

# **CONTENTION, CONTROVERSY, AND CHANGE**

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Evolutions and Revolutions in the  
Jewish Experience

VOLUME I



**Touro College Press**



# **CONTENTION, CONTROVERSY, AND CHANGE**

Evolutions and Revolutions in the  
Jewish Experience

VOLUME I

**SIMCHA FISHBANE  
ERIC LEVINE**

*Editors*

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**Simcha Fishbane, PhD**, is a professor of Jewish studies at the Touro College Graduate School of Jewish Studies. He has been a rabbi, scholar, and educator serving the Jewish community for many years. He is the founder of a Jewish university in Moscow, Russia, a branch of Touro College, and served as its dean for three years. He has also been instrumental in establishing similar programs in Canada, Israel, Germany, and Italy. Professor Fishbane is the author of numerous books and articles on such diverse topics as *Mishnah Berurah*, *Aruch Hashulchan*, *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, and Jewish custom and ritual, as well as



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**Edward C. Halperin, MD, MA**, is chancellor and chief executive officer of New York Medical College of the Touro College and University System. Dr. Halperin received a BS in economics from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, a MD from Yale University, and a MA from Duke University. He was an intern in internal medicine at Stanford University Medical Center and a resident in radiation oncology at the Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School. Dr. Halperin was on the faculty at Duke University for twenty-three years, where he served as professor and chairman of the

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**Jess Olson, PhD**, is an assistant professor of Jewish history and the associate director of the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies. Interested in questions of nationalism, religion, and Jewish identity in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, Dr. Olson's areas of research include the Jews of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany, history of Zionism and Jewish nationalism, and the intersection between Jewish Orthodoxy and political engagement. His manuscript on early Zionist, later Yiddishist, and finally

executive in the *Agudat Yisrael*, Dr. Nathan Birnbaum, *Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity* was released in December 2012 by Stanford University Press. His publications include: *Nathan Birnbaum and Tuvia Horowitz: Friendship and the Origins of an Orthodox Ideologue, Nation, Peoplehood and Religion in the Life and Thought of Nathan Birnbaum*, and *The Late Zionism of Nathan Birnbaum: The Herzl Controversy Reconsidered*. Dr. Olson was a Yad Hanadiv/Beracha Foundation Fellow for the 2010–2011 academic year and was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship for 2011. Teaching and research interests include modern Jewish cultural and intellectual history, European Jewish history, history of Zionism and Jewish nationalism, history of Orthodoxy, Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and modern Jewish thought.

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*and Marriage in the Talmud and Midrash* (Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 2004), *Time and Life Cycle in Talmud and Midrash* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008), and *New Rituals Old Societies* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009). He has published numerous papers on rites and rites of passage in contemporary Israeli society and studies applying social scientific methods to the understanding of Late Antiquity Judaism.

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# Foreword

With the sweeping changes in the social, political, scientific, and religious structures of society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we are perhaps witness to the beginning of a new era in Jewish history. Although many aspects of Jewish communal life have been thought of as unchanging and traditional, the reality is that the Jewish community has been profoundly influenced by and in turn has influenced the recent changes in society.

The revolutionary changes in travel, communications, information technology, and urbanization of our society, for example, have rendered everyday life almost unrecognizable from what it was only two hundred years ago. We drive elaborate technological marvels along a vast interconnected highway system and we fly across continents in our normal routine. We have begun to harness the potential of silicon and electricity to carry our voices and ideas to people across the world in a matter of seconds.

The shrinking of both the physical and figurative distances that separate people from one another has undeniably altered our perception of our place in the global community. Furthermore, the migration of human populations from dispersed rural lands to crowded cities has created our modern society with diverse demographics and complex needs.

The collective implications of these modernizations are no less relevant to the present and future of Judaism. As both a parent and an educator, I would argue that never before have we been so uninformed about the world in which our children will live. How then can we hope to prepare them adequately to prosper both financially and spiritually in a future we know so little about?

The following chapters of *Contention, Controversy, and Change: Evolutions and Revolutions in the Jewish Experience* will attempt to address those questions by analyzing the important people and movements of the recent past in the hope of better informing us about what to expect in the near future. They will also explore the intersection between Jewish religious, communal, and social movements, along with their leaders, that has defined Judaism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Since the Diaspora began over twenty centuries ago, Jewish communal life has centered on the synagogue. The synagogue has formed the fundamental basis of religious observance in the Jewish community and in many cases served as a nexus for social action as well. Jewish communal organizations, apart from religious ones such as synagogues and schools, serve a variety of functions, including those that are internal to the Jewish community as well as functions that address external relationships with other people and communities.

A number of compelling models are available for analyzing the structure and function of the contemporary Jewish community. The works of the late Daniel Elazar, Steven Windmueller, and others come to mind as providing necessary tools and perspectives for studying our ever-evolving community. In my estimation, there are certain characteristics of community that are particularly useful and central and I will focus on these factors in this essay. More specifically, one can examine the actions of Jewish communal life as potentially organized into two “ideal type” analytic categories: first, whether the focus is internal or external to the Jewish community, and second, whether the goals can be accomplished through advocacy or direct service, i.e., social and communal services. These two characteristics create a schematic for four different classes of Jewish initiatives: internally focused direct service and advocacy organizations, and externally focused direct service and advocacy organizations.

An example of an internally focused social service organization, whose primary function is to provide care, shelter, and food for impoverished Jewish people, is the Ark in Chicago. This organization’s mission is primarily focused

on helping the poor and is a paradigm of an organization that does very little to lobby, either internally or externally, or create a philosophical position. It produces indirectly positive public relations, both inside and outside the Jewish community, because of its help for the poor. It also promotes a positive social interaction among its volunteers and donors through a number of means, all of which combine to coalesce into a direct service organization for the internal community.

The American Jewish World Service is an example of a primarily externally focused direct service organization. Their mission includes working to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. They provide financial support to both local grassroots and global organizations serving Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. While they do this by mobilizing both Jewish and non-Jewish American communities, they proudly identify as a Jewish organization with a primarily Jewish leadership.

The Anti-Defamation League is an example of an externally directed advocacy organization. Advocacy, in the sense intended here, refers to action taken to influence public opinion and to build support for a particular cause or policy. Typical expressions include lobbying, letter writing and petition campaigns, rallies, public meetings, and similar actions. The ADL's primary function is to look outside the Jewish community for evidence of prejudice and to use its communal organization to advocate for the Jewish people as a whole. The movement discussed later in this text, to save Soviet Jewry, is an example where the Jewish community looked externally to advocate for Jews living in the oppressive USSR.

An example of an internally focused advocacy organization, discussed in several chapters in this book, was the World Zionist Organization founded at the first Zionist Congress under the influence of Theodore Herzl. This organization crossed political borders and was designed both to create an internal group that could advocate for Zionism, as well as provide positive public relations outside the community. However, its primary function was to organize the Jewish community to support *Aliyah* and the eventual establishment of the State of Israel.

Almost all Jewish organizations, like the ones named above, have a component of intra-institutional social interaction that constitutes a segment of their experience. Even though the primary purpose of the organization may be



social or community service, bringing Jewish or like-minded people together for a common cause is an ancillary goal. For many, the sense of community and shared purpose is a powerful binding force created by collaboration within these organizations.

It is not surprising, considering the ubiquity of Jewish organizations devoted to service and advocacy, that the impetus for the Jewish social imperative, in addition to the more easily understandable ritual imperative, stems from the Bible. In Genesis 2:15, God tells Adam in the Garden of Eden that his role is to work the land and to guard it. This early commandment to build, maintain, and improve our surroundings as a primary responsibility of humankind has left a strong impression on the Jewish people.

This goal of global social improvement has been a prominent theme throughout Jewish writings and history. While ritual has been rejected by some Jews as an unnecessary component of that paradigm, the altruistic desire has remained a core component of Jewish thought and action. In addition, concern for the future of the Jewish people has fueled organizational life and activism. Some of the major movements described in this volume are focused on initiatives driven by these forces. Zionism arose out of a philosophical and practical response to anti-Semitism and discrimination. At its core, it was the establishment of a framework to enhance the future of the Jewish people.

Notwithstanding the Enlightenment and emancipation of many peoples in the past two centuries, racial and religious discrimination has sadly remained a component of most modern societies until recently. Although allowed to vote and in some cases accepted as citizens, Jews had continued to be viewed as the “other” in many societies. Even in the United States, until the early 1960s, restricted covenants prevented Jews from living in many neighborhoods. Sports clubs excluded them from membership and certain professions and schools had strong quotas limiting Jewish inclusion. These discriminatory practices played a role in shaping the structure of Jewish life by both uniting the various Jewish communities and by serving as an impetus for Jews to establish their own organizations, in which moral, social, religious, and recreational activities could thrive.

The subsequent creation and expansion of the State of Israel, of course, represents the most extreme response to discrimination and is the most profound change in Jewish communal life since the exile in 70 CE.

Controversy within the Jewish community has surrounded the concept of Zionism since its creation. For both religious and social reasons, a schism developed within the European Jewish community, shortly after Theodore Herzl engaged in activism and began building the political structure that produced modern Zionism. Some religious groups believed that human action without a revealed mandate from heaven should not replace divine intervention in the return of Jewish sovereignty to Israel. Others were more concerned about perpetuating the controlled environment that existed in some places in Europe, rather than risking religious observance and the communal structure by a move to Israel. Those early concerns persist among small elements of the Jewish community even today, but have been replaced on a moral and philosophical basis by a worldwide questioning of Zionism's implications. The social and philosophical upheaval produced by Zionism's emergence has exposed and provided insight into the core religious and social issues facing the Jewish people in the modern world.

Furthermore, Jewish history provides many examples of divided communities struggling to determine the best course for the Jewish future, in addition to the Zionist and anti-Zionist groups, active in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Similarly, we can use the same lens to understand the issues facing the Jewish people in biblical and historical events. The Bible describes Korach's band, who challenged establishment values through communal organization. At the time of the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, factions for and against surrender to Rome were present and disagreed with each other. The Israeli War of Independence featured disagreements, not only between Jews and Arabs, but between different factions of pre-state resistance that were often violently opposed to each other, resulting in events such as the sinking of the *Altalena*.

Thus, Jewish communal and organizational life, apart from direct religious observance, has been both important and essential to the creation of modern Judaism in all of its nuances. Despite decreasing occurrences of discrimination and the existence of many outlets for Jewish expression and participation in society, the strongest argument for the continued existence of Jewish communal organizations and activism is the unique success and accomplishment they continue to contribute to our global society.

The roles of many Jewish organizations have evolved in the past few years to include audiences and services outside their original objectives. This expansion and diversification of individual organizations can be cited as one way in which our Jewish community is changing in this new era of Jewish history. This change can point to, among other things, the growing sense in the global Jewish community of confidence and an expanded role in the global society. This would allow us to see the old communal borders as more permeable than ever before.

As one reads through this volume, one cannot help but admire the achievements of Jewish organizations and hope that they continue to thrive well into the future. Regardless of origin, purpose, and accomplishment, one might wonder what explains the powerful impulse to engage in the organizational development and participation highlighted in this book. I believe that there are two important factors that explain the richness of Jewish organizational life—goal oriented causes and externally or internally imposed isolation. In light of increasing anti-Semitism in Europe now, and the rising cost of education worldwide, our communal dependence on Jewish advocacy and service initiatives must continue to grow. As long as we work together to recognize and discuss the effects of our isolation in a meaningful way and continue to apply ourselves to our socially and ritually inspired goals, we can ensure a bright future both for our people and for all humanity.

**Alan Kadish, MD**

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We would like to dedicate the book to the memory of Dr. Anthony Polemeni, treasured, respected and beloved colleague and friend. May he rest in peace.

Eric Levine would also like to dedicate the book to the memory of his mother Gloria Levine, who passed away just prior to its publication. He would especially like to extend deep thanks to his wife Roxanne and daughter Tamar Levine, the next two generations of the Levine family, for their enduring love and support.

Finally, we thank the copyright holders for granting permission to reproduce the following material in this book.

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PART I

# Introduction





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# The Problematics of Jewish Collective Action: Community and Conflict and Change<sup>1</sup>

Eric Levine

## INTRODUCTION

C'mon people, now, smile on your brother,  
everybody get together try to love one  
another, right now.<sup>2</sup>

As the refrain from a popular rock song from the 1960s claims, the act of bringing people together, creating community, seemingly possessed a magical essence. Years later, a similar theme was again echoed in my own professional experience when I was the director of a community-based organization in New York City. A member of the board often used the word “community” in her comments at meetings. Watching her face and listening to her voice, one was struck by the almost mystical quality the word seemed to have for her.

That experience led to a lifelong passionate academic and professional fascination with both the myriad meanings people associate with the notion of community and the social process of community organizing, or collective

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- 1 The author would especially like to thank Marian Stoltz-Loike, Simcha Fishbane, and Roxanne Levine for their extremely important insights and constructive criticism on this chapter as well as acknowledge the suggestions made by various readers who provided helpful feedback.
  - 2 The song, entitled “Let’s Get Together,” has been sung by various artists. It was written by Chet Powers in 1963. The copyright is held by Irving Music, Inc. (BMI), renewed in 1991. Retrieved from [http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/the\\_youngbloods/get\\_together.html](http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/the_youngbloods/get_together.html).

action. I have been especially captivated by the subject of *Jewish* collective action, how Jews throughout history and in the contemporary period have organized their efforts to build communities, to manage organizations and institutional, cultural and religious change, to deal with internal communal conflicts, to manage their relationships to their external environments, and to respond to opportunities and challenges, especially those that are life- and community-threatening. Even more, I remain forever intrigued and inspired by how communities, institutions, organizations, and movements are created, mobilized, and sustained, and the heroic efforts often displayed by their leaders and constituents alike. Our rock lyricist may have been delightfully naïve in assuming that love alone creates togetherness. Perhaps it does take a bit of love for people, for both individuals and collectivities, to become actively involved in community building. But, building community, sustaining organizations, and mobilizing people is hard, labor-intensive, and often contentious work, although hopefully rewarding in the end. As such, this writer is fascinated by what I will call the “problematics of collective action,” or more specifically the problematics of uniquely Jewish collective action.

Academic, professional, and personal choices can be dramatically influenced by early life experiences. I write as one deeply affected by childhood memories of the Civil Rights Movement and as a direct participant in the anti-Vietnam war, student, Soviet Jewry, and late anti-poverty movements. These personal experiences laid the foundation for this lifelong preoccupation and, as a consequence, the subject of contentious politics and social movements has become of special interest to the author.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss collective action, with a focus on community, conflict, change, and contentious politics. My goal is to offer a general overview of these concepts, drawing heavily from sociological literature, including a survey of the major trends in theory and analytical frameworks. This will be followed by an application of theory to cases of Jewish contention. Through this demonstration, the claim will be made that this expansive literature should be applied widely to specifically Jewish instances of collective action, deepening and expanding our understanding of these cases and thereby suggesting a rich future research agenda. These discussions set the basic framework for the chapters that follow, following which I will lay out the structure of the book and its organizing focus around Jewish collective action.

## THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY

The study of community has a distinguished history in various fields of inquiry. Tracing the etymology of the word, Martinez-Brawley notes that the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* suggests that the term is derived from the Latin word *communis*, a noun implying “fellowship, community of relations or feelings. In medieval Latin, the word came to be used concretely in the sense of a ‘body of fellows or fellow townsmen.’”<sup>3</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites *communis* as well, and also lists *com* + *unus*, meaning “together as one.”<sup>4</sup> In a report published by the British National Institute for Social Work, a group known as the Barclay Working Party in 1980 defined community as a network, or informal relationships, between people connected with each other by kinship, common interest, geographical proximity, friendship, occupation, or the giving and receiving of services—or various combinations of these features.<sup>5</sup>

In her study of student and community organizing in the 1960s, sociologist Wini Breines conceives of community as a network of relationships more direct and more total, more personal than the formal, abstract, and instrumental relationship characterizing state and society.<sup>6</sup> One of the classical works on the subject was written by the German social scientist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887, entitled *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community and Society*). In that work the author coined the term *gemeinschaft* to refer to his notion of community, where people relate to one another through mutuality, common destiny, close bonds, and personal rewards and obligations derived from close bonds. Relations are more intimate, more direct. This social pattern is often observed in families, villages, and small geographic units. In contrast, *gesellschaft* described society, where rationality is valued, the market directs trade and exchanges, and self-interest prevails over the sense of common obligations and duties. Relationships are distant and formal, occur in larger social units,

3 E. Martinez-Brawley, “Community,” in *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, ed. Richard L. Edwards (Ed.-in-Chief), 19th ed., vol. 1 (Washington, DC: NASW Press, 1995), 539.

4 Georges Van Den Abbeele, “Introduction,” in *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), ix-xxvi.

5 Martinez-Brawley, “Community.”

6 Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

and are characterized by impersonal, contractual ties. *Gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* are the antitheses of one another.<sup>7</sup>

British social anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen claims that the standard ways of defining community in the social sciences have been based on an analysis of structure. These models, in his estimation, are off the mark. Instead, he approaches community as a phenomenon of culture, one “which is meaningfully constructed by people through their symbolic prowess and resources.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, rather than formulating yet another lexical meaning for the term, he proposes that we seek to establish its use as a concept. The word implies that people have something in common with each other that distinguishes them from members of other groups. Community is that entity to which one belongs, beyond the bonds of kinship but more immediate than the broader society. It connotes a relational idea: the opposition of (that is, distinction between) a community to other social entities. For Cohen, the point of studying the nature of community is to examine that element that captures this sense of discrimination, or boundary, which marks the beginning and end of community. He is interested in what the idea of boundary means to people, the meanings they impute to it, and the symbolism surrounding community and boundary. Cohen’s work is insightful, instructive, and germane to this essay; we shall return to it later.

The term community and the related notion of community building are commonly spoken but used very loosely. To be precise, there is no such thing as Jewish, Catholic, Latino, Irish, Italian, Asian, or African-American communities per se, although we use the wording for the sake of colloquial ease. For example, there is really no such thing as an Irish community of New York, or for that matter any other grouping, whether it be based around religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, or any other ascriptive or self-defining characteristic. But, there are, in fact, many communities comprised of such individuals or groups in the New York area. One would be hard-pressed to talk about a specific community of Manhattan, the Bronx, or Westchester, and all the more so one of Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto, or Vancouver. All of these areas are far too large geographically and demographically and too

7 Martinez-Brawley, “Community”; Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988).

8 Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1993), 38.

diverse to constitute unitary communities. But within these larger geographic frameworks one can speak about individual or local communities. It may then be possible to speak about an African-American community of Harlem, Crown Heights, or Mount Vernon, New York; an Italian community of Yonkers or Bay Ridge, New York; a Jewish community of Teaneck, New Jersey; a Latino community of Washington Heights in Manhattan; or an Asian-American community of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and so on. One can even identify multiple sub-communities of varying sizes and constituencies within these settings.<sup>9</sup>

To illustrate,

When government leaders refer to the Common Market as a “community,” they may be regarded as indulging in rhetoric: stating an aspiration to common interest which is all too obviously missing in reality. But when the inhabitants of a Shetland island talk of their “community,” they refer to an entity, a reality invested with all the sentiment attached to kinship, friendship, neighbouring, rivalry, familiarity, jealousy, as they inform the social process of everyday life. At this level, community is more than an oratorical abstraction: it hinges crucially on consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

The sense of community often possesses a spatial component, for generally people “feel” a deeper sense of community when they also share geographic proximity, such as in a neighborhood, a region, a town, a housing development, and so on. In my childhood in the Bronx, New York, our apartment building constituted a community, and that sense was especially reinforced when the tenants organized rent strikes against the landlord.

But community need not always involve close proximity. Communities are not just geographic entities, but can be identified along functional, ethnic, gender, age, occupational, social, economic, religious, ideological, cultural, and many other lines of delineation. In fact, people often perceive that they are part of a community that transcends local lines. There are non-geographically-based communities, such as professional or alumni associations, and all manner of

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9 Eric M. Levine, “Bowling Together: Community Building in the 90s,” *Cornerstone* 2 (1997): 69–77; Levine, “Everybody Get Together. . . Right Now: Reflections on the Meaning of Community and Community Practice,” *Social Work Forum* 34 (Winter/Spring 1998–9; published in 2000): 33–52.

10 Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction*, 13.

racial, religious, or ethnic groups that go beyond geography. So, members of organizations living in different areas can feel a sense of community with one another although they do not share residential proximity (i.e., Touro College alumni, National Association of Social Work, NAACP, AFL-CIO, AIPAC, Orthodox Union, etc.). National organizational systems will often create regional or local chapter structures to simulate that closer feeling. Still, the point is that vibrant, close-knit communities generally require some way in which their activities and purposes can be carried out by constituents on a regular and frequent basis.

To have sustaining power beyond the mere coincidental, communities need vehicles that can provide structure, regularity, stability, security, continuity, and shape to social life. In American society today, at least until recently, communal life has been for the most part synonymous with organizational life. Organizations come into being as people identify and seek solutions to their common interests or problems. Organizations provide the framework for regular, sustained contact among people.

The sense of community consists of a fundamental social feature as well. Generally, people prefer to find others who are like-minded, who share similar values, attitudes, and lifestyles. When people speak of a strong community, they mean the extent and quality of social networks, social circles and relationships that exist, and the linking of people together: that is, social cohesion. Social circles represent the ways people structure their everyday lives, the ways people interact regularly. For our interests, cohesion represents the extent to which people interact with others in consistent fashion.<sup>11</sup>

The more interactions and social relations that occur among people, the greater will be the probability that people will be integrated into a community and the continuity of communal life sustained. Individuals cannot survive alone, nor can they sustain a lifestyle or set of values alone. They also cannot respond to perceived needs and interests without banding together to amass the resources and deliver the services required to respond to those interests. Individuals and organizations are reinforced in what they do by virtue of the fact that they gain the support of others. In short, the more local, the more regular and sustained the interaction, the more intense the depth of

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11 Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change: Emerging Patterns in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

relationships, and the more basic the interactions among relatively homogeneous people, in terms of serving and meeting essential human needs, the stronger will be the sense of community.<sup>12</sup> The strength of community within any given group is determined by the degree to which its members experience a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance.

Finally, the word community does not refer to a fixed place or point in time—a community is always in a state of transition and motion, always in a state of becoming. Social life never stands still; human needs and social conditions are constantly shifting and changing. The idea of community really represents a continuum, from low to medium to high levels of “communitiness.” Consequently, the condition of becoming a “complete” community is never truly achieved.

### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY<sup>13</sup>

To this basic set of ideas about community, another critical dimension needs to be added. Community does not magically materialize out of thin air; it does not exist in and of itself. Indeed, the whole idea of community is a socially constructed entity. Community does not exist outside of people’s perceptions and collective definitions. It only comes into being as people are aware of it, are conscious of it, define it as such, and organize their lives around it.

Human reality is socially constructed reality. The social construction of reality is the process by which people create their understanding of the nature of the environment around them. The social order is the result of ongoing human production. It is not biologically derived or otherwise given in our natural environment, and it exists only as a product of human activity.<sup>14</sup> There is no single objective definition of reality, but only various and sometimes competing realities, each of which is defined by a different group, public, culture, or individual. As long as the definition of reality seems to work and is supported by a consensus, people will continue to regard it as true. As long as it works, or continues to provide satisfactory answers and explanations for the

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12 Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change*.

13 This line of reasoning draws on the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966); Herbert Blumer, “Social Problems as Collective Behavior,” *Social Problems* 18, no. 3 (1971): 296–306; Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction*.

14 Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

surrounding world, almost everyone in the society will take it for granted and will have little interest in pressing beyond it to anything deeper or more complicated.

Reality just seems to be there, pre-existing and pre-arranged. The reality we encounter is merely the interpretation we place on the evidence of our senses, and people in different cultures may interpret that reality very differently. These realities are socially constructed and are relative to a particular people at a particular time and place. The same data or “facts” may have different meanings to different groups or peoples at different times and thus will constitute different realities. These different realities are usually expressed in different words and symbols which come to have a reality of their own. To Berger and Luckmann, language actually structures our thinking and beliefs in the ways we look at facts, so that we tend to forget the difference between those facts themselves, the beliefs we have about them, and the meanings we give them.

Moreover, language is capable of transcending the reality of everyday life altogether. . . . Language now constructs immense edifices of symbolic representations that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life. . . . Language is capable not only of constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of “bringing back” these symbols and appraising them as objectively real elements in everyday life.<sup>15</sup>

Data or facts have no meaning in and of themselves until they are given meaning by a certain group or public in society. When the definitions fail to deliver meaningful explanations, people begin to question them and will be open to new constructions of reality being offered by various groups. People create cultural products (physical like cities, PCs, and baseballs, and nonmaterial, like language, beliefs, and theories). These products take on a life of their own. We are confronted by these products as part of reality and become so socialized that we forget that these are cultural creations and take them for granted as part of the natural landscape.

Similarly, collective beliefs are also social in origin. They are shared and become part of social reality itself. Once beliefs are shared, they acquire an existence independent of the individual. Beliefs are created by individuals not in isolation but in the course of communication and cooperation; in routine

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15 Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 40.



exchanges, in conversations in bars, at parties, in meeting rooms, in trains, over the phone and through e-mail. Within circles of friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and family, events and information are discussed, interpreted, and commented upon. The categorization and interpretation that occur in these discussions transform the unfamiliar and uncertain into the familiar.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, this process of defining reality and constructing meaning is social and consensual, the result of interaction among people. People behave according to perceived reality and whatever people believe to be real will be real in its consequences. Most of us believe and act upon that reality which we have learned to be true from family, friends, socialization, and the larger society. Berger and Luckmann similarly suggest that society exists only as individuals are conscious of it and that individual consciousness is socially determined.<sup>17</sup>

Community, too, is socially constructed and is a function of collective perceptions and definitions. It emerges and is sustained when individuals interact with one another, when they exchange and define shared concerns and issues, when they organize and work together, and when they share significant parts of their lives. The needs can be as broad as human experience itself: starting and sustaining synagogues and churches, establishing self-help groups and civic and communal organizations of all types, organizing neighborhood associations in order to erect stop signs, supporting the local school, building a community center, raising funds for the United Way or the UJA Federation, and so on. Thus, to reiterate the fundamental argument about the emergence of community, it does not exist outside of people's perceptions and collective definitions. A sense of community becomes "real" only as people are aware of it, are conscious of it, define it as such, and organize their lives around it.

For Cohen, various processes of modernity have worked to undermine the structural bases and the boundaries of community. These include such interrelated forces as industrialization and urbanization (and, I would add, suburbanization), the dominance of the cash economy and mass production, centralization of markets, the spread of mass media and the veritable explosion of mass information, the growth of the transportation infrastructure, and increased mobility. He asserts that as the structural bases of community

16 Bert Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

17 Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

become blurred, the symbolic bases of community take precedence. Thus, he concludes that community is a mental construct and “whether or not its structural boundaries remain intact, the reality of community lies in its members’ perceptions of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.”<sup>18</sup>

[Community] does not consist in social structure or in “the doing” of social behavior. It inheres, rather, in “the thinking” about it. It is in this sense that we can speak of the community as a symbolic, rather than a structural, construct. . . . Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic assertions of “fact.” By extension, the distinctiveness of communities and, thus, the reality of their boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms. As we have seen, this reality of community is expressed and embellished symbolically.<sup>19</sup>

## COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The building, developing, and managing of community (and its organizations and institutions) is, in essence, a collective enterprise and a form and manifestation of what can be termed “collective action.” In fact, a sense of community is both an outcome of collective action and, along with other crucial elements, enables further collective action. Collective action of all sorts is facilitated by the existence of dense networks of relationships, providing the platform from which communal, organizational, institutional, and movement activity can ensue.<sup>20</sup> As noted above, the act of creating community is a process whereby people come together to respond to shared interests and concerns.

A great deal of what people wish to accomplish cannot be achieved alone, either by private, individual action or through markets and the modern instrument for aggregating private interest, the corporation. Only through some form of *collective action* can people realize important individual and group goals and produce the myriad shared benefits associated with social

18 Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction*, 118.

19 Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction*, 98.

20 William A. Gamson, “The Social Psychology of Collective Action,” in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 62.

life. . . . Collective action can involve advocating for causes or goals, recruiting others, and banding together to gain voice and representation before public institutions, corporations, and other bodies, or it can entail producing something of value that is shared beyond those who created it. Whether the goal is the creation of public parks or pathways, health care or human rights, environmental sustainability or electoral accountability, or information databases and communications systems, the need for at least two people to act together toward the establishment of some shared “public good” is an enduring fact of human life.<sup>21</sup>

Collective action encompasses a wide array of human endeavor, “from raising an army to raising a barn; from building a bridge across a gulf separating states to building a faith community that spans the gulf between races; from organizing a business cartel to organizing a small partnership to compete in a crowded market; from the food riots of revolutionary France to the progressive dinners of charitable New York.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, collective action is any and all activity aimed at producing a collective good; that is, “actions taken by two or more people in pursuit of the same collective good.”<sup>23</sup>

At its most elementary level, collective action means the pursuit of a common objective through joint action—people working together for a variety of reasons, often including the belief that doing so enhances the prospect of achieving the objective. In that collective action covers a wide range of activity, it is useful to differentiate between the institutionalized and normatively sanctioned from those that are outside institutional channels, i.e., social movements.<sup>24</sup> For Tilly and Tarrow, two of the leading scholars studying collective action, the term means coordinating effort on behalf of shared interests or programs.

21 Bruce Bimber, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Cynthia Stohl, *Collective Action in Organizations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

22 Gerald Marwell and Pamela Oliver, *The Critical Mass in Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–2.

23 Marwell and Oliver, *The Critical Mass*, 4.

24 Doug McAdam and David A. Snow, eds., *Social Movements: Readings on Their Emergence, Mobilization, and Dynamics* (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 1997); David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, “Mapping the Terrain,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 3–16.

Football teams engage in collective action, but so do churches, voluntary associations, and neighbors who clear weeds from a vacant lot. When you go to school or to work for a big company, you enter an organization that is carrying on collective action. But most of the collective action involved occurs with no significant contention and no government involvement. The bulk of collective action takes place outside contentious politics.<sup>25</sup>

Community and collective action are intrinsically interrelated concepts—the coming together of community is a form of collective action and at the same time serves as a platform for continuing collective action. The notion of the social movement community (SMC), introduced as a tool for analyzing social movements, also helps to strengthen this link between community and collective action. Communities (physical or virtual), especially at the grassroots level, commonly provide the space for much social movement activity. Social movements contain more than just politically oriented organizations. Often, social movements are not actualized via centralized formal originations but mobilize, interact, and act through informal networks with fluid boundaries, flexible leadership structures, malleable divisions of labor, and informal structures inside communities.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on the experience of the contemporary American women's movement, Buechler conceived of the SMC as comprised of “informal networks of politicized participants who are active in promoting the goals of a social movement outside the boundaries of formal movement organizations.”<sup>27</sup> Communities can be comprised of multiple kinds of existing organizations, cultures, structures, leaders, constituents, informal groups, cultural groups, alternative organizations, coalitions, communications, and networks of people. Movement activists involved in a range of causes live, work, and regularly interact in the community context. But, movements and mobilizations also experience cycles of high and low activity—ebbs and flows—and frequently enter into periods of abeyance: extended phases of quietude but not disappearance, in which they remain ready to resurface when favorable conditions arise.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the SMC can encompass all types of extant, quiescent, and

25 Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2007), 5.

26 Steven M. Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

27 Buechler, *Women's Movements*, 61.

28 Verta Taylor, “Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance,” *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989): 761–75.

potential collective action. As a conceptual and analytical tool, the SMC enables scholars to focus closely on the interaction between all the actors, relations, and physical/virtual spaces that grow and support movements.<sup>29</sup> The idea of the SMC suggests that researchers seek to uncover the potentiality for collective action emanating from community and see its connection to the type, depth, and quality of communal cohesiveness and continuity.

### CONFLICT AND CHANGE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The community and collective action processes that have been described so far do not represent static or stable phenomena. The economic, political, social, cultural, institutional, and religious patterns of any given society or community are elements in constant motion, continual conflict, continual flux. A quite serviceable definition of conflict signifies that it is a perceived divergence of interest, or the recognition that interests are currently incompatible or cannot be met at the same time.<sup>30</sup> For Tarrow, conflict between challengers and authorities is normal and not to be viewed as an aberration.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, social conflict and change occur at many levels of social life and at many levels of complexity. Conflict takes place in a host of arenas of human interaction: interpersonal, interorganizational, intergroup, and intercommunal. Despite commonplace assumptions and perceptions, conflict is an inherent feature of human existence characterizing all forms of social relations. The absence of conflict would constitute the abnormal. It can function as a positive force for change and growth, for people and communities, and need not entail anger, hate, or hostility. Many, if not most, conflicts can be and are often resolved amicably and, in fact, the bulk of collective action takes place outside of contentious politics.

29 Steven M. Buechler, *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Suzanne Staggenborg, *Social Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Staggenborg, "Organization and Community in Social Movements," in *The Future of Social Movement Research: Dynamics, Mechanisms and Processes*, eds. Jacqueliene van Stekelenburg, Conny Roggeband, and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 125–144.

30 Dean G. Pruitt and Jeffrey Z. Rubin, *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement* (New York: Random House, 1986).

31 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*.