

Third Way political ideology – which 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, not to eliminate either. The third element is the community.

Elizabeth Frazer, in a key passage of her new and important book, *The Problems of Communitarian Politics: Unity and conflict*, 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 underpin 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 neglected by Blair, it is the third partner, the community.) What makes Professor 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.

The enigma is unravelled, 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 centre a future society on community action. These writers include Dick Atkinson (and to much lesser extent Henry Tam) in the United Kingdom, and Harry Boyte in the United States, all cited by Frazer as authorities. 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, though, one 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 fantasy.

In the same vein, the call of communitarians for greater reliance on community is meant to rearrange the societal division of labour, 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 replace local, let alone national and international, politics. On the contrary, community action allows citizens to gain the know-how and experience essential for serious political participation.

I should no longer delay disclosing that I am one of the communitarians whose political theory is questioned in this book. Normally, this fact would have precluded me from reviewing it. However, the book is couched in such scholarly and gentle terms that I see my way clear to join in the dialogue. 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

# Banding together

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Elizabeth Frazer

THE PROBLEMS OF  
COMMUNITARIAN POLITICS  
Unity and conflict  
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classical ones. Frazer disregards South-East Asian communitarians (who are basically authoritarians seeking 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 has previously examined, at the focus of this book are the new communitarians. This group issued a programme in 1990 in the United States, formed the Communitarian Network, published a quarterly (*The Responsive Community: Rights and responsibilities*) which 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 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 to conflict, which hid the fact that a call for consensus serves the forces of the status quo and 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 labour, 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 too inclined to seek consensus and not enough to recognize conflict, which Frazer considers the core of politics. Blair would in all probability still be the Leader of a frustrated Opposition if he had 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 not come to move beyond relatively uncontroversial themes such as modernizing Britain, 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 inequality is allowed to grow ever larger? How far should the nation allow multiculturalism to replace the existing British national identity? Has devolution both proceeded too far, threatening national unity, and not progressed far enough, to bring purpose 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 far from the contemplative groves of philosophers. Yet the criticism of political communitarians in which Frazer delves most is

oddly definitional. She argues that the notion of community is vague and elusive. But 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 indicate clearly that communities need not be local and are distinct from mere interest groups, in that they address a broad band of human needs. 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 of euphoria, as both Frazer and Martin Buber would have it.

Frazer sets very high thresholds as to what she is willing to consider a community. She argues, for instance, that unless there is a very robust set of shared meanings, a group cannot make a community. However, many communities thrive,

despite serious differences in the terms used, assumptions made and world-views held. 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, first, provide a rather different kind of attachment; the kind a person feels when they sense that they are a member of a whole group. Much more important is that communities underpin a moral culture. They define what a society considers virtuous, provide approbation for those who live up to these definitions, and censor 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 decisions (the core conception of political liberalism). This oversight of Elizabeth Frazer's might not be accidental. Political communitarians in the UK arose in response to the Left, as the Labour Party moved away from state socialism. In the US, 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 virtue 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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