Introduction

In this paper I examine the Bloomsbury Group, how they came to exist, the features that distinguish them from other groups, the nature of and reasons for their creativity, and lessons we might learn from them about the performance of creative communities elsewhere.

Who were they?

The Bloomsbury Group was an informal association of artists and intellectuals in England during the first half of the last century (Q. Bell 1990). Only one of the Group was a professional economist, but he, John Maynard Keynes, may have been the most important economist of his age. At least four other members (Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, and Virginia and Leonard Woolf) took economic questions very seriously and wrote often about them. Various other professional economists moved into and out of the Bloomsbury orbit from time to time, mainly through Cambridge connections: Gerald Shove, Hubert Henderson, Richard Kahn, Frank Ramsey, and others. The Group had its origins around the turn of the twentieth century when several young undergraduates at Cambridge (mainly at Trinity and Kings) became friends and discovered the joys of free-wheeling conversation, literature and the arts. They were, in addition to
Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell, Edward Morgan Forster, Thoby Stephen, Desmond McCarthy, and Saxon Sydney-Turner. They were influenced especially by two young dons of the time, the philosopher G. E. Moore and the wide-ranging scholar Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson. Although most had their eyes on an academic career none was awarded a fellowship after graduation and they all “went down” to London and elsewhere to seek their fortunes. They soon reassembled as a group in the lodgings of one or another, but particularly in the central London (Bloomsbury) flat of the children of the late Sir Leslie Stephen, who had recently moved there from the more respectable Hyde Park Gate, Kensington. The Cambridge young men were joined by the two Stephen sisters, Vanessa and Virginia, and by others who became either regular members of the group, like the painter Duncan Grant and the art historian and renaissance man Roger Fry, or intermittent visitors like the philosopher Bertrand Russell and the poets Rupert Brooke and T. S. Eliot.

There was never any formal organization of the Bloomsbury Group, no list of members, no acknowledged leader, no official rules, and no recognized identity. Clive Bell argued even that the Group did not exist, that it was only an invention of critics so that there would be a more visible target to attack (C. Bell, [1956] 1973). The nearest thing to a group structure was the “Memoir Club,” begun in 1920, that continued for more than three decades, in which members of the Group met to recall their early days. Admission to the club was closely guarded and could be blocked by a single blackball. Through the informal gatherings in Bloomsbury and through various cooperative endeavors that began quite soon thereafter, the Group grew significantly in the years before World War I to include the siblings of
members: Adrian Stephen, James Strachey, Marjorie Strachey, Philippa Strachey, and miscellaneous others such as the saloniere Ottoline Morrell and her politician husband Philip, the novelist Mary (Molly) McCarthy, the psycho-analyst Alix Sargent Florence, the patron of the arts Mary Hutchinson, and the artist Dora Carrington. During and after the war a younger generation was added to Bloomsbury; on the fringes at least this included the novelists Ralph Partridge and Gerald Brenan, the Bell children Julian, Quentin and Angelica, the ballerina Lydia Lopokova (later Keynes’s wife), the novelist David (Bunny) Garnett, the novelist Vita Sackville-West and her husband the diplomat Harold Nicholson, the writer Frances Partridge, and the poet George (Dadie) Rylands.

The Bloomsbury Group, or some image of it, was recognized by the public for the first time in connection with the Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912 in London. Organized by Fry, they involved the Bloomsbury artists and several of the writers. For the next three decades many contributions to literature and the arts came from the members, and in varying degree these were associated with the Group. By the 1920s the Group was being charged with having an unseemly hold over creative life in Great Britain. In the 1930s and 1940s their attacks on patriotism, militarism, and Empire brought complaints that their approach weakened the loyalty and commitment of the British elite, and even laid the basis for treason among intellectuals such as Burgess, McLean and Philby. By the 1950s most of the major Bloomsbury figures had departed the scene and increasingly they were forgotten. Then in the 1960s interest piqued again both from rediscovery of the work of some of the most prominent members (Virginia Woolf, Keynes, and Forster) and from the publication of
“tell-all” biographies, diaries, and letters that revealed personal lives as colorful as TV novellas. Revival of interest in the artists did not begin until the 1980s when, over the next two decades, retrospective exhibitions were held at the Tate Gallery, the Barbican and other public and private galleries throughout Britain. As early as the years before World War I Bloomsbury began to move outward from London to the surrounding counties in search of peace and the beauty of nature. The restoration of two of their homes and the opening of them to the public attracted new Groupies, the Sussex farmhouse, Charleston, where the Bells and Duncan Grant lived much of their lives (and sundry others spent extended periods), and Monks House in nearby Rodmell where Virginia and Leonard Woolf lived.

It is not possible to provide here an account of the accomplishments of the individual Bloomsbury Group members; they are too abundant. Most of the contributors have received careful attention from at least one biographer. In order to gain a sense of what they accomplished as a community I shall focus instead on what they did together. Probably the most celebrated cooperative endeavor was the Post-Impressionist exhibitions before World War I. Not only did the Bloomsburys discover there that it was pleasant and stimulating to work on a project together, but they found also that it was exceptionally thrilling to be perceived as intellectually and artistically revolutionary. Old ladies and gentlemen brandishing umbrellas at the pictures by Gaugain or Van Gogh became for them a glorious sight. Thereafter many of the Bloomsbury activities were in this revolutionary style: Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918), Maynard Keynes’s *Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), Clive Bell’s *Civilization* (1928), and Morgan Forster’s *Passage to India* (1924), to mention only
several of what were perceived when they were published as notorious books.

The Post-Impressionist exhibitions led to other activities in which the Bloomsburys worked successfully in collaboration: Roger Fry’s Omega Workshops, Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, the *Nation* Magazine published by Maynard Keynes, the Contemporary Art Society, were some of the most successful. However less visible collaboration may also be found throughout the accomplishments of the Group. Clive Bell’s exceptionally successful small book *Art* (1914) was based substantially on Fry’s ideas, a fact they both acknowledged openly and without acrimony. Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918) was read in draft and discussed vigorously by the Group. A distinguishing feature of all these cooperative endeavors was a commitment to experimentation. The Omega Workshops was established to provide a new source of regular income to artists and to bring esthetically-pleasing objects into the English home. The Hogarth Press aimed both to liberate writers from commercial publishers and to make books and pamphlets works of art in themselves. Some of the experiments ended quickly, for example a series of “biographical portraits” in which the interests and engagements of the sitters were to be represented on the canvas, and a series of literary travel guides commissioned by Leonard and Virginia Woolf for the Hogarth Press. Both series started and ended with number one. Yet some experiments lasted for decades, as for example the practice of anonymity in works of art, sometimes by not signing the works (as at the Omega Workshops) and sometimes by not including facial features in paintings and drawings. This experimental practice seems to have had at least two purposes: to capture rents from
successful artists for distribution to others less fortunate, and to strengthen the communication of aesthetic emotion through exclusion of extraneous detail. This last objective, explored by Roger Fry for the visual arts in his “An Essay in Aesthetics” ([1909] 1998), was discussed for fiction by Virginia Woolf in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” ([1924] 1993).

*What Was the Distinctive Bloomsbury Style?*

Although the members of Bloomsbury often insisted that there was no orthodoxy behind what they said and did, some things were held in common that shaped their style. To begin, they adhered to certain foundational texts, not without some disagreement as to interpretation to be sure, but with a substantial amount of agreement on fundamentals. The first was G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903), which they came upon in their youth. Above all they concluded that Moore freed them from the Benthamite utilitarianism that most had imbibed, often through the writings of John Stuart Mill. In reaction to Bentham’s hedonistic injunction to pursue life directed by the calculus of pleasure and pain Moore had suggested that, instead, the ultimate goal of human life, requiring no further explanation, should be the achievement of “states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects” (Moore 237). The young men at Cambridge concluded that miraculously Moore had described precisely, and then justified, the activities that appealed to them most. But there remained a certain vagueness about what was meant precisely by the “enjoyment of beautiful objects.” This was addressed by Roger Fry in “An Essay in Aesthetics” (1909) that took from Tolstoy the notion that the arts were all about the communication of emotion. From this Fry developed the proposition that
human life could be divided into three segments: the biological or active life, the emulative life (drawing on Thorstein Veblen), and the imaginative life through which civilization enabled humans to experience the arts, creative literature, and pure science, and thereby achieve Moore’s desired states of consciousness. There was never a formal endorsement of these texts as the foundation for the Bloomsbury credo but there were enough references to them throughout their lives and works to give the works this status (for example Keynes [1949]1972).

A second feature of the Bloomsbury style was a strong commitment, usually unspoken, to multi-disciplinary endeavor. This was manifest in the many cooperative projects among the representatives of different disciplines, the artists with the novelists, the social scientists with the psychologists etc. But most significantly it was reflected in the respect that practitioners of one discipline in the Group typically demonstrated for others. There was not the familiar multi-disciplinary interaction seen often today of one scholar discoursing on a topic while those from other disciplines listen politely with turned-off ears. The Bloomsburys really did listen and were prepared to learn from their fellows. An aspect of their inter-disciplinarity was undoubtedly the porosity of disciplinary boundaries seen from their location outside the academy. As artists and public intellectuals they were ready to cross formidable scholarly boundaries at a single leap and they expected to understand and engage with what they found on the other side. Some of this self-confidence may have come from the enormous amount of book-reviewing many of the members undertook to make a living. It was not unusual for Roger Fry or Virginia Woolf as reviewers to move within a short period comfortably among history, philosophy, literature, medicine,
architecture, psychology, theology, mythology, anthropology, and even linguistics or nuclear physics.

A firm commitment to outreach was another characteristic of Bloomsbury. In part this may have been the result of the members having to make their living by their pens; outreach brought fees. But it was also the result of their inheritance from strong Victorian families with an unwavering social conscience. Several of these families had roots in a Quaker faith that emphasized social responsibility, and some were descended from the Clapham Sect of the early nineteenth century that included the banker-economist Henry Thornton. The objective of the Clapham Sect was to make as much money as possible so that it could be spent on good works. Virginia Woolf, borrowing from Dr. Johnson, wrote of her own deep concern for the “common reader” and she extended this notion for the visual arts to a concern for “the common seer” ([1940] 1976). The result of these commitments to outreach was that the Bloomsburys engaged in innumerable public adventures as well as lecture series, reading clubs of various kinds and other experimental devices. They were thrilled by the advent of radio and were engaged with the BBC from the start. Some of the projects and institutions that were anticipated in their writings did not come to fruition until after they were gone, such as the arts council movement and Kenneth Clark’s hugely successful book and television series *Civilization* (1969). The Bloomsburys thought of direct outreach as a critical dimension of adult education. Their critics sometimes called it patronizing and an attempt to control their audience.
Some of the stylistic characteristics of the Bloomsburys that were shared by many of the members if not by all, remained a puzzle and an annoyance to outsiders. For example the Bloomsburys rejoiced in many forms of humor, from the subtle to the ribald, and even to the seemingly adolescent. Their practical jokes were notorious, from the celebrated “Dreadnaught Affair” in which they donned fancy dress to confuse the British navy, to an occasion when Maynard Keynes was invited to speak in Mussolini’s Italy and brought along Duncan Grant to visit galleries. There was confusion on arrival and, to their great enjoyment, Grant was taken off to speak on macro-economics while Maynard looked at the pictures. Critics of Bloomsbury thought these escapades demeaning and outrageous, but for the Bloomsburys they usually had a purpose. First of all they were good fun and a nice break from the hard work which characterized Bloomsbury most of the time. In addition they were a way to tease those in power and puncture the solemnity that they abhorred. In her deadly serious polemic against militarism and the treatment of women *Three Guineas* (1938) Virginia Woolf enraged the establishment by including photographs of men dressed up in the absurd regalia of the church, the army, the courts, and the academy. This reaction that she received suggests that she hit her target. Humor also was a way to address pridefulness, a quality in human nature that the Bloomsburys believed lay at the root of many social ills. Roger Fry prepared a mock sermon addressed to clergymen who had complained of indecency in art; his sermon was on the text “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. – Proverbs xvi, 18” (Fry 1934).

Two rather quirky traits of the Bloomsburys were especially irksome to their critics but central to their style. First, they were unwilling ever to
declare a subject closed. They kept on discussing and hypothesizing as long as they had any interest. Roger Fry described this as refusing to let a crust form on their reflections (Fry 1920 in Goodwin 1998, 86). Second, the Bloomsburys were reluctant to answer their opponents when attacked, even if most unfairly. It has often been asked why Keynes did not respond more fully to the many confused interpreters of his *General Theory* (1936) in the decade after its publication and before his death. Similarly it was a puzzle to many why Keynes ignored an attack from D. H. Lawrence and why Roger Fry did not reply to Wyndham Lewis after his intemperate critique of Fry’s management of the Omega Workshops. That Fry’s legal advisors suggested he could easily win a suit for libel against Lewis seemed of no interest to Fry and he, like Keynes, remained silent.

*A Focus on Public Policy*

From the outside Bloomsbury looked like a large sandbox in which a collection of brilliant people amused themselves with their friends in off hours. And to some degree that is what it was. But it was more than that! One of its most creative accomplishments was to become something like one of the “policy think tanks” that sprang up in the western world during the first half of the twentieth century: the Brookings Institution (Washington), Chatham House (London), the National Bureau of Economic Research (New York), and many others. Bloomsbury was different from most of these well-known policy studies institutions in several ways. Most important, it included on an equal footing the humanities and the arts along side the sciences and social sciences. Second it allowed no hierarchy or visible leadership among the researchers. Finally, their conclusions and recommendations were seldom presented unambiguously. The focus of the
Group on particular policy areas often lasted over several decades, usually directed informally by one or two members, and their conclusions and recommendations changed repeatedly over this time. Some of the Bloomsbury public policy work is very well known, but much is known hardly at all. Those who failed to view the Bloomsbury policy commentary through a Bloomsbury filter tended to miss its full intent.

Almost all the policy concerns of the Bloomsburys were with what we would call today “market failures”. But their instincts were not to replace the markets with public authorities, as was suggested by many of their friends, but rather to find solutions to the problems within or around the markets, if at all possible. Their experience with government during World War I was entirely unsatisfactory and disagreeable and public solutions became for them a last resort. The concern of Maynard Keynes with macro-economic instability in a market economy is most well-known. His General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money (1936) explained how aggregate demand for goods and services depended on the psychological proclivities of different elements of the economy: investors, consumers, wage earners, holders of liquid assets, and others. It is less well-known that, rather like those classical economists he criticized, he looked forward to a time in the future when economic scarcity would be relieved and people would have time to achieve civilization and pursuit of the imaginative life (Keynes 1972 [1930]). In the mean time the free market economy should be disturbed as little as possible. “Thus, apart from the necessity of central controls to bring about an adjustment between the propensity to consume and the inducement to invest, there is no more reason to socialise economic life than there was before” (Keynes 1936, 379).
Roger Fry for his part was worried most about how artists, writers, and pure scientists could survive in a market economy where the demand for their services was very limited. His concerns for the adequacy of demand were on the micro level comparable to those of Keynes on the macro level. And Fry, like Keynes, searched for ways to strengthen the private demand for the arts and was chary about substantial governmental involvement. Virginia Woolf spent much of her life exploring how women in society could be enabled to achieve the imaginative life: what were the obstacles and how could they be removed? Many of her readers have mistakenly perceived a more simple set of objectives in her writings, those of the Benthamite utilitarian feminists who sought equal pay, the vote, college degrees, and other tangible rewards kept from Victorian women by the patriarchy. For Virginia Woolf, like the other Bloomsburys, such material achievements were simply means to the true end of civilization and the desired states of consciousness. One of her sad discoveries near the end of her life was that these means did not necessarily lead to this end.

Morgan Forster from his early childhood was deeply troubled by the destruction of the English countryside. At about the same time as the American progressives and for many of the same reasons he became aware also of widespread air and water pollution, the destruction of species habitat, and the disappearance of truly wild places upon which native creatures and even local folklore depended. Leonard Woolf was one of the first in Britain to think hard about what political forms should replace the European empires that he was confident were on their last legs. From his own experience as a colonial administrator in Ceylon and through close touch
with observers inside and out of the British government he came to believe that some form of world government was necessary. He concluded also that the political circumstances of peace and prosperity in which civilization could be achieved were exceptionally fragile and needed to be assiduously preserved.

These are only some of the most pressing public policy issues addressed within Bloomsbury; others included how to achieve a reconsideration and reform of all the entrenched practices of the Victorian age, how to minimize the likelihood of warfare as a way of settling disputes, the challenges to reducing the barriers of social class, the consequences of new technologies like the airplane and the radio, the racial and ethnic tensions that would arise from reverse migration within the European empires, mental illness, cruelty to animals, difficulties encountered in making personal philanthropy effective, the social consequences of religion, and more….

*The Harvest of Interdisciplinarity*

It is striking and intriguing that among the Bloomsburys there evolved a three-part strategy for responding to public policy questions. Apparently there was no discussion of this method. It just evolved and took hold. In the first stage a problem was specified, examined and explored from various directions. What makes Bloomsbury unusual and distinctive here and in all three stages was that the creative writers and the artists were actively involved as much as the social scientists. At the start of the examination of virtually all the public policy questions under review, the ultimate objectives of civilization and the imaginative life were carefully spelled out. The
novelists and the painters typically played the devil’s advocate with respect both to the question of what could be expected in the imaginative life and how easily it could be achieved. Here are a few examples of how the novelists contributed in this first stage. Forster’s most successful early novel *Howards End* (1910) dealt with the plight of a lower middle class office clerk, Leonard Bast, who is attempting to experience the imaginative life. But he faces formidable obstacles, has little success, and is ultimately destroyed indirectly by unemployment, unrelieved by well-meaning private philanthropy, and directly by a bookcase that, symbolically, falls on his head. Virginia Woolf’s first novel *Voyage Out* (1915) recounts the efforts of a young middle class woman to reach civilization through interaction with some recent Cambridge graduates; she dies in the process. The contributions of the humanists and artists to the policy inquiry are usually oblique, hesitant, and skeptical. They raise questions and seldom give answers, and often they address several issues in a single work of art. Forster addressed class tensions, the predicament of women, the challenge of reaching the imaginative life, the destruction of nature, the ineffectiveness of private benevolence and other themes, all in *Howards End*. Garnett explored the complex consequences of the liberation of women, cruelty to animals (fox hunting), and the destructive force of religion in *Lady into Fox*. (1923). In her second novel *Night and Day* ([1919] 1992) Virginia Woolf examines the reasons why several young people, seemingly well equipped to experience the imaginative life, fail to do so; the human tragedies of warfare, old age and mental illness, are all in *Mrs. Dalloway* ([1925] 1928)
In the second stage of public policy investigation the Bloomsburys typically recommended a range of rather moderate and conventional reforms, usually involving some redistribution of income and wealth or institutional change, with as little involvement of government as possible. Keynes’s thoughts growing out of the *Treatise on Money* (1930) were that reform was called for in central bank policy. Roger Fry’s first reformist initiative was establishment of the Omega Workshops, a corporation in which friends of the arts would bring together the capital and the management skills to generate guaranteed minimum incomes for the participating artists (Collins 1983). Forster and other Bloomsburys suggested initially that the English countryside could be protected through a combination of private actions and some limited governmental intervention like creation of national parks. Leonard Woolf, who foresaw rising economic and political tensions in the modern market economy, counted heavily on experiments with cooperative enterprise to bring relief. Virginia Woolf proposed that the liberation of women artists and intellectuals could be achieved through modest redistribution of income and property: for each a thousand pounds a year and a room of her own.

In the third stage of Bloomsbury policy exploration several developments typically occurred. First, the authors of policy initiatives expressed increasing disillusionment with the reforms initially proposed; it seemed these reforms simply were not up to the challenge. And so the authors turned for deeper understanding to new sources of enlightenment, including biography, history, a wide range of newer disciplines like anthropology, psychology, American Institutional Economics, and any wisdom that might be gleaned from bible stories and classical mythology, the latter impressed
upon them by their friend the Cambridge classicist Jane Harrison. And finally once again they turned to fiction. Toward the end of this third stage of consideration of policy problems the Bloomsburys usually suggested a variety of more radical and unconventional reform proposals that often angered and bewildered both friends and enemies.

Psychology was the discipline from which the Bloomsburys hoped initially to gain the richest new insights. They came to believe that the assumption of the simple rational actor with stable preferences did not match the real world. The appreciation that human nature was, in fact, infinitely complex led them naturally to a strengthening of their tendency toward tolerance. Instead of concluding that policy solutions rested on restoring human behavior to rationality they concluded that the challenge was to understand human behavior as it was and to work with it, and around it, to achieve desired objectives. Despite the derogatory language they often used to describe certain kinds of human behavior they were remarkably non-judgmental in reacting to it. Keynes was prepared to work with consumers and investors as he found them, and Fry was willing to find useful tasks in the grand scheme of things for all of the ten or so categories of demanders for the arts that he identified. Plutocrats should be encouraged to pay the high costs of preserving the works of old masters, while Snobbists could be taught to buy from the most promising younger artists, and so on.

Despite their initial optimism about what they might learn from the emerging discipline of psychology, the Bloomsburys quickly became disillusioned with what they found there. Neither Freud, nor Jung, nor Trotter, seemed to have plausible answers to the questions that concerned them the most.
They concluded that Freud failed to understand the arts at all, and they were
affronted that he portrayed artists as mildly insane (Fry [1924] 1928). They
turned instead in several other directions for enlightenment about human
behavior. The first new direction was to biography and autobiography,
which they treated as amateur case studies in psychology unconstrained by
distracting and speculative theory. From short biographical sketches in book
reviews to book-length studies they published hundreds of exercises in life
writing. Virtually every Bloomsbury followed this approach, and it was
formalized in the Memoir Club. Even the artists painted large numbers of
interpretive portraits of their friends, relatives, and others. While some of
their biography could be misunderstood as hagiography it was generally
intended to inform some inquiry that concerned them at the moment.
Naturally their biographical endeavors were directed toward their own
particular concerns. Fry examined the lives of artists like Joshua Reynolds
and John Singer Sargent to find out what made them tick and how their
successors might be assisted in the modern economy (Fry 1905). Keynes
examined the lives of economists, politicians, and scientists to help
understand how new ideas in economics were discovered and applied in the
real world (Keynes [1933] 1972). Virginia Woolf delved into the lives of
women writers to see why they had contributed less than men. Lytton
Strachey, who gave impetus to the overall study of biography,
demonstrated how the behavior of social institutions – the army, the church,
the public school or the family – could be illuminated by studies of their
leaders.

Another alternative to conventional psychology as a means of understanding
human behavior that was explored by the Bloomsburys was to consult bible
stories and classical mythology. They did this, undoubtedly, in part because their education had been heavily laced with religion and the classics, and because they believed that deep questions about human psychology were eternal. Many of the greatest minds through human history had been grappling with the same questions as they, and in these early works light could be cast on many of the most pressing contemporary questions. For example, Keynes went back to the King Midas story to understand liquidity preference. The women artists and writers, and some men too, explored the stories of Adam and Eve, Daphne and Apollo, and Cupid and Psyche to explain the position of women in modern society. Forster used the figure of Pan to express a love for nature that rose above a utilitarian focus on nature’s products (Forster 1947, 3-38). Leonard Woolf was especially intrigued by how Euripides attacked destructive myth by retelling and mocking these tales, and he set down a strategy along these lines for the Bloomsburys to follow (L. Woolf 1953, 64).

Still another source of inspiration for the Bloomsburys during their third stage of inquiry was the radical reinterpretation of economics that was taking place in the United States during their heyday, called by Walton Hamilton Institutional Economics. The earliest stimulus to the Bloomsburys seems to have come from Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* ([1899] 1979) via Roger Fry who learned about Veblen while in New York as curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Veblen’s examination of instincts, complex and sometimes conflicting behavioral drives, emulation, workmanship, and the mistreatment of certain segments of society by others seemed to answer many questions for the Bloomsburys. They went
on to read later Institutionalists, including John R. Commons, and probably Clarence Ayres.

The one overarching proposal that stretched across much of the Bloomsbury discussion in the third stage of their policy explorations was for improved education, information, and expertise to reduce the dangers of misunderstanding and miscommunication among actors in the economy. An abiding cause of problems in human affairs, the Bloomsburys found, was inconsistency in expectations about the future. This was most obvious in individual markets where suppliers often did not produce what demanders wanted and inventory cycles were the result. But the inconsistencies could be on a larger scale as well. Keynes observed that investors might plan not to invest as much as savers to save, and unemployment could ensue. Leonard Woolf observed that one body of doctrine, political theory, promised a future of liberty, equality, and fraternity, while another body of doctrine, economic theory, promised the constraints of a market economy, inequality determined by productivity, and competition instead of brotherhood. Unless these conflicting prophesies were explained and resolved disappointment could lead to destructive conflict within societies and among nations. There were opportunities at several levels for experts in the economy to improve knowledge about markets and thereby increase stability. Art critics could identify genuine quality in the arts so that demanders would not make purchasing errors that would drive them disillusioned from the field. Political scientists might demonstrate, as Leonard Woolf attempted to do, that more responsive economic and political institutions were a real possibility and needed only to be invented. Psychoanalysts might help troubled individuals achieve self-understanding
and avoid the disappointments that came from inconsistent expectations. In the process of improving expertise about the future certain new factors might be discerned that had been ignored in analyses up to that point. The Bloomsburys urged attention to the corrosive consequences of fear, the paralysing power of unreason as manifest in religion and other inflexible ideologies, and the dangerous attachment to the notion of “difference” whether based in gender, race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, or some other distinction. Virginia Woolf’s famous response to demands for feminism was a call, instead, for androgeny, a move to the middle. As the Bloomsburys identified rather subtle problems with knowledge of the future as the potential root of contemporary social and economic conflict, they faced mounting difficulties bringing some of their audience along with them.

Just as the presence of artists and humanists in their midst helped the Bloomsburys to turn to biography when they lost faith in behavioral science, so when they lost confidence in social science as the only path to understanding they could turn again to narrative fiction. As with their other methodological turns there is no evidence of prior planning, strategic thinking, or even acquiescence on the part of the social scientists in this device. The roles of the novelists and short story writers became to improve understanding of the issues under review by telling stories in which the problems and conventional solutions played important parts. They discovered complexities, especially the consequences of reform, including unanticipated ones. In some respects the approach of fiction, concentrating on a few variables in a plot line, resembled the modeling practice of the social scientists, without of course the same rigor and controls.
The first question addressed by the novelists in this third stage of analysis remained the Bloomsbury one: what exactly were those “states of consciousness” so beloved of G. E. Moore and found in Roger Fry’s “imaginative life”? And how did the proposed reforms set out to achieve them? Forster explored this question thoroughly in his Italian novels, where even the southern Europeans, whom the Bloomsburys tended to see as exemplars of civilization, find reasons to neglect their imaginative opportunities for biological and emulative attractions.

In her first two novels, *Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, Virginia Woolf reviewed the experiences of three young women in very different circumstances but attracted to various aspects of literature, the arts, and even abstract mathematics. One dies before it can be determined whether she will reach her goal; the others are not carried beyond their youth in the novels, but the prospects for their success do not look promising. In a short story called “Other Kingdom” Forster tells the of a young Irish women brought to England to be “civilized” before marriage. However her education in the classics changes her character so much that her fiance is infuriated and after a bitter dispute, like Daphne, she turns into a tree (Forster 1947, 75-112).

In the later stages of inquiry into social and economic problems the Bloomsbury novelists went beyond explorations into the issues being addressed to model the solutions proposed by Bloomsburys and others. Once again there is no indication that this was part of a plan; in large part the novelists’ actions may have grown out of listening to the discussions of
policy and then, quite unselfconsciously, including the proposals in their stories. In her own novels Virginia Woolf tested her recipe for bringing women into the imaginative life – privacy and independent income – and to her dismay concluded they were not the whole answer. Similarly Forster examined the consequences for “civilization” of education in the classics and adoption of Mediterranean mores and values, and he too demonstrated that problems remained.

The future of relations within the Empire was an issue that concerned most members of the Bloomsbury Group. Leonard Woolf and Morgan Forster lived for some time in different parts of the Empire and wrote about them with feeling. In response to those who looked ahead to warm imperial relations within some new kind of new federalism these writers in their fiction were cautious at best, and even discouraging. One of the clear messages that emerged from Forster’s last novel Passage to India ([1924] 1984) and from Leonard Woolf’s Stories from the East (1921) was that the British and Indians could never know each other well enough to make it possible for one to govern the other successfully. David Garnett in Sailor’s Return (1925), a novel deeply prescient of conditions that lay ahead, wrote of the racial tensions that would emerge when widespread immigration to Britain from the former colonies began in earnest.

A distinct feature of the policy work that distinguished Bloomsbury from other centers of inquiry was that they seldom concluded with precise prescriptions for what to do. They reached general conclusions but seldom offered specific policy agendas. Why? Modulated policy advice may have been a natural device of these public intellectuals to retain and not
antagonize their diverse audience. It may have been their sense also, reflected in their use of ancient texts to interpret problems, that important issues are seldom new and never go away or get fully solved. It is a mistake to think, as many of their contemporaries implied, that there is a policy silver bullet. It may have been their discovery through constant multidisciplinary interaction that most problems are so complex that they do not submit to a simple solution; and it may have been an aspect of their well-known unwillingness to engage in vigorous controversy outside their circle that they declined to put out targets large enough to attract their critics.

Some Conclusions and Reflections
Features of the Bloomsbury Group that distinguish it from other creative communities include the following. It was multidisciplinary across a remarkably wide band of human knowledge, from the sciences to the humanities and the arts, and even into professional areas like architecture and medicine. The members, perhaps because they were friends before they became collaborators, were exceptionally tolerant of each other and prepared to accept that the scientific, literary and artistic contributions of their fellows could be relevant to their own quite different range of interests. In part because of the prominence of social scientists in their midst, and in part because of the times through which they lived, the Bloomsburys were concerned above all with large questions of economic public policy. They were not, as they were often accused of being, focused mainly on their own individual enjoyment of the arts and letters. They attended to many of the important issues of the day, from maintaining macro-economic stability and bringing down empire, to protection of the environment, ending discrimination, and preserving the arts in a market economy.
It was significant that for the most part the Bloomsburys were not academics, even though not by their own choice. They were public intellectuals and, therefore, sellers of their wares in the market place of art and ideas; most of them lived by their wits and had to consider the interests and tastes of their audience when preparing their products for sale. This helps to explain their joy in experiment and the unusual range of devices through which their creativity was expressed, from conventional monographs, novels, essays, paintings and drawings to humor, childish escapades and even toys. The lack of discipline implicit in their roles as public intellectuals helps to explain some seemingly anomalous behavior as seen by more conventional scholars. For example they rejoiced in maintaining a revolutionary stance without the reverence for ancestors customary in the academy. They felt comfortable that their firm rejection of Benthamite utilitarianism and utility maximization as an explanation and norm for human behavior went directly against the grain of the evolving social sciences. Similarly they did not mind that their acknowledgement of Thorstein Veblen as inspiration for their contempt for emulation and ceremony in the modern economy placed them with such disreputable figures as John R. Hobson, Veblen’s most prominent interpreter in Britain and a distinctly heterodox figure. The Bloomsburys’ repeated references to biblical and classical texts, although a conscious analytical device as we now see, made at a time when the social sciences were attempting to separate themselves from the humanities must have seemed then like a mixture of antiquarianism and insult.
The most striking methodological innovation to emerge from Bloomsbury, and one that has not been replicated since, was their incorporation of narrative storytelling in their often-sophisticated inquiries into social, political and economic issues. Narrative – fictional, biographical, and autobiographical – had at least four functions in the Bloomsbury canon, in addition to the obvious ones of generating income and constituting works of art. First, it was used to illuminate problems such as unemployment, the condition of women, mental illness, and illiteracy, and supposed solutions to them such as private philanthropy and the medical and teaching professions. Sometimes narrative led to redefinition of the problems, or at least deeper understanding of them. Second, narrative was used to try out conventional policy agendas such as public subsidies and minor institutional adjustments, to remedy a problem like discrimination. Third, as new, more radical, approaches were proposed within Bloomsbury or without, these too were “modeled” in fiction to discover their possible consequences. Finally, when the Bloomsburys were confident that a problem was at last well understood and the policies sensible and consistent they were prepared to challenge old myths that had been used to sustain obsolete interpretations (such as bible stories) and even to incorporate their findings and recommendations in new modern myths of their own making.

The Bloomsburys addressed so many different issues of their time that it is not possible to discern a single coherent policy scenario that they advocated for the solution of all problems. However, several elements were usually present in their recommendations. First, of course, was their apparent agreement that satisfactions of the body were valuable, but satisfactions of the mind were more so. Second, as a means of gaining these higher ends
they placed great weight on freedom, not just conventional personal liberty but freedom from fear and from want. Without these freedoms, civilization, the conditions required to achieve the highest states of human consciousness, were not possible. To this end they were prepared cautiously to entertain new functions for government, both domestic and international, but they urged restraints on all powers given to public authorities. As a counterweight to government authority they called for, and participated in, the expansion of civil society and experiments with private sector volunteerism.

A third over-arching element in all the Bloomsbury policy proposals was a call for more and better education and better understanding at all levels and among all classes. They concluded that many of the market imperfections and inconsistent expectations that concerned them would be eliminated, or attenuated, by better knowledge and better technical analysis. But, in addition, what we today call liberal education they thought was the most promising solution to broader problems of prejudice and discrimination, insensitivity to one’s surroundings, unreasoning pride, and irrational and philistine behavior of all kinds. They did their best to strengthen liberal education in their own times and in ways that were open to them.

It is impossible to estimate with confidence the value added by the Bloomsbury Group as a creative community to the very considerable accomplishments of the individual members if acting alone. Nor can it be said whether the experience of the Group could be replicated at another time by another set of people. A controlled experiment would answer these questions but unfortunately cannot be carried out. Nevertheless the large
amount of historical evidence suggests strongly that the whole was, indeed, more than the sum of the parts.

References


