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‘Edges to Middles’: Robert Morrison MacIver on ‘Community’

Geoff Payne

Like many sociologists of my generation, I first encountered the work of Robert Morrison MacIver when I was an undergraduate,[1] and then again when I was a postgraduate tutor in Canada. However, it was not until a decade later when I working in the Aberdeen Sociology Department that I discovered, courtesy of Robert Moore, that MacIver was Scottish and had worked at the University. More significantly, he had been the first lecturer explicitly contracted to teach sociology.[2] Having written about community myself in the form of ‘place communities’, and living as I now do in a small, rural settlement from which I can watch the ferry sailing across the Minch to MacIver’s birthplace in Stornaway in the Western Isles, I remain personally intrigued by the way that, growing up in an even more isolated setting, he came to produce his conception of community not as a small unit but as a wider collectivity. Therefore in this article, after I have set MacIver’s contribution in the context of his contemporaries’ writing, I intend to explore his work on community as a contribution to social theories of society, the state, and forms of human relationship, and consider how this evolved and some of its limitations. Finally, in the latter part of this paper, I would like to reflect briefly on how his ideas

[1] Like many before and since, I first encountered MacIver’s work in the form of MacIver and Page’s introductory textbook, which I discovered while browsing in the Manchester University Library. In those far-off days of the early 1960s, before there were specially written introductory texts in Britain, and when student reading lists were somewhat basic, we were expected to find books and read them for ourselves. MacIver and Page was not on my official reading list and so for a short period it became a useful and admittedly sometimes under-acknowledged resource of ideas which in seminar discussions served to plump out my own limited grasp of the discipline. MacIver notes that a good university education (based on Oxford before the First World War) should ‘evoke initiative…We should teach our abler students to educate themselves’ (MacIver 1968, 63). This sentiment, perhaps best summed up by Frank Zappa’s frequently quoted (by librarians) remark ‘If you want to get laid, go to college. If you want an education, go to the library’, is one that the laws of nature seem to require to be re-iterated by successive generations of academics.

[2] We should not forget that MacIver may have *become* a sociologist but he remained a political scientist, as later celebratory volumes edited by Berger *et al* (1954) and Bramson (1970) demonstrate.

may connect with MacIver's background, and also on their limited influence in later writers' work on (rural) place communities.

MacIver as Scholar and 'New Sociologist'

Compared with his account of his childhood and student days, Robert MacIver says relatively little in his autobiography about his time in Aberdeen (see MacIver 1968). He joined the staff in 1907 in his mid-twenties, leaving in 1915 when he was 33. His first book, *Community: a sociological study (being an attempt to set out the nature and fundamental laws of social life)* was published in 1917 but as his preface to the first edition shows, was completed in Aberdeen by September 1914. Some parts of it had earlier appeared as articles in social science journals: *The Political Quarterly; The Philosophy Review; The International Journal of Ethics;* and *The Sociological Review* (MacIver, 1928, x). MacIver had contributed seven articles to these journals, plus two in the journal *Mind*, between 1909 and early 1914*:* (Bramson 1970, 311–12). The span of these journals reflects the range of disciplines that most concerned him both as an emerging scholar and later in his career.

Particularly in his early publications,[3] MacIver, being initially a Classics scholar as well as a political philosopher, confidently covers a wide span of sources in a way which all too often leaves one–or at least, leaves me–less than comprehensively qualified to evaluate his conclusions.[4] Producing a short

[3] Like most of MacIver's subsequent works, his first book was reprinted and revised a confusing number of times. Its second edition, completed in 1919 was 'revised throughout', shifting the emphasis further away from biological and psychological models and towards a more integrated sociological perspective. The third edition appeared in 1924, with 'some slight additions or changes made in the text', and two small appendices added. It is this edition that I have used as a main source (in its second printing in 1928) for the simple practical reason that it was the oldest version of the text readily available to me. I have also drawn on *Society: its structure and changes* (1931). The latter was the basis for the later and most widely-known of MacIver's sociology books, being re-worked to appear on many undergraduate reading lists as 'MacIver and Page' in various editions between 1949 and 1974 Surprisingly, although first published in 1931 as *Society: its structure and changes*, it is included in MacIver's autobiography only under the title of its very considerably revised version dating from 1937, i.e. *Sociology–a Textbook of Sociology* (MacIver 1968, 250–1: Spitz 1969, reprinted in Bramson 1970, 309). Where I have used it, I have drawn on the 1931 edition, reprinted in 1933. MacIver's list of his own publications in his autobiography (1968, 250–1) is much sparser than that in Bramson (1970, 309–16).

4 His tendency to quote original sources un-translated, i.e. in their original Greek, Latin,

and necessarily simplified account of MacIver's conception of 'community' is therefore a doubly complicated task. His ideas understandably change and are re-worked in several versions, while the way in which he sets them out and the scope of their wide coverage present a challenge to today's more specialist reader.

Although titled *Community*, substantial sections of his first book are a justification of sociology as a distinct new social science.[5] The Preface to the second edition, asks rhetorically:

> Is sociology a real science or only a bundle of snippets hung on a thread of good intentions? I hold it to be a real science, still in its infancy…if [this book's] contents can be divided up so that this part can be assigned to psychology, this to economics, this to politics, and so on, then the quest has been in vain (reprinted in the third edition, 1928, xi–xii).

His argument is largely based on examples from Ancient Greece, Rome, and the Old Testament, a framework typical of intellectuals of his era, reflecting their cultural assumptions and modes of discourse. In 2007, the scarcity of concrete reference in his work to other European societies of the time, to North America, or to anthropology beyond crude travellers' tales, is disorienting (it should be remembered that the first reports of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown's forays 'into the field' did not appear until 1913, so that MacIver's first work effectively pre-dates them). His exposition and writing style remind one of Durkheim's *Social Division of Labour* or *The Elementary Forms,* books which provide an element of indirect dialogue running throughout MacIver's *Community.*

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that he was just a classicist, even though he later noted that he 'never in his rather lengthy academic training had heard the word "sociology"' (MacIver 1970, v).[6] Among those whose work he quotes and debates in his discussion of community we

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German and French, can leave a linguistic ignoramus like myself unable to grasp, let alone evaluate, the points that are being made.

[5] 'At the time it was written…the major figures in the development of the new subject were French and German, and it had not taken on the proportions of the great academic industry it has now reached…[The book] was meant to be a contribution to social theory–or, if you prefer, to the philosophy of society' MacIver (1970, v).

[6] I am grateful to Graham Crow for bringing MacIver's Preface to the fourth and final edition of *Community*, and Gans' article on sociological amnesia mentioned below, to my attention.

find Simmel and Durkheim in particular, but also Tönnies, Comte, Spencer, Hobhouse, Albion Small, Maine, Murdock, Frazer, Robertson, Ward, Le Play, and De Coulanges (but not of course Weber, whose work MacIver picks up later after its publication in German in the early 1920s, and through Parsons' 1930 translation of *The Protestant Ethic*). MacIver engages with contemporary intellectuals like Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Harold Laski, and G. D. H. Cole. He ranges over the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Hobbes, Hegel, Kant, Mill, Hume, and Machiavelli. And he draws on a score of other writers whose names are now less familiar, at least to me: the psychologists McDougall, James, and Ribot; the economists Marshall and Gill; philosophers Gieke and Fourniére; sociologists Wallis, MacKenzie and Fouillée; political writers Bransford, Angell, Jaynes Hill, and of course Marx, and various other historians, eugenicists, biologists (including Patrick Geddes) and medical writers. While many of these exchanges are relatively brief, they demonstrate a scholar with a breadth of learning and vision that is seldom found in our more specialist, RAE-dominated age. MacIver was working at a time when one could be influenced by and influence an intellectual world in which ideas and exchanges moved more easily back and to across inter-disciplinary boundaries (Payne 2007).

Writing initially before the First World War, we find him concerned with understanding the basic elements of social life as he delineates sociology from psychology, philosophy and history. Here community is used as a rather abstract formulation. His later work, particularly in the text-book co-written with Page, has a little more to say about localities, and concrete manifestations of community in settlements, cities and regions, although less than a more empirical sociologist like myself might wish to see.

Society and the State: a negative definition of community

MacIver effectively defines community by distinguishing it from three other related concepts: society, the state, and associations. He reserves the word 'society' not for a unit of people, or a unit of shared culture, or for some notion of a social system, but rather for what might be described as the propensity of people to have social relationships with other people, and *all* products of that propensity. In this 'universal or generic sense' he wishes to 'include every willed relationship of man to man' (1928, 22). Thus MacIver's 'society' is greater than any one country or nation-state, containing within it

states, associations and communities, which are each special types of social relationships.

> *Whenever living beings enter into, or maintain willed relation-ships with one another, there society exists*… it is clear that society is an element or function of life itself, present wherever life is found (ibid., 5: original emphasis).

His term 'willed' relationship is preferred to 'purposive', 'conscious' or 'instinctive' social activity in order to be more inclusive, and is used to mark off relationships between physical objects that have no mutual awareness from the relationships between 'social animals'. While the form and outward manifestation of 'society' is always changing, it is universal as a principle of human life.

However, having sketched this version of 'society' MacIver actually makes very little use of it in his first work on community, concentrating instead on society's three constituent elements. It is not until 1931 with the publication of *Society: its structure and changes* that MacIver begins to talk more about society as 'a system of social relationships' (1933, x) or as 'the organisation' created by the expression of the nature of social beings, 'the web of social relationships… which guides and controls their behaviour in a myriad ways' (ibid., 6).[7] Prior to moving towards this more conventional usage, he has seen the operation of association and community as the more organised and significant elements through which action is shaped.

This view is closely connected to MacIver's interpretation of 'the State', a topic which looms larger in his work than 'society'.[8] Although he does sometimes discuss the State in terms of concrete offices, formal systems and particular forms of governance, his interest lies more in the political philosophy of the State either as the collective manifestation of the individuals and social relations it contains – a neo-Hegelian view which he rejects (1928, 28) – or in the relationship between the State and the associations which it imperfectly regulates, his own position. This has, of course, been much more an issue in philosophy and political science than in sociology, and part of MacIver's reputation in those fields stems from his insistence, developed

[7] A phrase to be found repeated in late editions of his introductory text: (e.g. MacIver and Page 1965, 5).

[8] MacIver sees his work on the State as central to his general purposes (in the Preface to a later edition, he identifies 'the conception of what the state *is* and what its relation is to the other organizations' of social life, as the first of the two main principles that form the centre of his book (1970, vi: original emphasis).

more fully in his *The Web of Government* (1947), that society, nation and State are conceptually separate. In his book on community, he rests his case on two main grounds.

First, there exist 'primitive' communities – referred to by later anthropologists as 'stateless societies' (Gluckman 1965, Ch. 3) or acephalous societies (Cohen 1969) – where there is no political law, this latter being a prerequisite of the existence of a state (1928, 31, 130). As Schapera (1957, 147) later noted, MacIver moderates this argument initially in his *Elements of Social Science* (1921) and then in *Sociology – a Textbook of Sociology* (1937) under the subsequent influence of Malinowski's work on law and custom. His second argument is that the State is 'exclusive and determinate. Where one state ends, another begins' (1928, 29). Against this, he contends that communities extend beyond state boundaries, both in the form of trans-national bodies and relationships, and in the form of imposed state boundaries which divide natural communities.

> The modern world, marked off into separate States, is not partitioned into a number of isolated communities … the State is neither coterminous nor synonymous with community (ibid., 29).

Thus for MacIver, 'society' contains nations, communities, associations and the State. The State is an association, albeit the most important one. Associations are components of community life, and therefore State and Community cannot be synonymous.

Community defined

Having roughly pruned away society and the State, we come to 'community' itself. MacIver uses the word community for (usually concrete) units of people who share multiple aspects of social life, whereas 'association' refers to the sub-units of specific, *goal-oriented* social activities through which a community is sustained and operates. A community is

> any area of common life, village, or town, or district, or country, or even wider area … somehow distinguished from further areas … we distinguish the nuclei of intense common life, cities and nations and tribes and think of them as *par excellence* communities (1928, 22–3).

Thus the 'near community' may be local and small scale, but the 'wider community', such as the nation, is more important for MacIver. The 'common life' of a community arises from the tendency of those who live together to become, and be, more similar to each other, and consequently differentiated from those with whom they do not live. There are echoes here of Patrick Geddes' evolutionary biology which John Scott mentions in his paper.[9] The common life of the wider community (best thought of as something like a nation) is therefore likely to

> have some characteristic of its own such that the frontiers of the area have some meaning. All the laws of the cosmos, physical, biological and psychological, conspire to bring it about that beings who live together shall resemble one another. Wherever men live together they develop in some kind and degree distinctive common characteristics – manners, traditions, modes of speech, and so on. These are the signs and consequences of an effective common life. It will be seen that a community may be part of a wider community, and that all community is a question of degree (ibid., 23).

Without wishing to over-burden this short quotation, it illustrates several aspects of MacIver's take on community, and indeed much of his sociology.

– He begins with moderated generalised statements that leave room for further elaboration: '*some* characteristic of its own such that the frontiers of the area have *some* meaning.'
– He writes at length to account for social outcomes not only as arising from social processes or human history, but also from evolutionary biology and physical environment: 'All the laws of the cosmos, *physical, biological and psychological*, conspire.'
– He recognises from the start that one community may be nested within another, e.g. the village within a region within a country: 'a community may be part of a wider community.'
– While he has started with a common life that has acknowledged boundaries, he does not treat community as an absolute. The common life and the boundaries can take different forms: 'all community is a question of degree'.

[9] And indeed, Aristotle's conception of the 'polity' as a natural phenomenon.

To these four features we can add three other central characteristics of MacIver's idea of community which become clear later in his exposition.

– While community is an expression of a shared way of life, it does not follow that there is no conflict, disagreement, or competition within it. We shall return to this point below.

– Nor does a shared, intense social life imply that all members of a community are *completely* alike: he implicitly accepts Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarities (although without placing the social division of labour at its centre or wanting to use such analogies or terminology, ibid., 226). The emerging differentiation of the individual personality is a measure of how fully the sense of community is developing because the developed community depends on mutual tolerance and understanding of other people. This is the second of the main principles of his book (1970, vi). The differentiation of community is the process in which

> community ceases to be identified with or wholly subject to any single form of social life… each social relation grows more complex and each social being more closely bound to each in the interdependence of the whole (1928, 231).

> A society is not more socialized because it has achieved a high technological level… High socialization means that the social relationships between the members of a society are many-sided, woven intimately into the pattern of their lives, expressive of and calculated to advance the variety of interests, cultural, educational, recreational, civic, economic, in all their aspects, that appeal to the may-sided nature of the diversity of human beings (1970, vi–vii).

– Third, as shown by this quotation and by MacIver's three chapters documenting 'communal development' (1928, 169-248), he does not have a static view of community. Not only do the members live and die while 'the community itself marches out of the past into the present' (ibid., 87), but the forms of community life also change over time. Although by our own standards, his perspective has a dubious base in social evolution (and possibly even eugenics: ibid., 398–416), this acceptance of fluidity escapes later treatments of community that would be more static, as in some discussions of place communities (e.g. see Brody's (1973) criticism of the work of Arensberg and Kimball (1940)).

This emphasis on the importance of differences within the community, and the community's capacity to evolve, also helps to fuel MacIver's long and sceptical discussion of analogy in the emerging sociological literature of his time. He differentiates his own recognition of the community as a 'union of minds' from Durkheim's allusion to a 'group mind' (1928, 76) or the latter's 'society-greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts doctrine' (ibid., 88–91) fallaciously based on the chemical transformation of elements when they enter into composition. Equally, he rejects the notion that the community can be thought of as an organism:

> an organism is or has…a single centre, a unity of life, a purpose or consciousness…A community consists of myriad centres of life and consciousness…community is a matter of degree, with no set bounds, whereas organism is a closed system (ibid., 73; 75).

Community's internal complexity lies not only in its individuals, but also in its associations.

Associations as components of community

MacIver's use of 'association' and the 'interests' they serve helps to hold his ideas of society, state and community together. Within a community, people lead their lives through a series of joint activities. A community can (but does not necessarily) encompass the whole of a person's life. In contrast, a single joint activity, an association can never do this.

> A community is a *focus for* social life, the common living of social beings; an association is an *organisation of* social life, definitely established for the pursuit of one or more common interests. An association is partial, a community is integral (ibid., 24: emphasis added).

The phenomenon of people living together in a village or city community is something different from 'the association of men in a church or trade union' (Ibid.). Any one community will have many associations, and community members will belong to more than one, but normally not to all of them.

> Community bubbles into associations permanent and transient, and no student of the actual social life of the present can help being struck by the enormous number of associations of every kind… within a community there may exist not only numerous associations but antagonistic associations (ibid., 23–4).

Whereas community is used to indicate wider areas of common life, and a more general sense of social life (in a way that sometimes blurs into MacIver's use of the term 'society'), 'an association is an organisation of social beings… for the pursuit of some common interest' (ibid., 23).

MacIver says that an 'interest' is the reason why individuals exercise willed relationships. An interest is the 'object which determines activity' (ibid., 98), or the outcomes that individuals seek to achieve through collective action.

> It is because we seek, clearly or dimly, from prescience or instinct, some end, some fulfilment of ourselves or others, that we relate ourselves to one another in society… It is as men will in relation to one another that they create community, but it is by reason of, for the sake of, interests (ibid., 98–9).

MacIver prefers 'interest' to alternative terms such as 'means and ends' (which place the emphasis too much on the purely rational); 'desire' (which is too subjective and lacks connotations of stability and permanence); or 'social forces' (which suggest external mechanical or impersonal power rather than human consciousness and agency). This latter point is important: although his discussion of interests, as solutions to the problems of human survival and the regulation of social intercourse, is sometimes reminiscent of the language of structural functionalism (e.g. ibid., 99, 109; or his later discussion of the family (1933, 133–7), MacIver locates will and interest in the minds or 'psychic existence' of human beings. His sociology, although seeking to delineate core social forms, therefore retains a highly developed sense of the individual actor (1928, 112-13). It also means that his typology of interests (ibid., 102–8) recognises not only variety, but also that not every interest is mutually compatible, although he tends to locate incompatibility as between individuals rather than between associations (e.g. ibid., 117–27).

Some appreciation of his framework can be gained from Fig. 1 which relates interests to types of association.

Figure 1: MacIver's Typology of Interests and Associations[10]

INTERESTS	ASSOCIATIONS
General	
Interests of sociality, based on group or communal likenesses	Associations of camaraderie, clubs, social intercourse
Specific*	
a) Ultimate, based on organic needs	
Sexual	Marriage, family, kinship
Non-sexual	Health associations: Agriculture; indutry; commerce; (also serving *psychical* interests)
b) Psychical	
Cultural: Scientific, philosophical and educational	Scientific and philosophical associations; schools and colleges
Cultural: Artistic and religious	Theatre; Art, music and literatur associations; churches
Power and prestige	Exclusive clubs; racist, militaristic and nationalist associations
Derivative Specific	Financial services; companies; trade unions;
Economic	employers groups (plus 'almost' all associations listed above as general/ specific;
Political	The state and its sub-divisions (i.e. communal level interests)
	Legal/judicial associations directly dependent on the state but not simply part of it
	Political parties:Interest groups/social movements (i.e. sub-group level interests)

[10] Adapted from *Community* (1928, 115–16): 'Specific' interests give rise to 'derivative specific' interests, either as a distinct interest, or combined into group and/or communal interests. In *Society* (1933, 163–4) MacIver re-classifies the first six clusters of associations (excluding economic activities, and schools and colleges) as 'primary'; education as 'intermediate'; and the remainder as 'secondary', as the basis for the study of 'the social structure'. MacIver regards this schema as a provisional exposition.

> It is exceedingly difficult to classify, completely and without cross-division, these specific interests and the associations which they create…interests lie behind interests in the most perplexing ways (ibid., 111).

Indeed a slightly modified form of this schema appears later in his text-book (MacIver and Page 1965, 447). Any specific interest *may* be 'derivative', but some are more derivative or secondary than others, hence the distinction between 'ultimate' and 'derivative'.

In this schema, there are several features to note. First, he is concerned not with institutional forms but the underlying 'principles' that they embody. While he recognises that institutions may be seen as arising directly from the community (ibid., 156) he places greater importance on the capacity of associations to generate particular organisational structures and practices.

> An association is more than a form, it is the creator as well as the created, it is a source of institutions…The association may modify its institutions, may dissolve some and create others…So the association outlives its institutions. Therefore if we are to be strict in our thinking, we should speak of the family as an association and of marriage as an institution, of the State as an association and of representative government as an institution, of the church as an association and of baptism as an institution. The association is a living thing, the institution is but a form, a means (ibid., 155–6).

While this is a useful analytical distinction, it might be argued that MacIver recognises but underestimates the capacity of institutional practices to take on a life of their own (ibid., 157–65), and to exercise independent influence over the people caught up in them, perhaps analogous to Michels' iron law of oligopoly (1911/1915).[11]

The last quotation also refers to the State as an association, a point we earlier noted was central to MacIver's political philosophy. The State

[11] MacIver appears not to have encountered Michels' work, first published in German in 1911 until later. He refers to it in its first translation, published as *Political Parties* in 1915, in *Society* (1931, 169) apparently with some approval as addressing individual conflicts within institutions, but without shifting his focus of attention away from associations to institutions as a potentially more significant sociological site.

may be the greatest association of all, providing guidance, co-ordination and regulation over other associations (ibid., 28–47,110), but it is still an association.

Because the community pre-exists the State, the State cannot be other than an association. Here is MacIver engaged in a critique of social contract theory:

> Community existed before any State. It was the slow-developing will of men in community to create the State which gradually brought the State into being. Community was there from the first, but the State has been constructed. The State is an association men as social beings have willed to create and now will to maintain. There is thus a will in community more fundamental than even the will of the State…community itself is prior to and the necessary precondition of all covenant. A social covenant to establish society (or community) is a contradiction. A social covenant to establish or maintain the State is a great reality (ibid., 130, 132).

MacIver's schema also brings out the distinctiveness of where he draws the line between community and association. To those accustomed to Tönnies' conceptualisation, we find association a little surprisingly being used in a more extensive way. Whereas Tönnies concentrates on contractual, commercial, mechanical, regulated or large scale activities as embodying association, MacIver extends this to embrace all forms of State affairs. Similarly, while Tönnies places the family and religious belief in the realm of community, MacIver sees them as associations. In his brief discussion of this point MacIver regards Tönnies' differentiation as being one only of degree, rather than his own specification of a basic principle of distinction between community and association (1928, 24–5).

The evolution of MacIver's ideas

It is an inconvenient if unremarkable fact that MacIver changed his conception of community during his life-time. And yet the shift is largely one of emphasis rather than a change of heart. One of MacIver's strengths as a social theorist is an honest recognition of inconsistencies, marginal

differences, and ambiguities. His use of carefully elaborated 'moderated propositions' (Payne and Williams 2005) and conditional 'social laws' means that in the longer term his work could develop and evolve.

In later work, perhaps under the influence of Cooley's *Social Organization*, MacIver seems to become more aware that face-to-face, primary relationships can be marked off from other less personal, secondary relationships in large organizations (1933,172–90), but even here he sees the features of formal organization and interest which typify associations as grounds for retaining his original distinction.[12] The term, 'secondary relations', begins to be used by MacIver at a still later point, in his text-book's discussion of types of social group (e.g. MacIver and Page,1965, 220–2).

In his early writing the closest he comes to elaborating the distinctive character of community (if we grant for the moment that such a thing exists) is in his discussion of locality, and the geographical dimension of community. We have already seen that he speaks of locality in terms of the village, city, region, and country, as exemplifying his *areas* of common life. Conversely, he does not include locality in his list of false perspectives of community (1928, 69–97). But locality does not feature as a significant source of common life, except as the basis for people becoming more alike each other when they live in the same place.

On the other hand, MacIver also has a lot to say in his initial treatment about the physical environment with respect to evolution and human history. This material focuses on the evolutionary importance of 'intelligence' and the capacity for individual development that indicate MacIver's notion of 'high socialization'. His discussion draws on the classic questions of why major civilisations took their particular political forms and sizes, on biological debates about natural selection and the survival of the fittest, and on patterns of economic advantage following from the accidents of climate, geographical location, juxtaposition, or victory in warfare (ibid., 273–416). MacIver's interest lies in how these factors impinge on community maintenance and the origins of community formation.

Because he sees community as existing simultaneously at several levels and in different places, there are inevitable problems of 'co-ordination'

[12] Although *Social Organization* was originally published in 1909, there is no reference to it in *Community*, completed five years later. *Social Organization* was reprinted several times around 1920,and is acknowledged by MacIver in 1931 in *Society*. In his later work, MacIver also begins to use the term 'society' in a more conventional sense to mean large-scale social organization or social structure.

between communities. These express themselves in economics as commercial competition, in political science as the tension between centre and periphery, or central and local government, and in sociology as a question of communication and spheres of interaction (ibid., 259–63). With regard to community, MacIver can be said to have a regard for the physical, but not a developed sense of locality.

This deficit is to some small extent addressed in MacIver's 1931 publication, *Society*. We have already noted that he begins to make greater allowance for primary and secondary relationships in this book. He also elaborates on the territorial base of common life in three main ways, not least in acknowledging at a very early point in his exposition that territory is a problematic feature (1933, 10–11). He begins his chapter on community with a section on 'the territorial basis of community' (ibid., 57–60), insisting 'on its territorial character. It implies a common soil as well as common living' (ibid., 59), but this section actually adds little new to his earlier concerns.

Where we do find a new note is his recognition that proximity does not in all cases produce likeness. In re-stating his definition of community in his book *Society*, he acknowledges that there are

> local areas which seem to lack the other conditions of social coherence necessary to give them a community character. The residents of a ward or district of a large city may lack sufficient contacts or common interests to constitute a community, to possess a community spirit… locality, though a necessary condition, is not enough to create a community (ibid., 10–11).

But if some areas do not sustain community, and locality is insufficient to explain it (a point since made by Lee and Newby (1983, 57), where does this leave MacIver's earlier assertion that co-residence breeds likeness, from which common life and community spring? How much more so does this apply to large nations seen as community? His additional assumption, that the failure in this respect of the 'near community' will in some way be compensated by the 'wider community', is one that also calls for empirical exploration.

In *Society* and later in his textbook, MacIver also shows some signs of coming to grips with the question of how individuals regard their community or communities in a brief discussion of 'community sentiment'. This takes three forms:

– the sense of communion itself, in which people identify themselves with others as being an undivided 'we':

> the sentiment which swells most strongly when the commonweal is threatened, so that men are ready to sacrifice all their private interests to save it (1933, 62).

– the sense of station and social place,

> so that each has a role to play, his own part and duty to fulfil in the reciprocal exchanges of the social scene (ibid., 63).

– the sense of dependence on the community as a necessary condition for one's own life:

> a physical dependence, since all his material wants are satisfied within it, and a spiritual dependence, since it is his greater home, the nearer world which sustains his spirit, which embodies all that is familiar… to his life, his refuge from all the phantasms of solitude' (ibid., 63).

On the basis of these feelings,

> members of a community feel a peculiar interest in one another… they appreciate more vividly and with a warmer imagination what anyone in their own group does or suffer… Moreover, the development of specialization has transferred to associational groups some part of the alliance that was formerly bestowed on the local community (ibid., 63–4),

so that the nation increasingly become the predominant, largest effective unit of community. Even at this wider level of community, MacIver does not actually take his discussion of community, locality and sentiment very far, despite later highlighting locality and sentiment as two principles central to his conception of community (e.g. MacIver and Page 1965, 9).

Some limitations to MacIver's idea of community

To sum up this middle section of the paper, MacIver's conception of community offers logically consistent grounds for distinguishing between community and association, without undue dependence on the idea of primary relationships or locality. He retains a strong emphasis on the capacity of individual minds to make choices in how people live with together. He sees community as fluid and evolutionary: there is little hint of nostalgia for some lost, pre-industrial, small-scale way of living, or of community existing independently as a social force external to individual actors.

However, his conception of community as common life is problematic. While his dependence on the propensity for co-residents to grow more alike, and thus to build common life, may be sustainable if one takes a longer perspective, in the short-run MacIver has to concede exceptions in urban settlements. He does not deal with the challenge this empirical problem poses for his emphasis on likeness and common life.

Although he provides a logical basis for separating community from association, we might ask what practical advantages it gives us as sociologists beyond conceptual clarity (necessary though that is). By grouping together so much in the associational sphere, there is not a great deal left to be treated as community. Community is reduced to a generalised 'common life' which has vague boundaries and is constantly changing. Whereas community does give rise to associations, and to social solidarity through its accommodation to individual differences, one is left with doubts about what is *there* to be analysed, once that has been said. If the social relations of the family and kinship, the associations of camaraderie and direct mutual support are stripped away, there is not much to distinguish as 'common life' except social similarities of 'likeness' among people, and their physical proximity. As a result of his inclusive definition of association, MacIver can offer little description or analysis of the social life of actual villages or towns or countries, other than as associations. This outcome is also due to the fact that a more detailed account would involve concentrating on *institutional forms* rather than the *principle* of community or association.

Thus his treatment of community does not become fully elaborated because his analysis is not carried forward at the level of institutions. Instead, his writing at times retreats into an evangelistic fervour about the potential for growing 'likeness', an absolute faith that one level of conflict can be overcome by a higher level of over-arching cohesion, a belief that human evolution moves us towards a mutual toleration and closer social integration in which we

can accept that not all individuals are alike and recognise our deeper, underlying, shared 'community' (e.g. his 'optimistic' views on social class, capitalism, and democracy in the nation-state: 1928, 272–91).

It is tempting to place this optimism in the context of hopes for internationalism in the aftermath of the First World War, although it seems to me to draw also on a more fundamental philosophy of mutual forbearance and co-operation that shows itself in other parts of MacIver's publications, such as in his autobiography, his work on public policy issues such as racial prejudice or delinquency (1948; 1949; 1966), or his quasi-religious writings (1960, 1962). In this, he was more at home in the America intellectual traditions of the mid-twentieth century than the narrower confines of both his childhood and undergraduate training. As Cook suggested in the 1954 festschrift,

> It has been MacIver's special task to restate the problem of individual, group, and state in such a way as to avoid the empirical-idealist alternative, and to provide foundations for a democratic philosophy which shall use the insights of both while avoiding their errors and biases… It is also the great imperative of the Western, and more especially of the American, ethical and political tradition; it is the vital necessity for the security and progress of free society (1954, 179).

Despite this positive view of MacIver's contribution as a philosopher of democracy, his work sits a little uneasily in a more recent British sociology schooled on the one hand in conflict theory and hostility to structural functionalism, and on the other in small-scale studies of micro-processes. While by no means a functionalist, MacIver is however essentially focussed, throughout his work, on integration and co-operation. He recognises tensions between individuals but offers little in the way of handling conflicts of interest between associations. His personal concerns for liberty and the freedom of the individual, and his hatred of war and authoritarian rulers (e.g. 1968, 131) do not result in a sociology which can confidently handle the stark evil of the abuse of power, the grim reality of continuing social inequalities, not least that of poverty, or the intense out-group hostility that is integral to closed systems of belief. Social division and social cohesion may be the two sides of one coin, but it is social inequality that remains a central issue for contemporary society, and for sociology, and here MacIver can offer us only limited insights. His lack of current impact is as much to do with this as to other features of what Gans has called 'sociological amnesia' (1998).

An Absence of Place Community

Given the nature of his ideas about community, it should not surprise us that MacIver has bequeathed strikingly little to the *empirical study* of communities, particularly to place communities, the mainstream field most relevant to the application of community, except perhaps for nationality and imagined communities (Anderson 1983). While I have not conducted an exhaustive search,[13] there appears to be little reference to MacIver in most well-known British contributions to this literature. For example, there is none in Bell and Newby's *Community Studies* (1971), or Crow and Allen's *Community Life* (1994), and only one passing connection made, and that to his text-book, among the contributors to Cohen's two books (1982, 172;[14] 1986). Bulmer (1987, 118–19) refers briefly to MacIver, but in personal correspondence declines to cite him as a significant influence.[15] A more recent survey of the history of community as a sociological concept completely ignores MacIver (Delanty 2003). While there are occasional references in some of the American literature of the early 1970s (e.g. Anderson 1971, 71, 388; Poplin 1972) these seem more ritualistic than inspirational.

Perhaps the only exception to this overall picture is Frankenberg's *Communities in Britain,* where he tells us that:

> As an operational definition of community I have followed MacIver and Page, who write that a community is 'an area of social living marked by some degree of *social coherence.* The bases of community are *locality* and *community sentiment*' (MacIver and Page 1961, 9)

However, although Frankenberg continues that this concept 'is discussed more fully in Part Two' of his book, he does not in fact mention MacIver again.[16]

[13] For example, neither Bauman (2001) nor Etzioni (1997) list MacIver in their indexes. Graham Crow writes in this context, 'I did undertake a quick check to see if other scholars had been more thorough in their tracing of roots, and…I did also look in a few texts on the history of sociology (e.g. Ritzer, Duncan Mitchell) but sadly no mention of MacIver.' (personal email, 29 April 2007).

[14] While I am not intending to be ageist, the contributor in question was then a member of the older generation of sociological researchers.

[15] E-mail, 03 May 2007. Bulmer (1977) also has two references to MacIver (one by Bierstadt) but neither is to community.

[16] Although it could be argued that some elements of MacIver's vision of community do have an *implicit* influence on Frankenberg's work (e.g; Frankenberg 1966, 238).

This absence of a resonance between MacIver's work and the study of small or near communities may be understandable in the light of his focus on the wider community, and his lack of interest in institutional forms. Nevertheless, it still strikes me as remarkable that someone growing up in the extreme isolation of the small fishing port of Stornaway in the latter part of the nineteenth century did not engage more closely with place community.[17]

MacIver seems ambivalent, to say the least, about the small town in which he grew up, and his own origins. On the one hand many of the dynamics of small town and rural life are portrayed positively in his autobiography. He describes his childhood with enthusiasm, and waxes lyrical about his mother (1968, 2–17). He recounts the pleasure of summer visits to his relatives on their crofts, and the excitement of life on the fish quays. In a coda to his autobiography he reflects nostalgically on the sense of loss felt by the aging exile who can never 'go home'.

On the other hand, he reports his sense of individual constraint during his growing up, and his discovery of alternatives as a young teenager: 'I felt as though I were emerging from a thought-prison' (ibid., 30). Although he does not discuss them, he would have also have been aware of the deep communal tensions over land tenure: e.g. the Napier Commission investigating the plight of small landholders had visited the island the year after he was born and the Lewis 'land raids' followed the First World War (Hutchinson 2003, 14–21). He also notes the social class divisions within Stornaway. This is not an idyllic near community. MacIver's account is markedly different from that of Arthur Geddes (1955).[18]

Despite his elegiac comments about re-visiting the island in the mid-1930s, MacIver seems to have made few return visits to Lewis, distancing himself from his origins. In doing so, he left two false trails. First, while MacIver acknowledges that his grandparents were crofters, he portrays his own background as solidly middle class. In his autobiography he refers to his father as 'a rather successful merchant', one of the first to trade in Harris Tweed (1968,18) and belonging to 'the more well-to do' of the town (ibid., 32). On his wedding certificate, MacIver also enters his father's occupation as 'Tweed Manufacturer'.[19]

[17] Even today, it would take us more than seven hours to travel from Aberdeen to Stornaway by car and ferry, and over four hours using air travel.

[18] Arthur, the son of MacIver's friend Patrick Geddes, carried out a land survey in 1919 for the Leverhulme project and later produced a loving and uncritical ethnography of rural life in Lewis and Harris, 'a study in British community'. Arthur Geddes, who became a leading social geographer, at no point refers to MacIver's work.

[19] Information from birth, marriage and death certificates, and households in the

I am grateful to Judy Payne for her recent documentary research which shows that these claims are suspect. All other official registration documents refer to his father as a shopman (aged 14) in a 'drapers, grocers and spirit merchants', or (later) as a 'general merchant': i.e. a small shop-keeper. He was the first generation of a crofting and fishing family to be literate. MacIver's mother was the daughter of another shopkeeper, variously listed as a 'grocer and draper', or 'general merchant'. She was a dressmaker and her sisters worked as dressmaker, milliner, 'shopmaid', or 'saleswoman'. Being second generation petty bourgeois may partly account for her dominant role in her marriage.

Although the MacIvers moved into a 'a more commodious stone house in a more agreeable setting' in Bayhead Street, even more on the outskirts of the town, while MacIver was still young, this was not a life of affluence. Next door lived two elderly aunts and an uncle who appear to have been suffering from clinical depression and were cared for by MacIver's mother (1968, 11). In 1891, the household also provided accommodation for an apprentice draper, as well as visiting kin from the crofts at Carloway. However, despite this domestic load, both in his mother's childhood home and after marriage, they kept only one live-in servant. MacIver's prospects of a university education were entirely dependent on not just getting a scholarship, but 'a good one', i.e. one that paid a larger bursary (ibid., 41). Perhaps as a result of studying at Oxford, MacIver became sufficiently defensive about his background that he felt a need to re-invent an enhanced social origin for himself.

The second false trail is more revealing about his psychology and his attitudes to his family origins. Census records show that his mother's cousin from Glasgow, Barbara Shaw, lived with the family from an early age, working successively as a draper's saleswoman and draper's assistant, and moving into the new household formed when MacIver's parents married. Two years after the death of MacIver's mother in 1912, his father re-married: to Barbara Shaw, listed as his housekeeper. He died in 1923, Barbara in1939, both still resident in the family home. *At no point in his autobiography does MacIver record that he had a step-mother, mention Barbara by name, or say that she was a member of his household while he was growing up.*

This may be connected with the very positive way that he talks about his

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Censuses 1871 – 1901, have been collected from www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk and are copyright of the General Register Office, Edinburgh. Details of each reference are code numbered and somewhat repetitive and so have not been given here: they are however available from the author on request.

mother, and the more reserved tone of his fewer comments about his father (to whom he dedicates *Community)*. It helps to explain the diaspora of his brothers, the quick sale of the family home and the dispersal of its contents in 1939 on the death of his step-mother, and MacIver's reluctance to re-visit the island once he had moved to North America. If the family is removed, wider attachments to the community are also changed. MacIver's general analysis suggests that ties to the near community can be replaced by ties to a wider community. As John Brewer notes, MacIver remained very much a Highland Scot throughout the rest of his life, despite distancing himself from Stornaway. This reflects his view of community as a wider social phenomenon than the narrower confines of the immediate locality.

I have called this paper 'Edges to Middles', a possibly obscure title that was intended to carry several meanings. First, I wanted to signal Robert MacIver's own journey from the periphery of British society to the centre of American intellectual life. Second, his writing contributed to establishing sociology as a separate discipline, and moving it from the far edges of academic respectability into the middle ground. And third, he took the idea of community from a vague idea into a more precise, central concept for understanding social living.

But 'edges to middle' also has a more traditional meaning, referring to how, when a sheet or blanket wore thin, the respectable poor cut it down the middle, and joined the two outsides to make a new middle. In that sense it stands for the good intentions of a drapers' son whose sense of community did not quite succeed in coming to terms with the basis of likeness between co-residents, when in fact at the institutional level this has resided so often in shared poverty and disadvantage. The poor have often huddled together because there was no other support, but the strength of the common bonds, of community, that came from this did not recompense the poor quality of their common life. As Robert MacIver himself wrote: 'So long as great numbers are, through no fault of theirs, destitute and expropriated, they cannot…root themselves in community, for community means for them merely a system of driving outer forces to which they are subject' (1928, 369). At one end of society, his optimistic hopes for amelioration have yet to be realised, while at the other end, affluence, mobility, new technology and personal choice have undermined any sense of wider common life, leaving a social world of fragmented associations and institutions, and weakened community sentiments, that would have disappointed MacIver and his hopes for community.

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