

## Book Reviews

**D69. "Banding Together," The Times Literary Supplement, (July 14, 2000), p. 9.  
(Elizabeth Frazer, The Problems of Communitarian Politics: Unity and Conflict.)**

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Third Way political ideology--that is at least in part communitarian--is an amalgam of three elements. While it rejects both statism and unfettered markets, it seeks a carefully crafted balance between the government and the private sector, surely not to eliminate either. The third element is the community.

Professor Frazer, in a key passage of her new, important book, summarizes the communitarian perspective as follows: "The state-society formulation altogether should become a community; power and authority that has been accrued by individuals on the one hand, and the state and its bureaucratic agencies on the other, should be given back to the 'community.'" A good part of her book is dedicated to showing that such an approach, as reflected in reliance on community action, community policing, and "caring," is profoundly misguided.

At first one may be puzzled by this mischaracterization of the communitarian position by a distinguished political theorist. This puzzle only deepens when one notes that the book openly challenges the intellectual assumptions that undergird the Blair government, which obviously has been both nurturing the market and making some rather liberal use of the state. (If any element has been a bit neglected by Blair, it is the third partner, the community). What makes Frazer's thesis even more surprising is that the book as a whole constitutes a carefully laid out, responsible, even respectful critique of communitarian politics, without any crocodile tears, old left bellyaching, or simplistic ideological slogans ("end inequality").

The enigma is unraveled as one reads on and realizes that Frazer is, up to a point, correct. There are some--who might be called "utopian communitarians"--who write as if one could center a future society on community action. These writers include Dick Atkinson (and to much lesser extent Henry Tam) in the UK, and Harry Boyte in the USA, all cited by Frazer as evidence. Moreover, other communitarians--who argue that communities can and should play a much larger role in our life--have left themselves open to the criticism that they care little about the two other sectors. If one, though, looks beyond a few authors and matters of emphasis, one finds that communitarian politics is essentially aiming to develop a judicious balance among the three partners; it does not wish away the government (and hence "politics") nor the market in a kind of end-of-history Marxist fantasia.

In the same vein, communitarians' call for greater reliance on community is meant to rearrange the societal division of labor, not to eliminate the other partners. For instance, greater reliance on self-help groups and other forms of community-based caring often cited by Frazer, may ease the burden on the National Health Service, and more generally on the welfare state--but obviously cannot replace either. Likewise, community policing may ease and improve the work of the police but surely cannot substitute for it. Above all, community action cannot substitute for local, let alone national and international, politics. On the contrary, community action is the place citizens gain the know-how and experience essential for meaningful political participation.

I should no longer delay disclosing that I am one of the communitarians whose political theory is questioned in this book. Under most circumstances this fact would have compelled

me to refuse to review the book. However, given that Professor Frazer's book is couched in such a scholarly and genteel manner, I see my way clear to join in the dialogue she has laid out on communitarian politics. No offense given, none taken.

Frazer is aware that communitarians differ from one another as much as the Catholicism of worker priests (or liberation theology) differs from the Pope's conservative Catholicism--or as welfare liberals differ from classical ones. To proceed, Professor Frazer disregards Southeast Asian communitarians (who are basically authoritarians who seek to suppress individuals for the sake of national goals). And, while she includes considerable discussion of philosophical communitarians (Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer), whose theoretical criticism of liberalism she examined in a previous, highly-regarded work she co-authored with Nicola Lacey (*The Politics of Community*), at the focus of this book are the new communitarians. This group issued a platform in 1990 in the USA, formed the Communitarian Network, published a quarterly (*The Responsive Community: Rights and Responsibilities*) that Frazer often cites, and who--together with their British associates, Blair, and key people around him--constitute what Frazer considers the main political communitarians. The other mainstay of political communitarians according to Frazer, is *Tikkun*, an American Jewish left-liberal outlet with considerable New Age overtones, usually not considered communitarian.

The subtitle of Frazer's book is *Unity and Conflict*. At first, I feared that Frazer would fall into the trap of characterizing communitarian politics the way the old left used to: communitarians were said to prefer consensus building over conflict, and hence served to hide the fact that a call for consensus serves the forces of the status quo and hides that society is nothing but an arena in which classes clash. However, Frazer seems to recognize that one can have conflict within unity. Thus, members of a family (however defined) can struggle to restructure their division of labor, power, and relationships--while seeking to maintain the union. Her criticism of communitarian politics on this matter is at its best when she argues that it has been inclined too much to seek consensus and not enough toward conflict, which Frazer considers the core of politics. Blair would in all probability still be the leader of a frustrated opposition if he followed this line of thinking, however it does not follow that once in office one cannot consider spending a bit more political capital on addressing some divisive issues.

While Frazer does not provide specific examples, her formulation makes one wonder if the time has come to move beyond relatively highly consensuated themes such as modernizing Britain (and making it mod and cool), to facing tougher--and more conflict-prone--matters, all of which concern the integrity of the nation as a community. For instance: Can a national community thrive if one allows inequality to grow ever larger? How far should the nation allow multiculturalism to replace existing British national identity? Has devolution both proceeded too far, threatening national unity, and not progressed far enough, bringing missions and control to local communities? And if this is the case, how might nation building be nurtured to maintain the proper communitarian balance between unity and conflict?

The main difference between philosophical and political communitarians in Frazer's book is that the latter seek action in the real world, a realm that is worlds apart from the contemplative groves of philosophers. Yet the criticism of political communitarians on which Frazer delves most is oddly definitional. She argues that the notion of community--the core concept of political communitarianism and the one very often evoked by Blair--is vague and elusive. As I see it, while terminological precision may be a virtue in academia, it matters little on the stump. And while Frazer is correct in noting that terms such as "liberty" and "democracy" have been much more carefully studied than community, this is true mainly on

the campus; when used by politicians, they all become rather fuzzy. See, for instance, the frequent references to Russia as a democracy.

Moreover, community can be defined at least with the same amount of precision as other widely used but often contested concepts, such as class, power, and even rationality. A community is a group of people who share criss-crossing affective bonds and a moral culture. By asserting this definition I mean to clearly indicate that communities need not be local (let that canard die), and are distinct from mere interest groups in that communities address a broad band of human needs and not only narrow interests. People who band together to gain privileged treatment for office equipment make an interest group; those who share a history, identity and fate, a community. And such communities can be made to last for centuries; they are far more tangible than a spirit or euphoria, as both Frazer and Martin Buber would have it.

Also, Frazer sets some very high thresholds as to what she is willing to consider a community. For instance, she argues that unless there is a very robust set of shared meanings, a group cannot a community make. However, many communities thrive despite serious differences in the terms used, assumptions made, and world views held. (Frazer has much more to say about "interpretivism" and "social constructionism," which the readers of this review will somehow have to do without.)

Frazer argues that communitarians jump from the insight that people require social attachments, which they can find in friendship and other relationships, to the need for community. Indeed, communitarians have not done a good job in showing the difference. Communities, firstly, provide a rather different kind of attachment; the kind a person feels when they feel that they are a member of a whole group. Much more important is that communities undergird a moral culture. They define what a society considers virtuous, provides approbation for those who live up to these definitions, and censors those who do not, thus reducing the need for policing.

This is the point Frazer misses most. She insists that the central concept of communitarianism is community. Actually, it is the idea that societies require shared formulations of the good rather than leaving each individual to make these determinations (the core conception of political liberalism). This oversight of Frazer's might not be accidental. Political communitarians in the UK rose in response to the left, as the Labour party moved away from state socialism. In the USA, the group rose in response to the religious right, which kept trying to fill the moral vacuum that was generated by the collapse of traditional values, a vacuum liberals were reluctant to fill. Hence, the dialogue about virtues has preoccupied American communitarians more than British ones. However, given that there can be no community, nor a stable society, without a shared moral culture, this issue will continue to be pivotal for both philosophical and political communitarians.

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