

Community Properly Understood: A Defense of “Democratic Communitarianism”

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The word “community” leads a double life. It makes most people feel good, associated as it is with warmth, friendship, and acceptance. But among academics the word arouses suspicion. Doesn’t community imply the abandonment of ethical universalism and the withdrawal into closed particularistic loyalties? Doesn’t it perhaps lead even to ethnic cleansing?

The word community is a good word and worthy of continued use if it is carefully defined. My fellow authors and I attempted such a definition in *Habits of the Heart*, but it was often ignored. The primary problem is that the word is frequently used to mean small-scale, face-to-face groups like the family, the congregation, and the small town—what the Germans call *Gemeinschaft*. There is a long tradition of extolling this kind of community in America. But when that is all that community means, it is basically sentimental and, in the strict sense of the word, nostalgic. And nostalgia, as Christopher Lasch wrote, is merely a psychological placebo that allows one to accept regrettfully but uncritically whatever is currently being served up in the name of progress. It inhibits, rather than serves, serious social criticism.

Thus if the term community is to be useful, it must mean something more. Those philosophical liberals who tend to reject the term community altogether see society as based on a social contract establishing procedures of fairness, but otherwise leaving individuals free to serve their own interests. They argue that under modern conditions, if we think of community as based on shared values and shared goals, community can exist only in small groups and is not possible or desirable in large-scale societies or institutions.

A deeper analysis, however, reveals that it is possible to see this supposed contrast of contract versus community as a continuum, or

even as a necessary complementarity, rather than as an either/or proposition. Surely procedural norms of fairness are necessary in large-scale social institutions; but any group of any size, if it has a significant breadth of involvement and lasts a significant length of time, must have some shared values and goals. Consequently societies and institutions can never be based solely on contract, striving to maximize the opportunities of individuals. They must also, to some extent, be communities with shared values and goals.

But this reformulation leads to a further problem. Those who think of community as a form of *Gemeinschaft*, as well as their liberal critics, tend to think consensus about values and goals must be complete or nearly complete. Is such complete consensus realistic, or even desirable, in modern societies?

The answer, of course, is no. Yet this lack of unanimity need not create problems for supporters of community. While community-shared values and goals do imply something more than procedural agreement—they do imply some agreements about substance—they do not require anything like total or unarguable agreement. A good community is one in which there is argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life. Community is not about silent consensus; it is a form of intelligent, reflective life, in which there is indeed consensus, but where the consensus can be challenged and changed—often gradually, sometimes radically—over time.

Thus we are led to the question of what makes any kind of group a community and not just a contractual association. The answer lies in a shared concern with the following question: “What will make this group a *good* group?” Any institution, such as a university, a city, or a society, insofar as it is or seeks to be a community, needs to ask what is a good university, city, society, and so forth. So far as it reaches agreement about the good it is supposed to realize (and that will always be contested and open to further debate), it becomes a community with some common values and some common goals. (“Goals” are particularly important, as the effort to define a good community also entails the goal of trying to create a good one—or, more modestly and realistically, a better one than the current one.)

THE INDIVIDUAL RECONSIDERED

Even given the claim that community does not require complete consensus, some people view with skepticism any effort to reach some common agreement about the good. Such a view is rooted in our culture's adherence to "ontological individualism"—the belief that the truth of our condition is not in our society or in our relation to others, but in our isolated and inviolable selves. It is this belief that tempts us to imagine that it is opportunity that will solve all our problems—if we could just provide individuals the opportunity to realize themselves, then everything else would take care of itself. If we focus on individual opportunity then we don't need to worry about substantive agreement or the common good, much less force any such notion on others. Each individual can concentrate on whatever good he or she chooses to pursue.

In seeking to solve our problems through individual opportunity we have come up with two master strategies. We will provide opportunity through the market or through the state. The great ideological wars of our current politics focus on whether the most effective provider of opportunity is the market or the state. On this issue we imagine a radical polarity between conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat. What we often do not see is that this is a very tame polarity, because the opponents agree so deeply on most of the terms of the problem. Both solutions are individualistic. Whatever their opponents say, those who support a strong government seldom believe in government as such. They simply see it as the most effective provider of those opportunities that will allow individuals to have a fair chance at making something of themselves. Those who believe in the market think free competition is the best context for individual self-realization. Both positions are essentially technocratic. They do not imply much about substantive values, other than freedom and opportunity. They would solve our problems through economic or political mechanisms, not moral solidarity.

And yet the world of these ideological opponents, composed as it is of autonomous individuals, markets, and states, is not the world that anyone lives in—not even the free enterprise or welfare liberal ideologists. This ideological world is a world without families. It is also a world without neighborhoods, ethnic communities, churches,

cities and towns, even nations (as opposed to states). It is, to use the terminology of the German sociologist-philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a world of individuals and systems (economic and administrative), but not a lifeworld. The lifeworld missing in these conservative and liberal ideologies is the place where we communicate with others, deliberate, come to agreements about standards and norms, pursue in common an effort to create a valuable form of life—in short, the lifeworld is the world of community.

DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITARIANISM

I want to sketch a framework that escapes the ideological blinders of current American politics and highlights what is missing in much of our debate. As opposed to free market conservatism and welfare state liberalism, I want to describe another approach to our common problems which I will call—borrowing from Jonathan Boswell in *Community and the Economy: The Theory of Public Co-operation*—democratic communitarianism. Democratic communitarianism does not pit itself against the two reigning ideologies as a third way. It accepts the value and inevitability of both the market and the state, but it insists that the function of the market and the state is to serve us, not to dominate us. Democratic communitarianism seeks to provide a humane context within which to think about the market and the state. Its first principle is the one already enunciated in what I have said about community: it seeks to define and further the good which is the community's purpose. I want to offer four values to which democratic communitarianism is committed and which give its notion of the good somewhat more specificity:

1. Democratic communitarianism is based on the value of the sacredness of the individual, which is common to most of the great religions and philosophies of the world. (It is expressed in biblical religion through the idea that we are created in the image and likeness of God.) Anything that would oppress individuals, or operate to stunt individual development, would be contrary to the principles of democratic communitarianism. However, unlike its ideological rivals, democratic communitarianism does not think of individuals as existing in a vacuum or as existing in a world composed only of markets and states. Rather, it believes that individuals are realized

only in and through communities, and that strong, healthy, morally vigorous communities are the prerequisite for strong, healthy, morally vigorous individuals.

2. Democratic communitarianism, therefore, affirms the central value of solidarity. Solidarity points to the fact that we become who we are through our relationships—that reciprocity, loyalty, and shared commitment to the good are defining features of a fully human life.

3. Democratic communitarianism believes in what Boswell has called “complementary association.” By this he means a commitment to “varied social groupings: the family, the local community, the cultural or religious group, the economic enterprise, the trade union or profession, the nation-state.” Through this principle it is clear that community does not mean small-scale, all-inclusive, total groups. In our kind of society an individual will belong to many communities and ultimately the world itself can be seen as a community. Democratic communitarianism views such a multiplicity of belonging as a positive good, as potentially and in principle complementary.

4. Finally, democratic communitarianism is committed to the idea of participation as both a right and a duty. Communities become positive goods only when they provide the opportunity and support to participate in them. A corollary of this principle is the principle of subsidiarity, derived from Catholic social teaching. This idea asserts that the groups closest to a problem should attend to it, receiving support from higher level groups only if necessary. To be clear, democratic communitarianism does not adhere to Patrick Buchanan’s interpretation of subsidiarity, which projects a society virtually without a state. A more legitimate understanding of subsidiarity realizes the inevitability and necessity of the state. It has the responsibility of nurturing lower-level associations wherever they are weak, as they normally are among the poor and the marginalized. Applying this perspective to current events, at a moment when powerful political forces in the United States are attempting to dismantle a weak welfare state, democratic communitarians will defend vigorous and responsible state action.

Nothing in this argument is meant to imply that face-to-face community is not a good thing. It is, and in our society it needs to be

strengthened. But the argument for democratic community—rooted in the search for the common good—applies to groups of any size, and ultimately to the world as a community. It is a political argument grounded on the belief that a politics based on the summing of individual preferences is inadequate and misleading. Democratic communitarianism presumes that morality and politics cannot be separated and that moral argument, painful and difficult though it sometimes is, is fundamental to a defensible stance in today's world.

The Civilized World

In 1881, a Brule Sioux chief, Spotted Tail, was killed by Crow Dog, a member of his tribe. The tribe, following Brule law, sent peacemakers to the families of both the victim and the killer. The goal accomplished by these peacemakers was the restoration of tribal harmony by securing from Crow Dog's family an expression of regret and an offer to pay Spotted Tail's family for the wrong done to them. The U.S. Supreme Court, maintaining that the United States lacked jurisdiction over "the murder of one Indian by another in Indian Country," expressed some dismay that they felt obliged to defer to "the strongest prejudices of savage nature" and to "the red man's revenge," instead of upholding the punishment that the federal court had thought appropriate for Crow Dog: execution.