Third Way political ideology — which is, at least in part, communitarian — is an amalgam of three elements. While it rejects both statism and unfettered markets, it seeks a cautious and crafted balance between a governmental and the private sector, not to eliminate either. The third element is the community. Elizabeth Frazer, in a key passage of her new and important book, The Problems of Communitarian Politics: Unity and Conflict, summarises the communitarian perspective as follows: "The state-society formulation altogether should become a community, power and authority that has been accrued by individuals on the one hand, and the state and its bureaucratic agencies on the other, should be given back to the "community". A good part of her book is dedicated to showing that such an approach, as reflected in reliance on community action, community policing and "caring", is profoundly misguided.

At first, one may be puzzled by this mischaracterization of the communitarian position by a distinguished political theorist. This puzzle only deepens when one notes that the book opens with a challenge to a key insight that underpins the Blair Government, which obviously has been both nurturing the market and making some rather liberal use of the State. (If an adverse comment has been made, it is, by the third partner, the community.) What makes Professor Frazer's thesis even more surprising is that the book as a whole constitutes a careful and significant critique of communitarian politics, without any crocodile tears, Old Left bellyaching, or simplistic ideological slogans.

There is an enigma for one reads on and realizes that Frazer is, up to a point, correct. There are some — who might be called "utopian communitarians" — who write as if one could centre a future society on community action. These writers include Dick Atkinson (and to much lesser extent Henry Tannah) in the United Kingdom, and Harry Boyle in the United States, all cited by Frazer as authorities. Moreover, other communutarians — who argue that communities can and should play a much larger role in our life — have left themselves open to the criticism that they care little about the two other sectors. If, though, one looks beyond a few authors and matters of emphasis, one finds that communitarian politics is essentially aiming to develop a judicious balance among the three partners, it does not wish away the market and, hence "politics" nor the market in a three partners; it does not wish away the government and realizes that Frazer is, up to a point, correct. Moreover, one cannot substitute for it. Above all, community knowledge and experience essential for serious political participation.

The subtitle of Frazer's book is Unity and Conflict. At first, I feared that Frazer would fall into the trap of characterizing communitarian politics by the kind of end-of-history Marxist fantasy. However, Frazer often cites, and who's together with their British associates, Blair and key people around him — constitute what Frazer considers the main political communitarians.

oddly definitional. She argues that the notion of community is vague and elusive. But while terminological precision may be a virtue in academia, it matters little on the stump. And while Frazer is correct in noting that terms such as "liberty" and "democracy" have been much more carefully studied than "community", it is true mainly on the campus, when used by politicians, they all become rather fuzzy. See, for instance, the frequent references to Russia as a democracy. Moreover, community can be defined at least with the same amount of precision as other widely used but often contested concepts, such as class, power and even rationality. A community is a group of people who share cross-cutting affective bonds and a moral culture. By asserting this definition, I mean to indicate clearly that communities need not be local and are distinct from mere interest groups, in that they address a broad band of human needs. People who band together to gain privileged treatment for office equipment make an interest group; those who share a history, identity and fate, a community. And such communities can be made to last for centuries; they are far more tangible than a spirit of euphoria, as both Frazer and Martin Buber would have it. It often sets very high thresholds to what she is willing to consider a community. She argues, for instance, that unless there is a very robust set of shared meanings, a group cannot make a community.

However, many communities thrive, despite serious differences in the terms used, assumptions made and world-views held. Frazer argues that communitarians jump from the insight that people require social attachments, which they can find in friendships and other relationships, to the need for community. Indeed, communitarians have not done a good job in showing the difference. Communities, first, provide a rather different kind of attachment; the kind a person feels when they sense that they are a member of a whole group. Much more important is that communities underpin a moral culture. They define what a society considers virtuous, provide approval for those who live up to these definitions, and censor those who do not, thus reducing the need for policing. This is the point Frazer misses most. She insists that the central concept of communitarianism is community. Actually, it is the idea that societies require shared formulations of the good rather than leaving each individual to make these decisions (the core conception of political liberalism). This oversight of Elizabeth Frazer's might not be accidental. Political communitarians are in the UK in response to the Left, as the Labour Party moved away from state socialism. In the US, the group rose in response to the religious Right, which kept trying to fill the moral vacuum that was generated by the collapse of traditional values, a vacuum liberals were reluctant to fill. Hence, the dialogue about virtue has preoccupied American communitarians more than British ones. However, given that there can be no community, nor a stable society, without a shared moral culture, this issue will continue to be pivotal for both philosophical and political communitarians.

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