These commentators do not, of course, necessarily all agree with each other in detail, but they share a common concern that all is not right with society. Indeed, they believe that there has been something distinctively awry since the beginning of modernity and now, in what is variously described as 'late' or 'post' modernity, some argue that things seem to be getting progressively worse.

Individuals, it is claimed, are not happy; they suffer more from mental ill health; they are less ready to make long and enduring commitments; they are less able or prepared to trust each other. In more extreme analyses they are seen as isolated social atoms, pursuing a life of consumer-driven gratification: in a consumer society we are what we buy. Whether as a cause or consequence of this, various indicators are adduced, demonstrating an alleged collapse of family life, civic engagement and communal values.¹

ON THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF CURRENT DISCONTENTS

As we shall see, the theme of community lost has 'a long pedigree in our letters'.² Much commentary and debate has been prompted by new forms of political organization, for example, the rise of the nation state and the growth of democracy, or by new economic relationships linked to industrialization, the rise of capitalism and, more recently, to post-industrialism. Certainly, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries writers have returned over and over again to the problem of social integration and community, sometimes lamenting the passing of traditional forms of associative life, sometimes wrestling with the impact of new political arrangements on civil society, sometimes fearing for loss of social morality.³

For some pessimistic commentators, the notion of 'community lost' is associated with the decline of place-based communities. According to this argument, traditional community was embodied in the pre-modern world, in stable rural communities, where people knew their place in society and social relationships were based on people's position in the family, their sex, age and trade. The growth of the city and increased social and geographical mobility were thought to have disrupted these rural communities and were said to threaten social cohesion. During the first half of the twentieth century, for example, American sociologists, who feared that an urban way of life would undermine traditional ties, began to see community as preserved in local neighbourhoods but threatened by the wider city. For these writers, community was essentially a sense of place, which could only be expressed in relation to small localities.⁴ In the middle of the twentieth century, ethnographic studies in Britain and the United States explored the survival of place-based community, identifying examples of tightly knit, cohesive, apparently traditional communities whose continued existence was attributed to their resistance to modernity.⁵ More recently, the search for place-based community has continued in newly established estates and housing developments where community is characterized, not as resistance to modernity, but as a sense of shared commitment to the collective common good among people in a particular physical space.⁶ The assumption behind some of these studies appears to be that the work situation as a source of common solidarity has given way to the residential situation, but the basis of such an assumption has rarely been confronted openly.

However, the idea of community as necessarily place-based is now being increasingly challenged, especially in the light of apparently ever greater levels of geographical mobility, the process of globalization, and, in particular, the spread of new information technologies. We are told that contemporary postmodern communities are nomadic, emotional, elective and communicative, rather than based on given relationships or tied to physical spaces.⁷ The Internet, it is argued, has made possible the establishment of virtual communities and radically reshaped social relations. Some have welcomed this development, arguing that it creates new possibilities for relationships, opening up connections between people who otherwise would have no contact.⁸ Where virtual communities exist only online and do not involve any

face-to-face-contact, however, they are not recognized by some writers as communities, in the traditional sense, because they lack most of the defining characteristics and are based on 'thin', ephemeral, rather than 'thick', resilient, bonds.⁹

In addition to concerns about the perceived breakup of locally based communities, fears have also been expressed about a reduction in wider public participation. For example, writing about the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that, under democracy, people were focusing on immediate 'little circles' and neglecting their broader social responsibilities:

Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself.¹⁰

De Tocqueville maintained that these 'little circles' arise out of what he called the 'erroneous judgement' of individuals which 'saps the virtues of public life'. Ironically and paradoxically, it was the coming of democracy which encouraged individuals to leave 'society at large to itself'.

As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases who, although they are neither rich enough nor powerful enough to exercise any great influence over their fellow-creatures, have nevertheless acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. . . they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.¹¹

To early sociologists, the world of personal social relationships – de Tocqueville's 'little circles' – was an insubstantial form of social glue, and Auguste Comte, for example, went so far as to proclaim: 'Society is no more decomposable into individuals than a geometric surface is into lines, or a line into points.'¹²

These concerns have been echoed more recently by political scientists, who are also troubled about a retreat from wider civic and social engagement. Robert Putnam, for example, is particularly concerned about a weakening of what he and others call social capital, a concept we discuss in more detail below. Putnam's fear is that a decline in social involvement, particularly in formal associational life, is eroding the quality of America's civil society. In his widely cited work *Bowling Alone*, Putnam supports his case with a very closely documented

account of the decline in memberships of churches, trades unions and a host of voluntary associations in the United States, which has taken place in the last few decades of the twentieth century.

Other critics concerned about the state of community today, such as Amitai Etzioni, place less emphasis on associational memberships but look back to small-town values of early nineteenth-century America and preach the need for people to be members of 'well-integrated communities'. In Etzioni's case, however, he emphasizes that 'communities need not be local or residential. The main features are a web of interpersonal attachments and a shared sense of values.'¹³ Etzioni affirms, with much empirical evidence to support him, that people in communities live longer, healthier and happier lives than those who are socially isolated. The fear now is that people have withdrawn yet further into their separate 'little circles' or, in even more extreme analyses, have become individualized atoms.

Changes in the quality of primary, informal social relationships, and a supposed increase in social isolation have concerned lawyers, historians and sociologists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A number of conservative nineteenth-century thinkers, for example, were preoccupied by a perceived long-term shift away from what Ferdinand Tönnies called *Gemeinschaft* or 'community' to *Gesellschaft* or 'association'. This shift entailed a change from 'natural' solidarities rooted in family life, folkways and religion, to solidarities where social relations were 'rational', impersonal and shaped by various forms of exchange.¹⁴ Writing in 1908, the German sociologist Georg Simmel, who was evidently fascinated by the constituents of communal life such as friendship, dependence, confidence and loyalty, was nevertheless concerned that there had been a fall-off in the quality of friendship as people became more differentiated from each other.

Modern man, possibly, has too much to hide to sustain a friendship in the ancient sense. . . The modern way of feeling tends more heavily toward differentiated friendships, which cover only one side of the personality, without playing into other aspects of it.¹⁵

Concerns about a perceived deterioration in social relations, problems of isolation, loneliness, unhappiness and fleeting, transient ties, remain to this day. In the middle of the twentieth century, for example, David Riesman and his colleagues published *The Lonely Crowd*¹⁶ and, twenty years later, Philip Slater published *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, claiming that

...Americans attempt to minimize, circumvent, or deny the interdependence upon which all human societies are based. We seek a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, and do-it-yourself skills of every kind. An enormous technology seems to have set itself the task of making it unnecessary for one human being to ask anything of another in the course of going about his daily business. . . We seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it. . .¹⁷

Americans thus find themselves in a vicious circle, in which their extra familial relationships are increasingly arduous, competitive, trivial, and irksome, in part as a result of efforts to avoid or minimize potentially irksome or competitive relationships.¹⁸

In 1978, Christopher Lasch wrote of a 'culture of narcissism',¹⁹ and others such as Robert Bellah and his associates wrote in *Habits of the Heart* that 'our problems today are not just political, they are moral and have to do with the meaning of life'.²⁰ Robert Lane has used statistics on mental ill health and survey results reporting decreasing levels of personal satisfaction to suggest that, in the United States at least, there has been a serious loss of happiness through the second half of the twentieth century.²¹ In 2005 it has been reported that about one in five Americans now suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that more than thirteen percent of Americans – over nineteen million people between the ages of 18 and 54 – suffer from an anxiety disorder.²²

Postmodernist writers have added their voices to the chorus of gloom, seeing people as corks on the tides of social change, bobbing about helplessly in the face of broader social and economic forces such as globalization or the information society. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, maintains that the contemporary '*Homo oeconomicus* and *homo consumens* are men and women *without social bonds*'.²³ Other people are seen as objects of consumption, who are judged by the amount of pleasure they are likely to offer in value-for-money terms. There has been a crumbling away of the skills of sociability. In his polemic on 'liquid love', Bauman maintains

Much. . . has happened on the road to liquid modern individualised society that has made long-term commitments thin on the ground, long-term engagement a rare expectation, and the obligation of mutual assistance 'come what may' a prospect that is neither realistic nor viewed as worthy of great effort.²⁴

Bauman, however, does not have much patience with those who bemoan the loss of community, regarding this as a search for some kind of security blanket, a hankering after some mythical or utopian state. Delanty, on the other hand, maintains that the notion of community is still relevant today, even though it may no longer refer to institutional or place-based attachments:

... the search for community cannot be seen only as a backward-looking rejection of modernity, a hopelessly nostalgic plea for the recovery of something lost; it is an expression of very modern values and of a condition that is central to the experience of life today, which we may call the experience of communicative belonging in an insecure world.²⁵

THE CORRODING EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION?

Running through these debates about the nature and quality of social life are two rather separate concerns, which are often conflated. The first concern is that *social connections are taking place at the wrong level or at only one level*, that of immediate personal social relationships. Although there may still be informal personal interaction between family, friends, colleagues and close neighbours, this does not appear to connect to wider civic engagement. People are said to withdraw into private worlds and turn their backs on communal or collective activity, there is widespread political apathy with few people bothering to vote and a weakening of old solidarities as membership of voluntary associations, such as friendly societies and trades unions, continues to fall.

A second concern is that *the quality of social relationships has deteriorated and that social connections of all kinds are weakening*. Even the immediate micro-social world of personal relationships has collapsed and all we are left with are transient, casual, self-interested ties and widespread social isolation. People are said to be lonely, to lack trust and suffer various forms of mental ill health. The couch potato, sitting alone watching television, snacking on junk food, is an iconic image of our time.

Both these concerns, however, rest on a more fundamental critique of contemporary society, namely, the growth of what Bellah and his colleagues call ontological individualism, or the idea that the individual is the only form of reality. More recently, sociologists have added the notion of 'individualization' to describe the complex processes in contemporary market capitalism and cultural life that

lead to such an emphasis on the individual. For writers like Christopher Lasch, individualism is a manifestation of narcissism in which individual autonomy and creativity are paramount and the individual self is expressed and sustained through patterns of consumption and lifestyle choices.²⁶ Anthony Giddens, on the other hand, focuses on individual empowerment; through 'reflexivity', a process of self-monitoring, individuals constantly and iteratively shape and amend their life projects.²⁷

It is feared that this overwhelming focus on the individual undermines the essential forms of social obligation that are necessary for the development of a 'morally coherent life'.²⁸ The social supports of collective action have been destroyed and individuals retreat into self-absorbed consumerism.²⁹ Interestingly, over the past decade, the rhetoric of Labour Party politicians in Britain has changed, shifting from a more collective sounding vocabulary such as 'the working class' to individual 'customers', 'clients' and, above all, 'consumers'. Even at the level of personal relationships, it is argued that individual choice has developed to such a degree that some have questioned whether, for example, the family is 'just another lifestyle choice'.³⁰

Part of the condition of late modernity, as seen by commentators such as Zygmunt Bauman or Amitai Etzioni, is that people do not take on responsibilities, relationships and commitments which might curtail their individual freedom. Rather than engage with problematic commitments, perhaps at much personal trouble and inconvenience, the new reflexive self recognizes that it is 'time to move on'. If mothers in a previous generation accepted that 'once you've made your bed you've got to lie in it', their sons and daughters today might simply prefer to leave it. Tracey Emin's unmade bed, an icon of conceptual art, famously exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, could be seen as a powerful contemporary metaphor.

This emphasis on the individual and the widespread prevalence of market mechanisms is coupled with the idea that the individual making rational choices is somehow more free than the rule-bound, sanction-ridden, societally constructed member of so-called traditional societies. Yet, according to some, this freedom may be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Zygmunt Bauman, in his book *Liquid Modernity*, is particularly concerned to emphasize the way society has created more and more choices, and situations where choices have to be made.³¹ 'I am what I choose' becomes the mantra of the self-reflexive individual. Yet this individualization

is a fate, not a choice: in the land of individual freedom of choice the option to escape individualization and to refuse to participate in the individualizing game is emphatically *not* on the agenda. . . [The] 'individualized' individual. . . is a human being who has no choice but to act as if the individuation had been attained.³²

The consequence of this, according to Bauman, is the 'corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship'.³³

This is a very strong argument. Individualization takes place not because individuals necessarily prefer to make choices and reject constraints and obligations, but rather because they have no choice but to make choices. Bauman's prose and style are nothing if not apocalyptic: not only are things bad, they are bound to stay this way; there is no obvious panacea or solution to the troubles created by an unstoppable and irreversible process of individualization. The chorus of gloom has indeed become so deafening we can hardly hear.

MAKING SENSE OF THE EVIDENCE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

So what are we to believe about the nature of social change? To what extent are fears about the loss of community justified, or based on a myth of a past golden age? At each stage, it seems there have been alternative interpretations, or other voices, which, somehow, have not been heard as loudly. For example, despite his fears about the neglect of 'society at large',³⁴ de Tocqueville did not propose that this neglect necessarily led to social isolation. He acknowledged that Americans could be strongly embedded in face-to-face relations and that these informal personal relations could help foster a wider sense of commitment:

. . . to each the love and respect of the population which surrounds you, a long succession of little services rendered and of obscure good deeds – a constant habit of kindness and an established reputation for disinterestedness – will be required. Local freedom, then, which leads a great number of citizens to value the affection of their kindred, perpetually brings men together, and forces them to help one another, in spite of the propensities which sever them.³⁵

Similarly, Karl Marx, who was concerned about the way that large-scale reorganization of the means of production had created new types of exploitation, nevertheless optimistically believed that new collective solidarities would emerge from a developing class consciousness, and Engels recognized that home ownership among the working

class could increase local community bonds. Durkheim challenged Tönnies's view of *Gesellschaft*, claiming that people were bound in more cooperative and flexible ways in modern society, giving greater personal freedom.³⁶ More recently, others have also challenged the seemingly endless catalogue of contemporary woes. Herbert Gans, for example, has criticized the pessimistic interpretations of many of his sociological colleagues with a spirited and insightful defence of middle American individualism. He remarks that 'people continue to structure their lives around the family and a variety of informal groups in a pattern I call micro-social, which has changed remarkably little over time'.³⁷

Despite cautious or dissenting voices, comparisons with some previous better, happier condition continue to be made. It seems that beliefs about an idyllic rustic community are deeply embedded in our culture. Raymond Williams argues that the folk ideal of a rustic pastoral, which goes back to the Garden of Eden fable, has long been part of the world's poetic tradition. The problem is that sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century it was somehow offered as a description, and thence an idealization, of actual English country life and its social and economic relations.³⁸ It is perhaps indicative that classical European sociology has its roots in the period of high Romanticism, when the literary transformation of the pastoral idyll was taking place.³⁹

Furthermore, those historians who were most likely to have influenced nineteenth-century social scientists were typically constitutional or political historians, and such economic and social historians as there were looked to the broad sweep. The enormous expansion of the new social history over the past thirty years, however, with its painstaking analysis of local documentary and statistical sources, has dramatically changed our understanding of everyday life in former times, and enabled us to question some of the assumptions which underlie fears about the loss of traditional community.

For example, the idea that, in the past, social life was rooted in stable geographical localities may have been overemphasized. It is very easy to forget how much geographical mobility has been the norm in Britain from well before the Act of Union. Men who voluntarily or involuntarily enlisted in the army were moved about the country in internal wars and, later, on the Continent in France and elsewhere. Those who enlisted in the navy perforce travelled much further and there would be few villages where young men were not taken away