Re-assembling Community

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My broader work focuses on the community buyout movement in rural Scotland where a different form of landownership is transforming economic, demographic, and environmental outcomes there. Today I'm going to talk about the implications that has for this thing called "community" that we talk about frequently but often don't fully define.

Specifically I assert that the results of the community buyouts not only represent a dramatic and elegant example of the capacity for community economies to transform landscapes and, in the words of Fiona MacKenzie, open the possibility for the re – doing of community; but also can provide insight into the mechanics by which this powerful but confounding and sometimes contradictory idea we call "community" can have both emancipatory and repressive potential.

I draw first on much the same body of theory as Katherine Gibson did in her excellent plenary on Wednesday, including of course the Gibson-Graham diverse economies research community as well as a "more than human" concept of community that builds on Latour and de la Bellacasa. However, I also want to re-incorporate formal studies on common property regimes from institutional economics. Specifically, I extend my advisor Ellen Bassett's examinations of community land trusts as mediators of commons of the form defined by Elinor Ostrom, Ronald Oakerson, and Dan Bromley, among others.

Rural Scotland, particularly the "highlands and islands" area in the north and west of the country, is an area with low population density, extremely concentrated land ownership, economic stagnation, and where populations have been declining for centuries. This trend begins with Highland Clearances of the 17th and 18th century but it didn't end there.

Trends over this period have led to a region dominated by large estates controlled by absentee owners, many spanning tens of thousands of acres, often with only a few thousand people on them and sometimes with less than 100.

In the 1990s, two large estates – the isle of Eigg in the Inner Hebrides and the North Assynt estate in the far northwest Assynt peninsula of the mainland – were put up for sale, and the local residents, tired of being ignored and erased as their land was bandied between various large landowners, decided to band together to form a community land trust and buy it themselves. This inspired dozens more buyouts that have now placed over a half million acres into community trust ownership.

So what is particularly remarkable about all of this is what seems to have

happened in the wake of community land ownership. The population decline which has been endemic to the highlands and islands for centuries seems to have suddenly reversed on these estates, as new stores, businesses, restaurants, and other industries open in these spaces. Many of the trusts have overseen new housing projects to accommodate new arrivals of residents.

At the same time, ecological conditions on these trusts have seen a turnaround. Even with growing populations, the conditions of grazing ranges have improved and community reforestation projects are restoring woodland areas to the landscape. In many cases, these seem to be doing even better than areas that are under the management of national public land organizations.

In part because of these successes, land reform has become a policy goal of the now 18-year old re-established Scottish Parliament, both under Labour and Scottish National Party control. Most notably, the Land Reform (Scotland) Acts of 2003 and of 2016 established both financial support and legal powers given to community ownership, specifically the creation of a Scottish Land Fund to support community buyouts and the establishment of Community Rights-to-Buy, giving Highland communities right of first refusal when large rural estates came up for sale.

This talk emerges from my present moment between what I term my preliminary research phase and my primary research phase, where I have developed some theoretical grounds which I am on the verge of setting out to examine in greater detail.

To be specific, in examining the two original estates that were bought by community trusts, a striking difference in outcomes emerges. In the early buyout of the isle of Eigg, the landlord's refusal to update or provide frequent access to the island's small, run-down community hall was a central point of contention driving the buyout effort. After the buyout was completed, not only did the newly formed trust build a new community hall, but also opted to continue to hold the vast majority of the estate in common. Additionally, while the island formed an official residents association which held positions on the board of the trust, all residents of the island, whether members of the trust or not, were given full voting rights in local issues. Subsequently, in the island's main claim to fame, the residents assembled a built their own 100% sustainable electricity grid to replace the individual diesel generators which had previously provided electrical power on the island, as well as broad noise pollution. In addition to the obvious pride (and tourist potential) that the island's green energy grid provided, residents have repeatedly spoken about the confidence and spirit that the completion of both of these projects generated, which have subsequently led to construction of a new island shop, new tea room, glamping huts, and other collective enterprises. Eigg's population has gone from 65 to over 100, including multiple young families.

By contrast, the Assynt Crofter's Trust consisted entirely of those holding crofting tenures, a specific kind of tenure with legal protections designed to

support in-resident subsistence farming supported by off-farm labor. Upon completion of the buyout, most of the crofters who were now in exclusive control of the trust elected to execute an individual crofting right-to-buy and took their crofts into fee simple private ownership. Today the Stoer Primary School which serves the estate has closed due to lack of students and an aging population. Many houses on the estate have been turned into rental vacation homes, often surrounded by badly overgrazed fields. Residents of the general area who are not crofters, but many of whom had contributed to the original fund raising effort to buy the trust, now express considerable resentment at the exclusivity of the trust. In 2005, a different portion of the Assynt estate was purchased under a different community trust, which elected to follow much more closely to the practices established on Eigg.

These divergent outcomes bring up the question of what the connection between common holding on the one hand and this centrality of "community" on the other.

Beyond the obvious but still important titular centrality of community in community buyouts, community ownership, and community land trusts, within narratives of rural Scotland and in broader development and policy narratives, community looms large. In the growing literature on Scottish land reform, community stands in as a space for discourse, negotiation, and "local control" for some. For others, such as Fiona MacKenzie who has engaged diverse economies discourses in these contexts, the production, performance, and "a-doing" of community is central to the opening of new possibilities.

More critically in a pragmatic sense, with the legal institutions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Acts, community is now a body that has legal standing.

In the development of the 2016 act, the Scottish government commissioned a report on land reform, then issued a "public consultation," similar to what in the US we call a public comment period, which asked specific questions about the recommendations of the government's report.

In my analysis of the responses to this consultation, including a question that directly asked, "how should community be defined?" My expectation was that supporters of land reform would argue for requirements of residency, while opponents, such as large landowners, would argue for their own inclusion in communities. Instead, I found that land reform supporters expressed uncertainty about how to define it, but often opted for very expansive definitions. Land reform opponents, on the other hand, most often refused to answer at all, opted for the most restrictive definitions, or challenged the validity of the question. In answers to other questions, land reform opponents often declared 'the market' or 'private ownership' to be a superior mechanisms for managing rural land, and dismissed 'community' as just so much sentiment and nothing else.

So I ask, why is community threatening to reform opponents? Why is it good but hard to define for proponents?

What is community anyway?

I claim that community needs a strong definition – in the context of Scotland, this is not just important theoretically, but also legally. Residents of rural Scotland freely use the word "community" to describe a particular thing, having an apparently shared intuitive sense of what it is, even if they are unable to define it specifically. Further, a stronger, more rigourous, more explicit definition of community can help us be clearer on what is going on in these spaces where "community" seems to be doing good but we haven't been able to articulate a general expression of why.

To put it briefly, I have been working to define a model of community which can meet these criteria:

- Strong
- More than warm fuzzies
- More than human
- Role of common property
- Generates secondary connections
- Incorporates local place but isn't fully restricted by it

Gibson-Graham, MacKenzie, and others continually remind us that community is a thing that is produced, performed, embodied, and most of all become. Further, recent discourses on community have started examining "more-than-human communities" as assemblages of care which include the non-human elements. Now, this is one of those instances for me for which I had this same idea a few years ago, except that the best name I could come up with was "communities as non-modern, actor-network assemblages of care." Yeah, I like "more-than-human communities" better too.

I want to push this further, though, particularly by expanding upon an assertion from Stephen Gudeman that Gibson-Graham specifically highlighted in *A Postcapitalist Politics*, which is of a bidirectional, obligate relationship between community and commons. As Gudeman says, no commons, no community; no community, no commons.

Elinor Ostrom, like Gibson-Graham, insists commons aren't just warm fuzzy sharing spaces, but have closed sets of appropriators with specific either formal or informal instutional rules for who gets to appropriate from it, when they're allowed to do so, when, what happens if those rules are broken, how conflicts are mediated, and how those who are not part of the set of appropriators may or may not be allowed limited access.

If we again circle back to interventions from science and technology studies, I specifically want to highlight the concept of boundary objects from Susan Leigh Star. A boundary object is an object or actor which moves between two groups and whose interpretation is plastic enough so as to be interpreted differently between the two groups. These objects, in Star's interpretation of Latour's phrasing, perform the work of *interessment* between the two groups –

that is it helps to foster collaborative work between two very different groups by performing the work of translation.

Boundary objects provide a helpful category of actors which address a question many have when reading Latour, which is how can an otherwise inanimate object have an agency of its own. They also provide a powerful illustration of the ways in which understanding non-human actors as having their own agency as expressed through sociotechnical networks may illuminate connections between heterogenous groups.

So what can this tell us about community? If commons and community are co-obligate, as Gudeman argues, and if those commons may be understood using Ostrom's framework, we have a number of ingredients here. The common pool resource at the core of the commons, whatever it is, performs as a non-human actor. The common property regime defines a set of relationships by which a set of appropriators relate to the object. Through this relationship, the commons – an actor-network in itself of material and relationships – performs as an actor which holds the center for a specific community.

The commons, then, is performing a task similar to that of but still distinct from a boundary object. Whereas the boundary object offers the service of translation between two disparate, often times distant heterogenous groups, here the commons, performing a role which I call that of a binding object (or binding actor – I'm really struggling with which name to use), which through its mediated, attenuated, specific relationships with other actors, both human and non-human, proximate and distanct, does immense work to define not just the set of inclusion and exclusion of who and what is included in a particular community, but also does work to delineate roles and hierarchies within that community.

Further, as all communities as we understand them may be multitudes of sub-communities, any given broadly geographically defined community may have a commons which binds them all together, while sub-communities have smaller commons which in turn define them. A healthy community may be expected to continue to actively birth additional common pool resource regimes and new sub-communities, as the central binding object brings actors together and provides a kind of structural substrate on which further enmeshed ties may be formed.

In a region where all resources are tightly privately held, such as in Scottish estates owned by private ownership or in the case of the Assynt Crofter's Trust, community may be extant, but dysfunctional or dominated and therefore weak and unhealthy and unable to perform its critical functions of facilitating non-market exchanges, care, opening of possibilities, and all of the other positive benefits which have been achieved on other Scottish trusts where common lands and more open decision making practices predominate. Further, the binding object may contribute to inequalities within a community – common pool resources which certain individuals are prevented from accessing will actively

contribute to and may be a primary source of the marginalization of those individuals. By the same token, commons binding objects which link marginalized individuals but exclude more privileged ones can be a strong act of empowerment.

Moving beyond the human realm, if the ties of affect, appropriation, care, concern, control, and ownership are severed between a human population and the land they inhabit, the logic of naked, atomized economic relations can be expected to lead to absent or ineffective labor of care for those resources leading to economic degradation or over-exploitation – ironically the very "tragedy of the commons" that Garrett Hardin warned of.

Here is the take-away I want to close with – I am proposing a bit of a methodological hypothesis: what would it mean for how we look at community development, politics, economics, and environmental concerns if every time "community" came up we looked for the binding commons at the center of it? I am asserting that the examination of these binding objects and their tangible, visible if ephemeral connections to other actors, in the case of community through explicit or implicit common property regimes, can illuminate and help us formally define what "community" means, how it operates, its relative health, and its capacity either support emancipation or repression both internally and externally.