

## Redefining Politics, Part II

I am in sympathy with important elements in the Communitarian Platform. Against the thin, contractual, and rights-driven language of the liberal view of politics, communitarians point to the need to focus on reciprocity, our common engagements with each other as citizens. Against the state-centered view of public agency that has characterized conventional welfare-state theory and policy, communitarians resurface the concerns of thinkers like John Dewey and Jane Addams for community organizations like family, religious congregations, and voluntary associations as seedbeds in which mutuality, attachment, and personal responsibility are nourished and cultivated. Finally, against the polarized, moralistic clashes in our time—where every issue (abortion, affirmative action, crime, the state of the inner cities, the environment) tends to become the occasion for battles cloaked in the language of absolute good and evil—communitarians seek to develop a “middle ground” that balances contending principles of free expression and development with social obligation and meaning. This, of course, also constitutes an effort to find a politically viable point of view. These themes are all welcome, indeed.

But we disagree about the ends and nature of citizenship and politics. Etzioni, like other communitarians, sees citizenship as most importantly involving questions of values and morality that derive from our attempt to forge a common way of life. This perspective has recently emerged across the political spectrum in counterpoint to the liberal view of citizenship and politics, which focuses on rights and allocation of resources and has a limited, institutional conception of the citizen’s role. I am convinced, however, that neither an institutional nor a values-oriented approach is sufficient. We need to renew an understanding of citizenship as serious stakeholding in the nation. People *become citizens* as they do practical politics, defined as the work of citizens in solving public problems.

In the liberal view, politics is mainly about the protection of rights (or “negative liberty”) and the allocation of scarce resources (claims to which have increasingly taken on rights language as well—the “right” to housing, the “right” to medical care, and so forth). Allocative politics has become the actual practice in America. The professionalism of our society has changed citizens into clients. We have lost Lincoln’s government “of the people, by the people and for the people.” People look to politics to generate benefits.

A liberal, institutional view of politics puts citizens on the sidelines as claimants and as aggrieved, righteous, innocent spectators. But this stance also creates a growing crisis. The nation fragments into a myriad of contending interest groups with often conflicting rights claims: young workers against older Americans on social security, taxpayers in suburban communities against inner cities needing services, blacks against whites, the Moral Majority against the advocates of “Peace and Justice.”

Against this background, the Communitarian Platform proposes a shared set of values that stems from the proposition that we all live in community. Etzioni seeks to distinguish the civic involvements of daily problem solving and moral concern from “politics,” which he defines in a government-centered sense. Other communitarians reintegrate politics and values more directly after the fashion of John Dewey. For instance, Jeffrey Bell, former Reagan speechwriter and a conservative, communitarian voice in this discussion, argues in *Populism and Elitism* that “the setting of a society’s standards is, in the final analysis, what politics is about.” The dilemma presented by a communitarian, values-oriented view is that there is no transcendental ground from which to determine *whose* values, virtues, and understandings of the community are to be accepted as the norm. Left, right, and center all advance their own views.

Yet there is another current in American history: practical politics. Politics (from the Greek, *politicos*, meaning “of the citizen”), always entails resource allocation and matters of morality and justice. But it is best understood in different terms, essentially as the process of public problem solving: the give-and-take, messy, everyday activity in which citizens set about dealing with the issues of our common existence, the general issues of the public world. I and my colleagues in Project Public Life, the citizen-education initiative I direct, find that politics and

citizenship take on life when people learn to understand their own problem-solving efforts as political and to “map” and negotiate the politics of their environments. Challenging young people to connect their own problem-solving efforts to the larger world of public politics is far more effective civic education than exhortations to this generation about civic virtue and obligation. Moreover, we have seen that unless young people learn politics, their projects and their “leadership development” can lead them to painful conflicts with their institutions and to further alienation.

American public life is deeply troubled today because we have largely lost practical politics. This loss, in turn, is a consequence of the breakdown of the places in which it was practiced. “Mediating political institutions” like political parties, settlement houses, ethnic organizations, public-minded churches and synagogues, active unions, and neighborhood schools once connected people’s everyday lives to larger arenas of governance. They were different from insular community institutions, charities, and other groups which have social use in cultivating mutuality—and have implicit connections to public problem solving—but which were not open, diverse, or public in character (a distinction that renders the fuzzy idea of “civil society” not very helpful in diagnosing our political crisis). Mediating political groups, for instance, were settings in which young people, mentored by adults, once learned public skills: how to form productive public relationships; how to negotiate with people they might not agree with; how to analyze decision making; how to recognize different interests; how to negotiate, bargain, and engage in public give-and-take.

Most of these institutions still exist, but they have become professionalized. As a result, they have lost their public, open, diverse character. Today, people look to specialists to solve problems and, on the larger canvas, to do politics. But while professionals—like politicians—have important roles in solving the problems of our society, they cannot begin to solve them alone.

Etzioni and I agree on the need for Americans to find overarching commonalities. But we differ on *how* such discovery is best achieved. In Etzioni’s terms, people come to awareness of things in common through appealing to each other in a “moral voice.” In my experience, respect and awareness of commonality among diverse groups are more frequently

the products of pragmatic work, not efforts to produce understanding. Blacks in the Woodlawn area of Chicago and white ethnics in Cicero, for instance, have different views of racial justice, based on different histories. Seeking common understanding is liable to deepen the awareness of the divide, without any mechanism for bridging it; in contrast, finding ways to work together on issues like housing and crime notably improves race relations. Similarly, moral voices of Jewish pro-choice women and Hispanic Catholic pro-life women in New York can drown out the possibility of collaboration on problems like teen pregnancy. When groups with divergent understandings of justice and morality develop practical work together out of different *interests*, it can teach mutual respect. Our nation is fractured because we have lost the means through which in the past groups engaged in the messy process of negotiating their way in the world, realizing through that process that their world was held in common.

Finally, practical politics highlights a different way of understanding the “encompassing context” of smaller, local communities. To rebuild mediating institutions and to reintegrate a badly fractured nation, the language of the *public* is more fruitful than the language of *community*.

Community implies density, trust, and lasting relations. The romantic fuzziness associated with the term is heightened by its application to widely different relationships: business community, national community, world community. Moreover, invocation of the national community is fraught with dangers that conservatives like William Schambra have observed: the melting and consequent obliteration of the particular, traditional, and historically grounded. Schambra contrasts the language of “great community” employed by 20th-century progressives with the language of particular communities employed by Ronald Reagan. Yet Reagan’s vocabulary lacked a context-naming concept to help citizens and groups map their relation to public governance. Hence, it was sentimental, like Bush’s “thousand points of light.”

In contrast, the concept of public arena reintroduces a distinction between public life and private experience that modern therapeutic language (“shared feelings”, “self-esteem”) and protest language (where every issue becomes the occasion for a Manichean division between good and evil) both obscure. Such a distinction is based not on the classic

republican ideal of civic virtue detached from private interests. It grows instead from recognition that although people's self interests lead them to public action, the best principles of action in public are different from those in private. Moreover, through productive, practical politics one's interests can broaden. In public we can learn to work with people with whom we disagree sharply and do not want to live "in community."

Thus, the concept of public is more effective than community in generating an understanding of shared fate and common principles, precisely because it is less hortatory and more pragmatic. It creates a space for different communal moralities. A public arena draws attention to the notion of a "commonwealth," a reciprocal exchange of public obligations and public goods. But it recognizes different interests, values, and trajectories, and the ways people learn to engage the public world in their distinctive styles, through their own experiences.

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There is no inherent contradiction between moral voice and working out differences; both are necessary for community-building. Indeed, one enhances the other. "Worked out" patterns that are deemed to be legitimate create much more community building than those that do not. And moral consensus that is invested in shared interests is stronger than consensus that is not so invested.

True, moral voices can grow shrill. But the polarization between the extremes of the abortion debate is not typical. On most issues, from the environment to smoking, from civil rights to government regulation, we work out compromises that often do not satisfy the diehards but reflect the consensus of the community. Just as one should not abandon cars because some drive them recklessly, so one should not give up on the moral voice because some raise it too dogmatically.

I fail to see why the term "public" draws more attention to shared interests than the term "community." Indeed, most experts on public opinion keep reminding us that there is not one public but only various

segmented publics. At best the term is amorphous and ephemeral. Who is in the public? Who is entitled to speak for it? What sways it? It seems often like a big blob that is pushed around by the media and politicians— unless it is anchored in a community and its mediating institutions.

As to the fact that people use the term “community” to refer to the social networks and moral voices of various constituencies, or to their yearning to extend those further (even worldwide), I fail to see why that should trouble anyone. As long as these communities see themselves as constituting parts of still more- encompassing communities and, hence, open to and cooperative with one another communities (rather than be hostile to them), community bonds will work against belligerent groups. And the moral voice of communities will work against those who abandon their children, discriminate, sexually harass, or otherwise violate values which we seek to affirm.

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*This is the last of a two-part Dialogue between Harry C. Boyte and Amitai Etzioni.*

**Nothing New Under the Sun**

Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsible-ness. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

Viktor E. Frankel, *Man's Search for Meaning*,

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