

# Statism and the Civil Society in Europe

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**A** State Department official offered this anecdote in a briefing to an American sociologist on his way to Europe to explore interest in communitarian ideas there. When former Secretary of State James Baker visited a number of Romanian orphanages, the discussion with his hosts turned to the question of how to alleviate their wretched conditions. Among other possibilities, Baker suggested the use of volunteers. The translator allowed that he did not understand this term. Baker explained. The translator continued to be puzzled. Baker tried again, and finally the light went on in the translator's eyes. "I see what you mean," he said, "you mean nuns..."

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During dialogues with colleagues, political leaders, and concerned citizens in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic toward the end of 1993, I found quite a few who had similar difficulties with the concept that communities might successfully discharge some key social missions and significantly undergird others. Fortunately, other Europeans were increasingly aware of the importance of the third sector, neither command-and-control nor free market, where members of communities come together voluntarily to help the body society.

### The exhausted welfare state

The thesis I put before the Europeans was rather elementary, at least to an American. I suggested that the welfare state has exhausted its capacity to undertake an ever wider array of social missions and pay in full for those it has already shouldered, because it has exhausted its ability to raise taxes and is losing political legitimacy. I emphasized that communitarians like myself do not oppose the welfare state in principle, and that we accept what many Europeans, including conservatives, call a responsible economy or social market. In America the same condition is referred to as welfare capitalism, the notion that the state will continue to play a central role in providing social services, from health insurance to unemployment benefits. However, it seems that as new social needs

are identified (e.g. a need for extensive nursing home services as the population ages), and as the costs of health care and other services continue to rise rather rapidly, it is not possible to expect the welfare state to expand much more. On the contrary, all over Europe there are movements afoot to reduce the scope of benefits and services already provided by the state. It follows that Europeans might do well to ponder what I call the Seattle story.

### The Seattle story

Imagine, I suggested to an audience in several German and British cities, as well as in Prague, that you are the top health commissioner of Seattle. You report to the mayor that new medical research strongly suggests that once a person has a heart attack he/she must be reached within four minutes to prevent irreparable brain damage. This requires positioning an ambulance every thirty-two blocks, you report further, which would cost the city millions of dollars each year. The mayor responds, "Sorry, I do not have that kind of money." Instead, I told my European audience, various private groups in Seattle have trained 400,000 people, nearly half its citizens, in CPR since 1985. Now it is very likely that if one keels over in Seattle, within half a minute there will be someone there to help you, without any costs to the public. On the contrary, the act of helping one another also serves to sustain the spirit of community, which in turn has many indirect beneficial effects, albeit none as dramatic as turning a breathless, blue body into a fully functional fellow human being.

In Seattle, people feel better about themselves and others than in a more atomistic urban environment, such as New York City. They are less isolated (e.g. they meet in various training and refresher classes for CPR). Moreover, their communitarian spirit spills into other areas; for instance, Seattle has one of the highest levels of voluntary recycling in the United States. Last but not least, these are the places in which people develop their civic "muscles," because participation in such social activities is a seedbed for cultivating democratic practices.

I added that in the U.S. much public good is done through such means, ranging from several thousand neighborhood crime-watches and patrol groups, to ethnic groups that help immigrants of their "own kind," to associations that organize block parties and other social events. Above all, I argued, our societies will need to do more societal business this way because I do not expect that Western economies will shift into

high gear in the foreseeable future, able to generate a large amount of additional public resources (to be paid from rising tax revenues). Hence, the debate that is often waged, between liberals who favor reliance on the state and Thatcherite conservatives who believe in the market, is beside the point. Both overlook the communitarian sector that we must rely upon even more in the coming years.

About half of those who joined in the communitarian dialogues in Europe resisted this idea. A German student remarked somewhat pointedly that Seattle was a rather affluent city, but that the communitarian agenda would face greater difficulty in the inner cities, such as in the poverty-ridden neighborhoods of Los Angeles. I suggested that one should not “ghetto-test” programs by judging their merits on the basis of their success or failure in the inner city. To do so implies that other parts of society need no shoring up, or that if something works only for the middle classes and blue-collar workers, it is without value. In addition, I pointed out that the poor are quick to share and help their own at least as much as the rich. (A wonderful description of this phenomenon can be found in Dominique Lapierre’s *City of Joy*, a book about the slums of Calcutta).

The participants raised a variety of other objections to my community-building ideas. Those on the left of the political spectrum suggested that I was actually a conservative in communitarian disguise, whose real purpose was to provide a rationale for dismantling the welfare state. I acknowledged that communitarians believe that people must take responsibility for themselves to a large extent, and that families and communities should be the second line of social defense and support. However, I also explained that communitarians favor a significant role for the state in providing social services, but not as a first resort or only stay. Indeed, I suggested, the best way to protect the welfare state is to shelter it from further burdens and responsibilities.

### **The idea of “mutuality”**

Several of the participants in these dialogues also felt that this “volunteerism” was a uniquely American way of doing social business. They implied that volunteerism was a form of charity, an affluent indulgence like giving alms to the poor to assuage a guilty conscience. I explained that the communitarian approach stresses mutuality in which we do things for one another, though of course there is nothing wrong with acts of generosity or charity. I also pointed out that in reality Europeans can be quite adept at using communitarian bodies and techniques, such as organizing sporting events or social clubs; but they do not naturally think of these as precedents for attending to other, more essential, social missions.

In Cologne, someone responded that Europeans are basically statist by nature. An older member of the audience in Munich allowed that “I pay my taxes; the government should provide the services.” When I asked if he would be willing to pay higher taxes when the costs of services rose, he demurred and seemed more willing to accord a hearing to the communitarian argument. One tends to forget, if one lives on

the American side of the Atlantic Ocean, how elaborate the European welfare state still is, despite some recent trimming. While we now have (after much hand-wringing) a Family and Medical Leave Act that permits people ninety days of *unpaid* leave if they work for corporations that have more than fifty employees, Germans are entitled to a year of paid leave, plus a guarantee that their job will await them upon their return for up to three years if they seek to take unpaid leave after the first paid year. For nearly a century, national health insurance for all has been taken for granted and covers a wide variety of benefits, even including three weeks of “taking the cure” at the spas. Unemployment pay has recently been reduced from 63 percent of a worker’s previous salary—to 60 percent for the first year. After that benefits can be collected for a lifetime “until a person retires”—to a state financed pension. When I expressed some concern that two theaters were recently closed in Berlin to save public funds, I was reassured that the government is still paying more or less in full for another twenty-nine theaters, not across Germany but in Berlin alone. Trimming of budgets has also led publicly financed symphonies in Germany to be available “only” to towns that have a population of 100,000 or more, rather than the 30,000 that was traditionally provided, and so on.

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And yet the public is very disaffected. The signs of intense alienation exhibited by many citizens in practically all European societies, despite their very elaborate welfare services, constitute a sociological warning light suggesting that there are masses of people disengaged from the democratic polities—masses that might be engaged by extremists from the left or right. During a visit to Belgium (a country where welfare service seems even more lavish than in Germany), frequent reference was made to the *Zoilen* (pillars) of social services, from child care to elder care, that reach into every neighborhood. However, Belgians do not feel supported by these pillars or involved in these services provided by what we would call tightly organized bureaucracies; instead, they incessantly complain about “the government.” In all the countries I visited, mentioning political leaders either in power *or* in opposition elicits groans, and public opinion polls expose even lower approval ratings for politicians than in the United States. (Those of Helmut Kohl and John Major were in the twenties). In a recent election in Hamburg, the second largest vote-winner was “none of the above” and both the extreme right and left gained at the cost of the major parties.

True, democracy does not require as high a degree of involvement or participation as a social-movement society, such as Israel in the heyday of pioneering. However, democracies do not fare well over the longer run if there is a high degree of disaffection. A less statist society, a more communitarian one,

might serve to re-engage the members of society as they participate in shared activities which they fashion, advance and control, even if many of these are apolitical.

While I have listed the objections that were raised by European politicians, intellectuals and community leaders, I should also indicate that there were a fair number, including some major figures, who expressed keen interest. More important, while they occasionally use different terminology, they are quite inclined in the communitarian direction all on their own. Thomas Meyer, a leading intellectual of the SPD in Germany, seemed more preoccupied with convincing his labor union and ideological left-wingers of the merits of communitarian arguments than with questioning these ideas himself. I sensed the same reaction in the comments of Gordon Brown, the second in command of the British Labor shadow government. Norbert Burger, the SPD mayor of Cologne, seemed a natural communitarian, making many of the same arguments himself long

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before any American visitor bent his ear. Minister-President Kurt Biedenkopf, the governor of Saxony, who is a leading conservative thinker and a member of the CSD, developed a whole line of communitarian thinking while occasionally lapsing into pure Thatcherism. (His close associate Meinhard Miegel, just published a book entitled *The End of Individualism*.) Thus, while he generally supported mutuality in society, he also suggested that privatization would solve many of Germany's problems. This same attempt to combine communitarian messages with *laissez faire* conservative ones was also evident in the comments of David Willets, a conservative MP in Britain. He spoke on the one hand about the importance of the family and the social fabric for the community, and on the other mused that the “modern society was transient, voluntary, and contractual,” overlooking the importance of social bonds and values he otherwise recognized. Nor did all those who lent a favorable ear to communitarian ideas come from either the labor or conservative camp. The person who hosted the presentation of communitarian ideas in Bonn, for example, was a leader of the Green (environmentalist) Party, State Minister Joschka Fischer. In Britain, the conversation was joined by a representative of the Liberal Democrats, Ben Rich.

**Next stop, Prague**

Next stop, Prague. The government of the Czech republic is run by a strongly *laissez faire*, conservative economist, Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus. To the surprise of many observers, he has just announced that the transition from a socialist economy to capitalism has basically been completed, meaning that most industries have been privatized, the borders have been opened

to trade, and other measures favored by the IMF have been implemented. However, an elaborate web of social services is still provided by the state (though the public coffers are all but depleted), and most Czechs still expect the state to provide the guidelines for their behavior. There is no visible strategy to develop communal bonds or a civil society. As one visiting German sociologist put it: the whole place is an “associative waste land.” The government is about to abolish farm cooperatives, as if any mode of cooperation is automatically antithetical to a private economy. Instead of turning public housing over to tenant councils, which in effect govern American high-rises (in that they hire or fire the custodial managers and supervise them), the Czech state (as well as the states that now constitute the eastern parts of Germany) seems intent on privatizing the buildings unit by unit, which squanders a valuable opportunity to engage in developing civic practices and skills. In exploring the role of communitarian relations many Europeans are held back by powerful ghosts from the past, which are used to stop discussions leading in this direction. For Czechs and former East Germans it is the specter of communism, and for all concerned it is the memory of fascism. While some individuals may hanker for the “good old days” when there were “strong” leaders and law and order, many intellectuals and quite a few political leaders are anxious not to open the door, even a crack, for the return of totalitarian regimes. Since any discussion of social responsibilities and civic order generates considerable agitation in these quarters, communitarian thinking can be a hard sell.

At the same time more and more Europeans are realizing that the protection of individual freedoms requires social bonds and civic values. Without these elements of community, isolated individuals are much more open to totalitarian appeals. Indeed, as the new rules of the game are formulated, crime, drug use, and pornography are proliferating while children and the elderly are being abandoned. These social ills are already feeding discussion about the need for “strong” measures and a nostalgia for an orderly past. In short, the choice Europeans face is not between an individualistic free market philosophy (everyone for themselves) applied to the body society and a totalitarian state, but between tyranny and an “ordered liberty” ordered by a robust civil society. Social and moral anarchy creates a dangerous political vacuum that gets filled sooner or later. What Europeans need, and are beginning to grope toward, is a society in which people share values and internalize them to the point that most people do most of the time what is socially required—attend to their families, act civilly to the neighbors, and so on—and then go beyond the call of duty because they believe it is the right thing to do. They need a society in which people do more for one another and rely less on the state or the market to fulfill their social needs. To put it more succinctly, Europe needs more of the communitarian bonds we used to have and need again, ourselves. FR

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