

# Common values

Amitai Etzioni, the most prominent spokesperson for the communitarian movement, answers his British critics

Much of the recent discussion of communitarian thinking in the United Kingdom has put those of us who speak for it in the position of social democrats who have to keep "proving" that they are not Stalinist. For instance, the *Economist* published an article about us entitled "Down with Rights" (18 March 1995), which was about as responsible as saying that the *Economist* champions "Down with the Market", and as accurate as saying that we seek to move into Buckingham Palace. (Some newspapers even occupied themselves with my all too numerous personal failings rather than the ideas and ideals at issue.) Given that the readers of this publication already have available to them a fair and balanced

discussion of our approach ("Import Duties", *NSS*, 3 March 1995) I shall focus on specific issues.

Is communitarian thinking a bunch of American ideas and does it speak to British society? Communitarian ideas are found in the writings of ancient Greeks (especially Aristotle), in the Old and New Testaments and throughout religious and intellectual history (for example, in the works of Martin Buber). They are very much part of the social democratic tradition reflected in concepts such as workers' solidarity and, of course, in the notion of the commune. True, in the 1980s, communitarian philosophy was a subject of specialisation for several North American professors (giant among them is the Canadian Charles Taylor); but since the early 1990s the philosophy has spread back to where it belongs—a much broader circle of public leaders and concerned citizens.

A society avoids the questions raised by communitarians at its peril. Yet to address these questions, each society—given its unique history, culture and circumstance—must develop its own communitarian agenda. Measured by communitarian standards, societies veer either towards too much individualism (a Thatcherite direction) or too much collectivism (a notion some Labourites have a hard time shedding). It is our duty to seek to maintain balance between individual rights and social concerns.

When I spoke in China, I stressed the need for individual rights. In the United States, I stress the need to shore up the sense of individual and social responsibility—since political rights are *relatively* well-attended to here, but concerns for the common good and for others (on which sharing and solidarity are ultimately based) are shortchanged.

I leave it to readers to determine what the UK most needs next—rights enshrined in a written British constitution perhaps, or a greater sense of personal and social responsibility.

## Rights and responsibilities

A word about the relations between rights and responsibilities. In some limited situations there are trade-offs. Creating a data bank that reveals whether or not a person one could hire to work in a child care centre has been convicted of child abuse—and noting that such persons have a 76 per cent probability of being

repeat offenders—takes away some privacy, for the greater good. The same holds when we ask those who drive school buses to be tested for drugs.

Rights and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin. First, a right is a moral and often legal claim on another person and hence becomes their responsibility. If the other side will not assume that responsibility, the right is meaningless. Thus, my right to free speech is dependent upon your accepting that you have a duty to allow me to say things that you find quite offensive.

Second, rights are best anchored when people are members of well-integrated communities, and most endangered when there is only a crowd of isolated individuals. Communities provide psychological and pragmatic support for those who stand up to the state; they are required for individual sanity, sustenance, and political backing.

Totalitarian regimes arise not because some rights are recast at the margin and lead down a slippery slope to a police state, but because elementary social order is not maintained and people call for "strong" leadership. Hence the well-established concern for *ordered* liberties, rather than license.

## Decline of the moral infrastructure

I see British society slipping in an American direction in terms of its moral infrastructure. And I see the gradual erosion of institutions that turn newborns into civil human beings—something youngsters do not become unless educated in the deepest sense of the term.

To point out that traditional families were, for many, the place where people got their initial values, is, I believe, *not* an argument for a return to the patriarchal family. Communitarians call for a *peer marriage* of two parents committed to one another and their children, with both partners equal in their rights and in their responsibilities.

One may argue that there are better arrangements for children than a two-parent egalitarian family, that infants can be brought up well in child care centres that are staffed by hired hands. But one should not overlook the importance of the issue by focusing only on jobs, social justice, and all the other very important socio-economic issues. We must ask: who will be entrusted with the moral education of the young?

### Focusing the debate with a science court

I suggest we need a science court, a panel of nine top experts and practitioners, to examine all the data and hold public hearings to focus the debate. I predict that the findings will show that, in most circumstances, it is best for infants up to the age of two to be with their parents. If this is so, society should enable parents to be parents in those crucial years by providing paid leave for both sexes, more flexi-time, shared jobs and opportunities to work at home, and by recognising the importance of parenting.

I deeply regret that some feminists see in our call for an egalitarian family an indirect way to suppress women. I suppose Betty Friedan championing the communitarian position (and endorsing its platform) has not sufficed to reassure the critics. But I do not know what else can be said other than emphasising that a deep concern for children by a male is not an anti-woman position.

### Socio-economic rights

But what about socio-economic rights? What is the communitarian economic agenda? The short answer is, there is none. The drive was, and is, to provide a democratic, inclusive alternative to the Christian right that provides authoritarian answers to issues raised by the decay of the moral infrastructure and the decline of shared values.

Our agenda, so far, has largely been "cultural". Communitarian ideas are ancient, but the movement was launched only five years ago, so maybe some British followers will add a communitarian socio-economic agenda to ours.

There is here, though, a bit more than meets the eye. During an international meeting of communitarians in Paris, a Labour lord argued that all that mattered was jobs. Others from the left maintain that if we just stop the "commodification of relationships", nationalise, or otherwise change the economic foundations of society, the rest will take care of itself. Families breaking up? Children being neglected? Crime rising? It's the fault of the economy, of course.

As I see it, economic factors are indeed important and must be attended to. But one should not fall into the kind of economic determinism that led Marx to write, "[therefore] I am not a Marxist". Ideas and ideals, values and social arrangements make a difference and are not mere reflections of economic factors. Cultural factors need attending to and are, indeed, at the core of the communitarian mission.

I have found with some of the Labour left a saddening tendency to repeat socio-economic mantras as if mere repetition will bring about social change. I do not fault these observers for holding on to the old ideals; some of the ideals may

withstand the test of time, after proper re-examination. But to be unwilling even to consider expressing old commitments in new ways—ways that may broaden the appeal of what we believe in—is to become another force delaying social changes that are overdue.

### Are communitarians good?

My colleague Ray Pahl (*New Statesman & Society*, 10 March 1995) has commented on the difference between virtuous communities and bedevilled ones. Communities are not automatically benign. Indeed, oppressive features have arisen in many communities in the past and appear in quite a few contemporary societies. However, to try to do without communities just because some of them burn books, lynch, or oppress, is like suggesting that we do without food because much of it is contaminated, has too much sugar, is affected by excessive antibiotics, or is simply rotten. What we need is to grow organic health food. The incontestable fact is that people in communities live longer, healthier, and happier lives than those who are socially isolated. This is not a small matter.

Communities need not be, and often are not, local or just residential. Union solidarity can provide community. So can a profession, a religious persuasion, a shared sub-culture. The main features are a web of interpersonal attachments and a shared set of values. Communities need to be evaluated, judged and often reformed, but not replaced with nothing. Communities that develop hierarchies, where those in power oppress others, are in particular need of restructuring.

One must acknowledge, though, that full equality is a Utopian goal and one which we should not *expect* to achieve. Similarly one should not assume that equality is a cure-all; we still need to nourish and sustain bonds.

Communitarian thinking is a rich body of thought, with deep historical foundations, but also one that is continuously being recast. It speaks to a broad range of people from different backgrounds and persuasions. I believe it is time for thinkers and activists in British communities to adapt communitarian thought to their own needs and values.

We cannot avoid addressing "cultural" issues and dealing head-on with the moral questions and the social arrangements that sustain a civil and ethical society. The answers? We are looking forward to learning from shared experiences and from other communitarian circles as they join the dialogue. Nothing, after all, could be more communitarian. ❏  
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