

The Need for a New Paradigm

Philip Selznick (Fall 1994) is reluctant to abandon the traditional division of social and political philosophy into liberals and conservatives. He prefers to see communitarian thought as a correction of liberalism. As I see it, communitarians have established a fundamentally different paradigm.

The core issue is the relationship between the individual and the community, or rights and the common good. One camp sees the individual as the center and all else as secondary or derivative. This camp is referred to as “liberal” by Selznick and others, but this term covers such different persuasions that it confuses more than it helps. Referring to it as “libertarian” is both more precise and more revealing.

The other camp sees virtue primarily in the collective, whether it is mother church, the fatherland, or the community. Individual rights are disregarded or viewed as secondary to the cause, the mission, the union. This camp is often referred to as conservative, a term which confuses social conservatives (who often are rather authoritarian) with laissez-faire conservatives (who are rather libertarian). The term “authoritarian” depicts best this second camp because the more one stresses the need to serve the common good, the less room and patience one has for democratic processes and institutions.

Communitarians form a clearly distinct camp that seeks balance between individual rights and the common good. We see both elements as equal in their standing and hence expect a built-in tension between them. The analogy of a bicycle that tends to lean in one direction or the other (libertarian or authoritarian) and needs to be pulled back toward the balanced center seems helpful. Hence, while communitarians may argue for more rights in some historical situations (e.g., in contemporary China) and for more attention to the common good in others (e.g., in the contemporary United States), the

basic focus is on the need and quest for a dynamic balance between the two.

So what then do we make of libertarian excesses: of their preoccupation with universals rather than also taking into account community-based particular cultures; of their preoccupation with liberties but disregard of their need to be orderly and hence limited (if only for the sake of liberty itself); and of their romanticization of reason and neglect of moral values? Selznick seems to imply that these flaws are all accidental oversights that can be corrected following a communitarian memo. As I see it they are inherent in the basic position that builds on one principle: the primacy of the individual over all else. Unless this principle is dropped, Selznick's "corrections" will not be truly accepted into the core of libertarian thinking.

Hence it is far from surprising that John Rawls's work has moved from often ignoring the social realm—to embracing it as secondary and as derivative. But this is about as far as he can bend without abandoning his libertarian position. What is needed is clearly a different paradigm, one that recognizes that societies are composites and are not cut from one principle, and that the main element of this composite is a tensed relationship between the common good and individual rights. History is replete with movements that sought to maximize one core value or the other (especially various totalitarian movements). Communitarians seek to restore the pivotal balance whenever it is lost.

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*Coming up in the Spring 1995 issue of The Responsive Community:
Stephen Macedo's "Communitarian Liberalism: A Reply to Philip Selznick."*