COMMUNITARIANISM

Communitarianism is a social philosophy that core assumption is the required shared ("social") formulations of the good. The assumption is both empirical (social life exhibits shared values) and normative (shared values ought to be formulated). While many sociologists may consider such an assumption as subject to little controversy, communitarianism is in effect a highly contested social philosophy. It is often contrasted with liberalism (based on the works of John Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill, not to be confused with liberalism as the term is used in contemporary American politics). Liberalism's core assumption is that what people consider right or wrong, their values, should strictly be a matter for each individual to determine. To the extent that social arrangements and public policies are needed, these should not be driven by shared values but by voluntary arrangements and contracts among the individuals involved, thus reflecting their values and interests. Communitarians, in contrast, see social institutions and policies as affected by tradition and hence by values passed from generation to generation. These become part of the self through nonrational processes, especially internalization, and are changed by other processes such as persuasion, religious or political indoctrination, leadership, and moral dialogues.

In addition, communitarianism emphasizes particularism, the special moral obligations people have to their families, kin, communities, and societies. In contrast, liberalism stresses the universal rights of all individuals, regardless of their particular membership. Indeed, liberal philosopher Jeremy Bentham declared that the very notion of a society is a fiction.

Until 1990, sociological and social psychological researchers and theorists and communitarian philosophers often ignored one another's works, despite the fact that they dealt with closely related issues. It should be noted, though, that communitarians were much more inclined to be openly and systematically normative than many social scientists.

HISTORY

Like many other schools of thought, communitarianism has changed considerably throughout its history, and has various existing camps that differentiate significantly. As far as can be determined, the term "communitarian" was not used until 1841, when Goodwyn Barmby, an official of the Communist Church, founded the Universal Communitarian Association.

Communitarian issues were addressed long before that date, however, for instance in Aristotle's comparison of the isolated lives of people in the big metropolis to close relationships in the smaller city. Both the Old and the New Testament deal with various issues one would consider communitarian today, for instance the obligations to one's community. The social teaching of the Catholic Church (for instance, concerning subsidiary) and of early utopian socialism (for example, regarding communal life and solidarity), all contain strong communitarian *elements*, although these works are not comprehensive communitarian statements and are not usually considered as communitarian works per se.

Among early sociologists whose work is strongly communitarian, although this fact is as a rule overlooked by social philosophers, are Ferdinand Tönnies, especially his comparison of the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft*, (or community and society); Emile Durkheim, especially his concerns about the integrating role of social values and the relations between the individual and society; and George Herbert Mead. These works are extensively examined elsewhere in this encyclopedia and hence are not discussed here.

A communitarian who combined social philosophy and sociology Martin Buber. Especially relevant are Buber's contrast between I-It and I-Thou relations, his interest in dialogue, and his distinction between genuine communal relationships and objectified ones.

Other sociologists whose work contains communitarian elements are Robert E. Park, William Kornhauser, and Robert Nisbet. Philip Selznick, Robert Bellah and his associates, and Amitai Etzioni wrote books that laid the foundations for new (or responsive) communitarianism, which Etzioni launched as a "school" and somewhat of a social movement in 1990.

Selznick's *The Moral Commonwealth* is especially key in forming a strong intellectual grounding for new communitarian thinking, and presents an integration of moral and social theory in a synthesis of "communitarian liberalism." According to Selznick, communitarianism does not reject basic liberal ideals and achievements; it seeks reconstruction of liberal perspectives to mitigate the excesses of individualism and rationalism, and to encourage an ethic of responsibility (in contrast to liberalism, where the concept of responsibility has no major role). In a community there is an irrepressible tension between exclusion and inclusion, and between civility and piety. Thus community is not a restful idea, a realm of peace and harmony. On the contrary, competing principles must be recognized and dealt with.

AUTHORITARIAN, POLITICAL THEORETICAL, AND RESPONSIVE COMMUNITARIANISM

Different communitarian camps are no closer to one another than National Socialists (Nazis) are to Scandinavian Social Democrats (also considered socialists). It is hence important to keep in mind which camp one is considering. The differences concern the normative relations between social order and liberty, and the relations between the community and the individual.

Authoritarian Communitarians. Authoritarian communitarians(some of whom are often referred to as "Asian" or "East Asian" communitarians) are those who argue that to maintain social order and harmony, individual rights and political liberties must be curtailed. Some believe in the strong arm of the state (such as former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysian head of state Mahathir Bin Mohamad), and some in strong social bonds and the voice of the family and community (especially the kind of society Japan had, at least until 1990). Among the arguments made by authoritarian communitarians is that social order is important to people, while what the West calls "liberty" actually amounts to social, political, and moral anarchy; that curbing legal and political rights is essential for rapid economic development; and that legal and political rights are a Western idea, which the West uses to harshly judge other cultures that have their own inherent values. The extent to which early sociological works, for instance, by Tönnies and *Community and Power* by Robert Nisbet, include authoritarian elements, is open to question.

Political Theoreticians . In the 1980s communitarian thinking became largely associated with three scholars: Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer. They criticized liberalism for its failure to realize that people are socially "situated" or contextualized, and its negligence of the greater common good in favor of individualistic self-interests. In addition, as Chandran Kukathas relates in *The Communitarian Challenge to Liberalism* (Paul, Miller, Paul, eds. 1990, p.90), communitarians argue that political community is an important value which is neglected by liberal political theory. Liberalism, they contend, views political society as a supposedly neutral framework of rules within which a diversity of moral traditions coexist. . . .[Such a view] neglects the fact that people have, or can have, a strong and 'deep' attachment to their societies—to their nations.

While for many outside sociology, especially until 1990, these three scholars were considered the founding fathers of communitarian thinking, none of them uses the term in their work, possibly to avoid being confused with authoritarian communitarians. These scholars almost completely ignored sociological works that preceded them, and were largely ignored by sociologists.

New or Responsive Communitarians. Early in 1990, a school of communitarianism was founded in which sociologists played a key role, although it included scholars from other disciplines such as William A. Galston (political theory), Mary Ann Glendon (law), Thomas Spragens, Jr. (political science), and Alan Ehrenhalt (writer) to mention but a few. The group, founded by Amitai Etzioni, took communitarianism from a small and somewhat esoteric academic discipline and introduced

it into public life, and recast its academic content. Its tools were *The Responsive Communitarian Platform: Rights and Responsibilities*, a joint manifesto summarizing the guiding principles of the group; an intellectual quarterly, *The Responsive Community*, whose editors include several sociologists; several books; position papers on issues ranging from a communitarian view of the family to organ donation and to bicultural education; and numerous public conferences, op-eds, and a web site (www.gwu.edu/~ccps).

Key Assumptions and Concepts. Responsive communitarianism methodologically is based on the macro-sociological assumption that societies have multiple and not wholly compatible needs and values, in contrast to philosophies that derive their core assumptions from one overarching principle, for instance liberty for libertarianism. Responsive communitarianism assumes that a "good society" is based on a carefully crafted balance between liberty and social order, between individual rights and social responsibilities, between particularistic (ethnic, racial, communal) and society-wide values and bonds. In that sense, far from representing a Western model, the communitarian good society combines 'Asian' values (also reflecting tenets of Islam and Judaism that stress social responsibilities) with a Western concern with political liberty and individual rights.

While the model of the good society is applicable to all societies, communitarianism stresses that different societies, during various historical periods, may be off balance in rather contrasting ways and hence may need to move in *different* directions in order to approximate the *same* balance. Thus, contemporary East Asian societies require much greater tolerance for individual and communal differences, while in the American society—especially at the end of the 1980s—excessive individualism needs to be reigned in. To put it differently, communitarianism suggests that the specific normative directives that flow from the good society model are historically and culturally contingent.

Responsive communitarians stress that the relationship between liberty and social order is not a zero-sum situation; up to a point they are mutually supportive. Thus, in situations such as those prevailing in late-1990s Moscow, where liberty and social order are neglected, increasing order might well also enhance people's autonomy and life choices. The same might be said about reducing crime in American cities when it reached the point where people did not venture into parks, and were reluctant to ride the subway or walk the streets after dark. Moreover, totalitarian regimes, the ultimate loss of freedom, are said to arise when order is minimized.

While up to a point social order and liberty enhance one another, if the level of social order is increased further and further, responsive communitarians expect it to reach a level where it will erode people's liberty. And, if the scope of liberty is extended ever more, it will reach a point where it will undermine the social order. This idea is expressed in the term *inverting symbiosis*, which indicates that up to a point liberty and order nourish one another, and beyond it they turn antagonistic.

The same point applies to the relationship between the self and the community. Political theorists have tended to depict the self as "encumbered," "situated,"or "contextualized,"all of which imply that it is constrained by social order. Responsive communitarians stress that individuals within communities are able to be more reasonable and productive than isolated individuals, but if social pressure to conform reaches a high level, such pressures undermine the development and expression of the self.

The next question is: Under what conditions can the zone of symbiosis be expanded, and that of antagonism between liberty and order be minimized? To answer that question the communitarian view of human nature must be introduced. While sociologists tend to avoid this term, on the grounds that it is not testible and can lead to racism (as evident in the notion that some groups of people are more intelligent by nature), communitarians use the term with less reluctance.

The view of human nature most compatible with responsive communitarian thinking is a *dynamic* (developmental) view, which holds that people at birth are akin to animals. But unlike social conservatives, who tend to embrace a dour view of human nature, and tend to view even adults after socialization as impulsive, irrational, dangerous, or sinful—communitarians maintain that people can become increasingly virtuous if the proper processes of value-internalization and reinforcement of undergirding social institutions, the "moralPage 358 | infrastructure," are in place. At the same time, communitarians do not presume that people can be made as virtuous as liberals assume them to be from the onset. (Liberals tend to assume that crime and forms of deviant behavior reflect social conditions, especially government interventions that pervert good people, rather than criminals' innate nature.)

The moral infrastructure, an essential foundation of a good society, draws on four social formations: families, schools, communities, and the community of communities. The four core elements of the moral infrastructure are arranged like Chinese nesting boxes, one within the other, and in a sociological progression. Infants are born into *families*, which communitarians stress have been entrusted throughout human history with beginning the process of instilling values and launching the moral self. *Schools* join the process as children grow older, further developing the moral self ("character"), or trying to remedy character neglect suffered under family care. Schools are hence viewed not merely or even primarily as places of teaching, where the passing of knowledge and skills occur, but as educational institutions in the broadest sense of the term.

Human nature, communitarians note, is such that even if children are reared in families dedicated to child raising and moral education, and children graduate from strong and dedicated schools, these youngsters are still not sufficiently equipped for a good, communitarian society. This is a point ignored by social philosophers who often assume that once people have acquired virtue and are habituated, they will be guided by their inner moral compass. The very concept of "conscience" assumes the formation of a perpetual inner gyroscope.

In contrast, communitarians—following standard sociological positions—assume that the good character of those who have acquired it tends to degrade. If left to their own devices, individuals gradually lose much of their commitments to their values, unless these are continuously reinforced. A major function of the *community*, as a building block of the moral infrastructure, is to reinforce the character of its members. This is achieved by the community's "moral voice," the informal sanction of others, built into a web of informal affect-laden relationships, which communities provide. In general, the weaker the community—because of high population turnover, few shared core values, high heterogeneity, etc.—the thinner the social web and the slacker the moral voice. The strength of the moral voice and the values it speaks for have been studied using a series of questions such as, Should one speak up if child abuse is witnessed? Or if children are seen painting swastikas? What about less dire situations, such as insisting that friends wear their seatbelts, or admonishing a nondisabled person one witnesses parking in a handicap space?

Informal surveys show that Americans in the 1980s were very reluctant to raise their moral voice; many accepted the liberal ideology that what is morally sound is to be determined by each individual, and one should not pass judgments over others. Alan Wolfe's study, *One Nation After All*, found that Americans, even in conservative parts of the country, have grown very tolerant of a great variety of social behavior. Increase in tolerance is of course by itself virtuous; communitarians, though, raise the question: At which point does such increased tolerance engendering an amoral culture where spousal abuse, discrimination, child neglect, drunk drivers, obsessive materialism, and other forms of antisocial behavior become matters the community should ignore, leaving them to individual discretion or the law.

More specifically, communitarians inquire various elements of the moral infrastructure whether they reinforce, neglect, or undermine it. In this context, the special communitarian perspective of voluntary associations is especially important. Previously, the significance of these associations has been highlighted as protecting individuals from the state (a protection they would not have if they faced the state as isolated or "atomized" individuals), and as intermediating bodies that aggregate, transmit, and underwrite individual signals to the state.

Communitarians argue that, in addition, the very same voluntary associations often fulfill a rather different role: They serve as social spaces in which members of communities reinforce their social webs and articulate their moral voice. That is, voluntary associations often constitute a basis of communal relationships. Thus, the members of a local chapter of the Masons, Elks, or Lions carePage 359 | about one another and reinforce each other's particular brand of conservative views. Similarly, the members of the New York City Reform Clubs, Americans for Democratic Action, and local chapters of the ACLU reinforce one another's particular brand of liberal views.

Communitarians pay special attention to the condition of public spaces as places communities happen (as distinct from private places like homes and cars). Even though one may carpool with friends or have them over for a visit, these are mainly activities of small friendship groups (what Robert Putnam calls "bowling alone"). Communities need more encompassing webs, and those are formed and reinforced in public gathering places—from school assembly halls to parks, from plazas to promenades. To the extent that these spaces become unsafe, communities lose one of their major sources of reinforcement; recapturing them for community use is hence a major element of community regeneration.

Most important, drawing again on sociology, and particularly on what has been called the "consensus" rather then the "conflict") model, communitarians tend to maintain that if in addition to strong families and schools that build character, a society has communities, where social webs are intact and thats moral voice is clearly articulate, that society will be able to base its social order largely on moral commitments rather than the forces of the state. This is the case, communitarians argue, drawing on sociological assumptions and studies, because once moral commitments are internalized and reinforced they help shape people's preferences in favor of prosocial behavior—thus reducing the need for coercion by the state and diminishing the tension between liberty and social order.

Many discussions of community and of the moral infrastructure stop at this point, having explored the moral agency of family, school, and community. However, social and moral communities are not freestanding; they are often parts of more encompassing social entities. Moreover, communitarians note that unless communities are bound socially and morally into more encompassing entities, they may war with one another. Hence, the importance of *communities of communities*, the society.

Communitarians argue that one should not view society as composed of millions of individuals, but as pluralism within unity. They further maintain that subcultures and loyalties are not a threat to the integrity of society as long as a core of shared values and institutions (such as the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, the democratic way of life, and mutual tolerance) are respected.

Communitarians draw on the four elements of the moral infrastructure—families, schools, communities, and communities of communities—as a sort of a checklist to help determine the state of the moral infrastructure in a given society. They argue that the decline of the two-parent family (due to high divorce rates, growing legitimation of single-parent families, and psychological disinvestment of parents in children), the deterioration of schools (due to automatic promotions and deterioration of social order in schools), the decline of communities (due to modernization), and the decline of the community of communities (as a result of excessive emphasis on diversity without parallel concern over shared bonds) resulted in the decline of moral and social order in the American society during the 1970s and 1980s. This was evidenced by the sharp rise in violent crime, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and in the decline of voluntarism, among other factors. The fact that some of these trends slowed down and reversed in the 1990s is viewed in part by communitarians as a reflection of changes in social thinking and practices they helped champion.

Here lies a great difference between the communitarian position and that of various religious social conservatives. Both groups recognize the need to regenerate the moral infrastructure, but conservatives favor returning to traditional social formations while communitarians point to new ways of shoring up society's ethical framework. For instance, many social conservatives favor women "graciously submitting to their husbands" and returning to homemaking, while communitarians argue for peer marriage, a concept introduced by Pepper Schwartz. Peer marriage suggests equal rights and responsibilities for mothers and fathers, but favors marriages that last, as compared to the liberal argument that single-parent families or child care centers can socialize children as well if not better than two-parent families. (Among the sociologists who have struck aPage 360 | communitarian position in this matter are Linda Waite, Glen Elder, Alice Rossi, and David Popenoe).

The communitarian argument over the role of communities in maintaining social order is strongly supported by sociological research of the kind conducted by Robert Sampson on the role of communities in fighting crime and drug abuse. David Karp and Todd Clear have also studied community involvement in criminal justice, focusing on ideas of restorative justice and policies that are concerned more with reintegrating offenders into their communities than merely punishing them.

Other communitarian themes examined by sociologists include topics explored by Edward W. Lehman, especially his writing on macro-sociology; Martin Whyte's work on the family; and Richard Coughlin's comparison of communitarian thinking to socioeconomics.

CIVIL SOCIETY, THE THIRD WAY, AND THE GOOD SOCIETY

Much of the normative debate in the West, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, has focused on the merit of the free market (or capitalism) versus the role of the state in securing the citizens' well-being. Communitarians have basically leapfrogged this debate, focusing instead on the importance of the third element of social life, that of the civic society, which is neither state nor market. Communitarians have played a key role in the debate over the condition of civic society in the West, such as examining whether participation in voluntary associations, voting, and trust in institutions have declined, and to what effect. The work of Robert Bellah and his associates has been particularly influential here, demonstrating the rise of first expressive and then instrumental individualism, and their ill effects.

Communitarians have argued that rather than dumping people (often the most vulnerable members of society) into the marketplace as the welfare state is curtailed, civic society's various institutions can empower these individuals to help one another in attending to some of their social needs. Communal institutions (including places of worship) can shoulder important parts of care previously provided by state agencies, although the state will have to continue to shoulder an important part of the burden.

Communitarians stress that mutuality, rather than charity, is the basis for community-wide action that is not solely limited to helping one particular vulnerable group or another. The CPR training of some 400,000 Seattle citizens, who are thus able to help one another without public costs or private charges, is held up as a key case in point. Other examples include voluntary recycling programs, crime watch patrols, and above all the massive assistance given to immigrants by members of their own ethnic group. Communitarians have also pointed to the importance of a culture of civility in maintaining a society's ability to work out differences without excessive conflict.

Communitarians have argued that a civic society is good, but not good enough. Civic society tends to be morally neutral on many matters other than values concerning its own inherent virtue and the attributes citizens need to make them into effective members of a civic society, for instance, to be able to think critically. Thus, all voluntary associations, from the KKK to the Urban League, from militias to Hadassah, are considered to have the same basic standing. In contrast, a good society seeks to promote a core of substantive values, and thus views some social associations and activities as more virtuous than others. In the same vein, communitarians have stressed that while everyone's legal right to free speech should be respected, there is no denying that some speech—seen from the community's viewpoint—is morally sound while other speech is abhorrent. For instance, the (legal) right to speak does not make hate speech (morally) right. Communitarians would not seek to suppress hate speech by legal means, however, but they urge communities to draw on their moral voice to chastise those who speak in ways that are offensive.

CRITICS AND RESPONSES

Critics of responsive communitarianism argue that the concept of community is vague; indeed that the term "community" itself cannot be well defined. In response, *community* has been defined as a combination of two elements: a) A web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one or chainlike individual relationships)and b) A measure of commitment to a set of shared values,Page 361 | norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity to a particular culture.

Some critics also contend that the quest for community is anachronistic, that contemporary societies are urban and populations geographically highly mobile, and thus bereft of community. Communitarians respond that communities exist in contemporary societies in small towns, suburbs, campuses and within city neighborhoods, often based on ethnic ties in places such as Korea Town in Los Angeles, Little Italy in New York City, the Irish section of South Boston, and so on. Moreover, communitarians point out that communities need not be geographic, members can be spread among nonmembers. For instance, homosexual groups often constitute communities even if they are not all neighbors.

Critics maintain that communities are authoritarian and oppressive, and have charged communitarians with seeking "Salem without witches." Communitarians respond that communities vary regarding this assessment. Contemporary communities tend to be relatively freer, given the relative ease of intercommunity mobility as well as shifting loyalties and psychic investments among various groups of which the same person is a member.

Critics also maintain that communities are exclusionary, and hence bigoted. Communitarians respond that communities must respect the laws of the society in which they are situated, but do tend to thrive on a measure of homogeneity and on people's desire to be with others of their own kind. Moreover, given the human benefit of community membership, a measure of self-segregation should be tolerated.

Critics of responsive communitarianism claim that communitarians ignore matters of power and injustice as well as economic considerations, and are generally inclined to adopt a consensus rather than a conflict model. Communitarians agree that they ought to pay more attention to the effects of these factors on communities. However, they do envision the possibilities of conflict within communities, and responsive communitarians do propose that one should not treat conflict and community as mutually exclusive. Extending this idea to the treatment of diversity and multiculturalism, communitarians argue in favor of a society in which many differences can be celebrated as long as a set of commitments to the overarching society is upheld.

VALUES AND VIRTUES

While sociologists greatly altered and enriched communitarian thinking, communitarian thinking's main contribution to sociology is the challenge of facing issues raised by the moral standing of various values, and the related question of cross-cultural moral judgments. Sociologists tend to treat all values as conceptually equal; a sociologist may refer to racist Afrikaners' beliefs and to humanitarian beliefs using the same "neutral" term, calling both "values." Communitarians use the term virtue to denote that some values (or belief systems) have a higher standing than others because they are compatible with the good society, while other values are not (and hence aberrant).

In the same vein, communitarians do not shy away from passing cross-cultural moral judgments, rejecting cultural relativism's claim that all cultures have basically equal moral standing. Thus, they view female circumcision, sex slaves, and *hudud* (chopping off the right hand of thieves) as violations of liberty and individual rights, and abandoning children, violating implicit contracts built into communal mutuality, or neglecting the environment, as evidence of a lack of commitment to social order and neglect of social responsibilities.

IMPACT

So far this examination has focused on the place of communitarian thinking in academic, conceptual, theoretical, and imperial works. Responsive communitarians have also been playing a considerable public role, presenting themselves as the founders of a new kind of environmental movement, one dedicated to shoring up society (not the state) rather than nature. Like environmentalism, communitarianism appeals to audiences across the political spectrum, although it has found greater acceptance with some groups rather than others. British Prime Minister Tony Blair is reported to have adopted the communitarian platform, and German Social Democrat Rudolf Scharping has suggested that his party should meet the communitarians "half way." President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary Rodham Clinton (author of *It*Page 362 | Top of Article *Takes a Village*) have combined communitarian with welfare-liberal themes. Among conservatives, Jack Kemp, a group of Tory members of the British parliament (especially David Willet), and German governor Kurt Biedenkopf are often listed as influenced by communitarianism. While this is only a partial list, it serves to illustrate the scope of communitarianism's influence and its cross over traditional ideological lines.

Communitarian terms have become part of the public vocabulary in the 1990s, especially references to "assuming responsibilities to match rights," while "communitarianism" itself is used much less often. The number of articles about communitarian thinking in the popular press increased twelvefold during the last decade of the twentieth century. The increase in the number of books, articles, and Ph.D. dissertations in academia for the same period, has been about eightfold. Interestingly, taking communitarianism from academia to the "streets" in the early 1990s resulted in the middle and late 1990s into a significant increase in acasemic interest. In the process, bridges have been built between social philosophers, sociologists, and community members and leaders, although they still sometimes travel on parallel rather than convergent pathways.

An extensive bibliography of communitarian works is also listed on The Communitarian Network's website, http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps.

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