# Northern Nineteenth Century Network colloquium

## "COMMUNITIES"

## Friday 6 April 2018, Université de Cergy-Pontoise

### Strand 1: History and Victorian Culture

In the long nineteenth century, the concept of community developed in opposition to the state. Influenced by Burke, reformers aspired to create a feeling of belonging. Other initiatives came from civil society, the social organism being considered an alternative to state power and other power centres such as local potentates like landlords and factory owners. Some community activities like charitable initiatives and church activities were deemed innocuous or even beneficial by those in power. However, they allowed communities to acquire the organising skills needed for political, social and even revolutionary activities.

In order to explore these trends in UK society in the nineteenth century we seek papers on different groups which attempted to organise collectively through, for instance, Friendly Societies, unions, cooperatives or churches. These groups are wide-ranging and could include class-consciousness, hobbies, organised sport and other means of community-forming and bonding. Papers could also explore the reasons why individuals and communities banded together through common interests, values or objectives such as political movements, religious movements, debating clubs and reading rooms.

Papers could also explore at a national or international level the social, economic, political or intellectual mutations that led to concepts of a national community, but which conversely also questioned it. Interactions between crises of faith and the organicist conception of society and between science, religion and politics, landlords and tenants, workers and employers will be a special focus of this conference so that the different implications of community and the factors that led to its formation in the nineteenth century can be explored.

### Strand 2: Visual Arts

Communities are commonly premised upon shared values or concerns. Originating from the Latin *communis*, the word may refer to a group of people living near one another who interact socially or to individuals who have something in common, such as norms, religion, values or identity. In the academic, scientific and artistic fields, communities may refer to local, national and even international organisations ranging from defined and formalised professional societies to loose and even virtual groupings or connections. In all cases, the very notion of community implies both a sense of belonging and an 'other', sometimes an enemy against whom groups may ally.

A variety of artistic communities mapped out the Victorian landscape. From the bohemian colonies of Chelsea or Hamptead with their concentration of painters' studios (like Whistler's Tite Street house) to the larger group affiliations such as Aestheticism circulating across Europe, network-based associations thrived, generating exchange, diffusion, cohesiveness, but also limits and boundaries.

In the context of the Gothic architectual revival initiated in the 1830s by the Oxford Movement, professionals sometimes felt the need to defend an occupation or a specific trend, resulting in the creation of Institutes or Societies such as the Royal Society of British Architects.

In a century marked by movement and expansion, artistic communities could be shaped, constructed or deconstructed, generating questions of inclusion and exclusion. In the Victorian illustrated press, the wood-engraved image, itself the result of a chain of producers – artists, engravers, editors, publishers – formed and addressed communities of readers and knowledge makers.
Over the past decades, the so-called 'digital turn' has generated new networks in which discussion, communication and archiving are dematerialised. Online resources like The Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration largely address nineteenth-century arts, bringing about new developments in the nature and the status of the archive, and achieving wider circulation of visual material.

Papers may address :
- Spatial communities, artistic and bohemian colonies.
- Movements and circulations
- Shifting communities : notions of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness.
- Limits and boundaries restricting communities.
- Clubs, Institutes and Societies
- Professional communities like newspapers, periodicals or magazines
- Digital/virtual communities

## Strand 3  Victorian Literature

The interest of the word "community" lies in its polysemy, while its interest as a literary motif ties in with its fuzziness. Whether named as such or transpiring as one, a community characteristically allows for ingrained connections and variable extensions, both inbound and outbound, both inclusive and exclusive (the Marshalsea in Dickens, Egdon Heath in Hardy). After all, wanting to become part of a community and failing to achieve to do so is at the heart of a great many Victorian plots. Communities often arise from the desire to belong to a part, against the whole.

By contrast with a well-ordered system of the pyramidal social type, a typical community is a looser, horizontal formation marked out by a sense of belonging and becoming, a kind of sprawling composition that may as smoothly decompose, like "an epergne or centre-piece of some kind […] so heavily overhung with cobwebs that its form [is] quite undistinguishable […] speckle-legged spiders with blotchy bodies running home to it, and running out from it, as if some circumstances of the greatest public importance had just transpired in the spider community." (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*). A community might be seen as a "motif" of the crocheting-encroaching type. Whether a body belonging with (rather than "to") organic unities, or a systemic unit founded on an organisation of some type (geographical, economic…), a community flourishes on "texture" of leavening substance.

The entity of the community functions either with acknowledged codes, or alleged and unsuspected ties. It can live defiantly out in the open, or favour secrecy (such as "The Brotherhood" in Wilkie Collins, or other secret societies mentioned elsewhere in Victorian fiction).

Can Raymond Williams's idea, declaring that the term "community" "seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term"

(Raymond Williams, *Keywords* 1976), be challenged as far as Victorian literature is concerned? Having something in common may be reassuring and protective, but aren't the contradictory forces at work within communities in Victorian fiction also of the destructive, repressive type, nurturing harsh conformism for example? … Or bad taste: "Philistinism was the note of the age and community in which he lived" (Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*)? Victorian literary communities might even harbour improbable pockets of resistance to civilisation, the most civilised of Europeans occasionally "putting aside their normal personalities and sinking themselves in their community […] their power of putting two and two together […] annihilated.' (E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*).

With the advent of easily accessible, cheaper media, communities in the Victorian era also materialize around the book as object, through book clubs, or reading communities sharing a spreading enthusiasm for serialized fiction for example.

Finally, long after the 19th century, the idea of communities hinging on Victorian literature echoes throughout the centuries, judging by the popularity of neo-Victorian literature even today (Sarah Waters, Michael Cox…), and fiction based on, or recycling Victorian heroes or heroines (Jasper Fforde and Brontë's Jane Eyre, James Wilson and Collins's Marian Halcombe, Lloyd Jones and Dickens's Pip) between tribute, pastiche and parody, not to mention "online communities" of fans of Victorian classics writing fanfiction, and a "Victoriana" even inspiring video game designers…

Papers may address:
- Community as a motif in Victorian literature,
- Reading communities, communities forming around new literary and publishing practices,
- Communities of writers (the Pre-Raphaelites, Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, Swinburne and Hardy).
- 21st century communities rejuvenating Victorian literature (Neo-Victorianism)
- Or through popular culture and diverse phenomena: communities of "tourist-readers", fanfiction on the web, "Victorian Steampunk", TV adaptations and series (*Sherlock*, *Elementary*, *Jekyll*, *Jekyll and Hyde* etc.), communities of gamers sharing an interest for Victoriana…

**Proposals to be sent by October 15 2017 to the two colleagues in charge and the coordinator of the event:**
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