

**A 308. “Communitarianism,” *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World, Vol 1, A-D*, Karen Christensen and David Levinson, eds. (Sage Publications, 2003) pp. 224-228.**

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Communitarianism is a social philosophy that maintains that society should articulate what is good—that such articulations are both needed and legitimate. Communitarianism is often contrasted with classical liberalism, a philosophical position that holds each individual should formulate the good on his or her own. Communitarians examine the ways shared conceptions of the good (values) are formed, transmitted, justified, and enforced. Hence their interest in communities (and moral dialogues within them), historically transmitted values and mores, and the societal units that transmit and enforce values such the family, schools, and voluntary associations (social clubs, churches, and so forth), which are all parts of communities.

Among early sociologists whose work is focused on communitarian issues (all though they did not use them) are Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), especially his comparison of the *gemeinschaft* (community), and *gesellschaft* (association); Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), who studied the socially integrating role of values and the relations between the society and the person; and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), who studied the self. Other early relevant sociological works are those of Robert E. Park, William Kornhauser, and Robert Nisbet.

While the term *communitarian* was coined only in the mid- nineteenth century, ideas that are communitarian in nature appear much earlier. They are found in the Old and New Testaments, Catholic theology (for example, the emphasis on the Church as community, and more recently on socialist doctrine (for example, writings about the early commune and about workers’ solidarity) and subsidiarity—the principle that the lowest level of authority capable of

addressing an issue is the one best able to handle it. In essence, moral judgements are best made at the community level rather than from the higher governing bodies.

### **Variations on the Theme of Communitarianism**

All communitarians uphold the importance of the social realm, and in particular of community, though they differ in the extent to which their conceptions are attentive to liberty and individual rights. Early communitarians, such as Ferdinand Tönnies and Robert Nisbet, stressed the importance of closely knit social fabric and authority. Asian communitarians are especially concerned about the values of social order. They argue that to maintain social harmony, individual rights and political liberties must be curtailed. Some seek to rely heavily on the state to maintain social order (for instance, leaders and champions of the regime in Singapore and Malaysia), and some on strong social bonds and moral culture (as Japan does). Asian communitarians also hold that the West's notion of liberty actually amounts to anarchy; that strong economic growth requires limiting freedoms; and that the West uses its idea of legal and political rights to chastise other cultures that have inherent values of their own.

In the 1980s, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, and Robert Bellah and his associates criticized the excessive individualism of classical liberalism exemplified by the United States under President Reagan and Britain under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In 1995, Alan Ehrenhalt's book *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America* questioned the value of enhancing choice, achieved at the cost of maintaining community and authority. In his book *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam identified what he deemed "social capital" – the element of communities that forms affective bonds among people – and stressed

the importance of “bridging social capital,” in which bonds of connectedness are formed across diverse social groups.

In response to the breakdown in the moral fabric of society engendered by excessive individualism, Amitai Etzioni and William A. Galston began to organize working meetings to think through communitarian approaches to key societal issues. They, along with Mary Ann Glendon, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and other figures from academia and politics, issued a platform endorsed by a wide range of leading Americans. Deeming themselves “responsive communitarians” in order to distinguish the movement from East Asian, authoritarian communitarians, Etzioni formed the Communitarian Network to study and promote communitarian approaches to social issues and began publishing a quarterly journal, *The Responsive Community*. The new communitarian movement has been credited with having influenced public leaders and elected leaders of various persuasions in a number of Western countries.

### **Concerns of Communitarians**

Communitarians also pay much attention to the relationship between the self and the community. Political theorists depict the self as “embedded,” which implies that the self is constrained by the community. Responsive communitarians stress that individuals who are well-integrated into communities are better able to reason and act in responsible ways than isolated individuals, but add that if social pressure to conform rises to high levels, it will undermine the individual self.

Communitarians pay special attention to social institutions, several of which form the moral infrastructure of society: families, schools, communities, and the community of

communities. Infants are born into families whose societal role is to introduce values and begin the development of the moral self. Schools' role is to further develop the moral self and to remedy moral development if it was neglected or distorted by the family.

### **Defining Community**

Several critics argue that the concept of community is of questionable value because it is so ill-defined. In *The Myth of Community Studies*, edited by Colin Bell and Howard Newby, Margaret Stacey argues that the solution to this problem is to avoid the term all together. Bell and Newby argue, "There has never been a theory of community, nor even a satisfactory definition of what community is" (Bell & Newby 1974, p. xliii). In another text, Bell and Newby write, "But what is community? . . . [I]t will be seen that over ninety definitions of community have been analyzed and that the one common element in them all was man!" (Bell & Newby 1973, p. 15).

Amitai Etzioni argued that community can be defined with reasonable precision. Community has two characteristics: first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one or chain-like individual relationship); and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity – in short, a particular culture. David E. Pearson stated, "To earn the appellation 'community,' it seems to me, groups must be able to exert moral suasion and extract a measure of compliance from their members. That is, communities are necessarily, indeed, by definition, coercive as well as moral, threatening their members with the stick of sanctions if they stray, offering them the carrot of certainty and stability if they don't." (Pearson 1995, p. 47).

### **Criticizing and Defending the Concept of Community**

Critics also suggested that those who long for community ignore the darker side of traditional communities. “In the new communitarian appeal to tradition, communities of ‘mutual aid and memory,’ and the Founders,” writes Linda McClain in “Rights and Irresponsibility” in the *Duke Law Journal*, “there is a problematic inattention to the less attractive, unjust features of tradition” (McClain1994, p. 1029).

Communities, critics write, use their moral voice to oppress people, are authoritarian by nature, and push people to conform. According to Will Kymlicka, this oppression can entail the community prescribing roles of subordination, roles that limit people’s individual potential and threaten their psychological well-being (Kymlicka 1993, pp. 208-221). Derek Phillips adds:

In their celebration of the ecstasy of belonging, communitarian writers exhibit a frightening forgetfulness about the past. They fail to acknowledge that the quest for community often involve domination for some and subordination for others. In attacking post- Enlightenment liberalism and the politics of rights, communitarian theorists threaten to rob individuals of their most basic protections against abuses of power. In emphasizing the importance of community for people’s everyday lives, communitarians fail to see that it is attachment rather than membership that is general human value. (Phillips 1993, p. 195)

Amy Gutmann pointedly remarks that communitarians “want us to live in Salem” (Gutmann 1985, p. 319), a community of strong shared values that went so far as to accuse nonconformist members of witchcraft during the seventeenth century.

Communitarians counter that behind many of these criticisms lies an image of old, or total, communities, which are neither typical of modern society nor necessary for, or even compatible with, a communitarian society. Old communities (traditional villages) were geographically bounded and the only communities of which people were members. In effect, other than escaping into no-man’s-land, often bandit territories, individuals had few opportunities

for choosing their social attachments. In short, old communities had monopolistic power over their members.

New communities are often limited in scope and reach. Members of one residential community are often also members of other communities – for example work, ethnic, or religious ones. As a result, community members have multiple sources of attachments, and if one threat becomes overwhelming, individuals will tend to pull back and turn to another community for their attachments. Thus, for example, if a person finds herself under high moral pressure at work to contribute to the United Way, to give blood, or to serve at a soup kitchen for the homeless, and these are lines of action she is not keen to follow, she may end up investing more of her energy in other communities—her writers’ group, for instance, or her church. If a person who has recently been divorced is under severe censure by his church community, on the other hand, he may well take on extra hours at work. This multi-community membership protects the individuals from both moral oppression and ostracism. However, incongruity between the values of a person’s multiple communities may substantially weaken the moral voice; thus the importance of the next-level moral community.

In short, the moral voice is most powerful when people are members of only one community, but it can be overwhelming in such cases. It is more moderated when individuals are members of several communities, but it still may suffice to undergird a good part of the social order, as long as the various communities share at least some core values.

For the same reason it is a valid criticism to argue that a total and monolithic community can drive people to conformism, if this means that such a community will push people to sacrifice large parts of their individual differences in order to follow shared values. But total

communities are rare in contemporary societies, while multi-community attachments are much more common. To worry, in this context, about traditionalism is like worrying about the effects of excessive savings in an economy long plagued by debts and deficits and rather reluctant to mend its ways.

Another facet of the same basic criticism is the charge that communities are authoritarian. Derek Phillips, for instance, remarks, “[C]ommunitarian thinking . . . obliterates individual autonomy entirely and dissolves the self into whatever roles are imposed by one’s position in society” (Phillips 1993, p. 183). As the political scientist Robert Booth Fowler puts it, critics “see talk of community as interfering with the necessary breaking down of dominant forces and cultures” (Fowler 1991, p.142). Some critics mean by this that communities are totalistic, a point already covered. Others mean that they are dominated by power elites or have one group that forces others to abide by the values of those in power.

Communitarians find that this criticism has merit, but it is misdirected. There are communities both past and present that have been or are authoritarian. The medieval phrase *Stadt luft macht frei* (“the air of the cities frees”) captures what the farmers of traditional villages must have felt when they first moved into cities at the beginning of the industrial era. (Poor working conditions and slums aside, being away from the stricter social codes of their families and villages seems to have given them a sense of freedom, which in some cases led to anarchic behavior.) Totalitarian communities exist in contemporary communities, such as North Korea. However, most contemporary communities, especially in communitarian societies, are not authoritarian even when they are defined by geography. Also relative ease of mobility means that people often choose which community to join and within which to live. Agnostics will not move

into a Hasidic community in Brooklyn, and prejudiced whites will not move into a neighborhood dominated by the Nation of Islam.

Dominance by power elites and other forms of authoritarianism are not basic or inherent features of community, but reflections of the way it can be distorted. To be fully or even highly communitarian, communities require authentic commitment of most – if not all – of their members to a set of core values. To attain such a commitment, the values that are being fostered need to be truly accepted by the members and responsive to their underlying needs. If some members of the society are excluded from the moral dialogue, or are manipulated into abiding by the moral voice, or if their true needs are ignored, they will eventually react to the community's lack of responsiveness in an antisocial manner. In short, communities can be distorted by those in power, but then their moral order will be diminished, and they will either have to become more responsive to their members' true needs or transform into some other noncommunitarian, social pattern.

Still other critics have accused communitarians not merely of overlooking the less attractive features of traditional communities, but of willfully longing to revive these features. According to Michael Taves, the communitarian vision concerns itself mostly with “reclaiming a reliance on traditional values and all that entails with regard to the family, sexual relations, religion, and the rejection of secularism” (Taves 1988, pp.7-8). According to Judith Stacey, “centrists” and communitarians have enough in common with former U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle to make people on the left uncomfortable (Stacey 1994, pp. 119-22).

Early communitarians might be charged with being, in effect, social conservatives, if not authoritarians. However, many contemporary communitarians, especially those who define



themselves as responsive communitarians, fully realize and often stress that they do *not* seek to return to traditional communities, with their authoritarian power structure, rigid stratification, and discriminatory practices against minorities and women. Responsive communitarians seek to build communities based on open participation, dialogue, and truly shared values. Linda McClain, a fair critic of communitarians, recognizes this feature of the responsive communitarians, writing that some communitarians do “recognize the need for careful evaluation of what is good and bad about [any specific] tradition and the possibility of severing certain features . . . from others” (McClain 1994, p. 1030). And R. Bruce Douglass writes, “Unlike conservatives, communitarians are aware that the days when the issues we face as a society could be settled on the basis of the beliefs of a privileged segment of the population have long since passed” (Douglass 1994, p. 55).

Finally, communitarians have noted that communities need to be embedded socially and morally in more encompassing entities if violent conflict among them is to be avoided. Society should not be viewed as composed of millions of individuals, but as pluralism (of communities) within unity (the society). The existence of subcultures does not undermine societal unity as long as there is a core of shared values and institutions.

### **Further Reading**

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