AUTONOMY VS. SOLIDARITY: LIBERAL, TOTALITARIAN AND COMMUNITARIAN TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how liberal, totalitarian, and communitarian traditions attempt to balance individual autonomy with communal solidarity. Modernity has been a great liberator, freeing individuals from restrictions of tradition, clan, and place. Liberalism celebrates this freedom in market, politics, and society. But the result, according to critics, is a society of unencumbered individuals who have lost the language of cooperation and community. The totalitarian response to the failings of liberalism is to subsume the individual within the total state. Individual autonomy is suppressed so that the true social self can be discovered in solidarity with the state that is the truth-bearer of culture and historical destiny. The communitarian response is to preserve the advantages of liberalism with its emphasis on human rights, universal tolerance, and free association, while attempting to revive a type of communal solidarity that is similar yet different from that found in traditional societies and totalitarian regimes. But the similarity of communitarian and totalitarian responses is problematic, as is the communitarian emphasis on romantic localism and its tendency to leave serious questions of economic power unexamined.

PREFACE

The purpose of this Symposium is to consider how political and institutional arrangements affect civic capacity and the potential for democratic governance. The preceding two articles by Johnson and Kass examine this question as it relates to the discourse on social capital.

Kass, in particular, identifies two normative deep structures that impact the designation of what he terms "social and political arrangements" as social capital. One of these structures is called the "communal theme" and is heavily influenced by the communitarian movement and its thought. This paper will explore communitarianism more fully and examine the basic normative assumptions and views it brings to the designation of institutions, networks and processes both as social capital and elements which support a community’s capacity to engage in democratic governance.

As will be seen, communitarianism brings to the normative evaluation of social capital and community capacity a critique of liberal autonomy and a concern for social embeddedness, but the communitarian discourse offers more. As both a social movement and an evolving political philosophy, its adherents probe the central tensions of the liberal legacy and attempt to design an institutional response that balances liberal gains in tolerance and basic rights with the need for social solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

Modernity, Giddens (1990) reminds us, has consequences and the Enlightenment its dark side. While we have freed ourselves from capricious sovereigns and feudal superstitions, unlocked our capacity to create worlds of our own choosing, and endowed ourselves with inalienable rights, the very success of our liberation has set us adrift. We find ourselves alone and alienated, cut loose from the certainties of place, tradition, and communal solidarity.

The dilemma of accommodating both our desire for autonomy and our need for community has produced a series of revolutionary political experiments that have sanctioned one or the other of these tendencies. While liberal regimes have given free reign to individual autonomy—totalitarian regimes have institutionalized various forms of egalitarian solidarity. But it seems we have yet to find a good fit. In our assessment of experi-
ments, we are confronted either with the authoritarian excesses of strong states or the corrosive individualism of weak ones.

Currently we are engaged in a discussion of a new solution, communitarianism, which suggests that the reconciliation of the tensions of modernity can be found in a reinvigorated civil society, that political commons located between the state and private domains that has been eroded by both liberal and statist regimes. Central to the communitarian thesis is an enlarged concept of citizenship, a strong democracy, that will be learned in families and voluntary associations where people engage in communal problem solving, broaden their networks of affiliation, and develop universal norms of reciprocity through repeated interaction.

But the question is open as to whether this or any other institutional design can resolve the dilemma of modernity. Consequently, the direction I will take in this essay is to examine and critique the communitarian solution, not by itself, but by considering it in the context of the strengths and weakness of other historical political settlements.

TENSIONS OF MODERNITY

The tensions of modernity are familiar but worth recounting. The upside has been the liberation of the individual from the narrowness of locality, suffocating tradition, obligatory rituals, and divisive tribalism. Self-aware and self-acting, modern individuals own themselves, speak for themselves, select their sovereigns, choose their associates, and increasingly self-create the communities they inhabit. Moderns are goal directed and self-reliant. They suspend immediate wants for future returns. They anticipate, plan and calculate the return for effort in both personal and public matters. Moderns exercise choice in their relationships. They develop careers and lead lives that reflect preferences for style, place, affiliation, and belief. Moderns are tolerant. They manage interdependencies so as to minimize interference with the rights and lifestyles of others. Moderns are critical yet optimistic. They accept nothing as given and everything as possible. Free of social responsibility and convention—mobile, opportunistic, and energetic—moderns have parlayed their freedom of association into a self-regulating system of production and exchange that satisfies both wants and curiosities (Taylor, 1989).

The downside of this awesome independence is the isolation and anxiety it produces. Lost to moderns are the manifest answers to existential questions provided by embeddedness with kin, culture, and place. Lost are pre-modern certainties of everyday rituals and known obligations. Lost is the intrinsic value of work, the sacredness of object and place, the natural rhythms of day and season. Lost also is the intimacy and trust generated from repeated face-to-face interactions in a society in which relationships are dense and multi-stranded (Tonnies, [1888] 1957). In their place are the modern indignities of surface friendliness and the constructed confidence in expert systems that are required to function in a world of strangers where instrumental relationships and black box technologies are the norm (Giddens, 1990).

Moderns have become victims of their own creativity and energetic opportunism. They find themselves in a world continually under construction, following misleading signs and impossible directions. Faced with unlimited possibilities, moderns become obsessed with the minutia of choice. Seduced by success, moderns experience an enlargement of their acquisitive instincts and a diminution of social capacities. Drift in a world of impermanent relationships and serial affiliations, bereft of authority, authenticity, trust and groundedness, moderns experience a sense of normlessness, a hollowing out of the soul (Nisbet, 1966). The irritation of their condition impels moderns to search for what Heidegger calls "the homeplace", that core of deep security and rootedness (Schutz, 1967). This quest for "givenness", both personal and institutional, in tension with their desire to retain autonomy, is at the core of the political experiments that have been ongoing since the Enlightenment.

LIBERALISM

Liberalism is perhaps the first uniquely modern political solution. Central to liberal philosophy is a thorough rejection of absolutist power, be it feudal sovereign, or contemporary state. Included in this sweeping rejection is a resistance to other sources of social and political power such as that of church authority, bureaucratic hierarchy, and even direct populist majoritarianism. Liberals argue that society exists to serve the individual, that individual claims take precedence over social claims, and that individuals have a right to seek their own gratification and happiness (Young, 1996). At the extreme, liberals thoroughly engage the possibilities of individual autonomy, are dismissive of the possibility of equality, and largely
ignore the claim that excessive individualism erodes communal life (Spragens, 1998).

Liberals do not pursue social arrangements for the sake of intrinsically valuable solidarity but rather as a means to manage inevitable interdependencies. Political solutions are designed to protect individuals from interference from the state, from organized interests, and from others. This is accomplished by magnifying the entitlements of property (including one’s person, papers, real property and ideas) and minimizing the ability of authorities and others to limit an individual’s right to pursue their unique vision of the good life. Included in this minimalist solution is a rejection of the right of the state or any group to impose a single vision of the common good on others (Young, 1996).

Integral to the liberal political solution is the encouragement of non-state institutions, markets and voluntary associations, as mechanisms for the provision of goods and services and platforms for generating solutions to public problems. These two institutions are seen as the great liberators and educators for social intercourse. Markets, supported by state guarantees of property and contract, allow individuals to enter into a self-interested exchange where the wants and needs of one are satisfied by the skills and resources of another. Although each party to the exchange seeks to maximize their relative advantage, the overall process creates a valuable social resource (the market) which, through its pricing mechanism, ensures a self-regulating equilibrium that maximizes the flow of good and services. Similarly, the liberal state allows great latitude to voluntary associations to solve the more complex and ambiguous problems of managing the commons (Hearn, 1997). While individuals will often engage in these efforts out of self-interest, in the words of de Tocqueville it is “self-interest rightly understood,” a type of generalized reciprocity that seeks personal return in the increase in the commonweal (de Tocqueville, p. 121, 1966).

The great divide in liberalism is between libertarian and welfare liberal approaches. Libertarians are uncompromising in their support of individual autonomy and unfettered markets. In the most current variant, public choice economics, libertarians extend the market model to nearly every aspect of public life. Competing political interests vie for dominance in the marketplace of ideas; people choose their level of services and taxes from a supermarket of districts and policy proposals. In this libertarian economist model, government is simply another service provider and an inefficient one at that (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). The possibility of pro-active public consensus is rejected as the imposition of false majoritarianism. The notion of citizenship, with its resonances of civic engagement, social responsibility, and selfless contribution to a greater good is radically diminished if not eliminated entirely. Even positive public activities such as voting are removed from the realm of public duty, relegated to a rational calculus of personal costs and benefits, or exercised in the negative to send a market-style signal to aggrandizing political leaders (Riker, 1982).

Welfare liberals, while accepting the basic premises of liberalism—self determination, civil rights, protection of property and markets—are more cognizant of the problems presented by non-interventionist politics and the ability of unrestrained markets to affect the life chances of those less privileged. Building on their progressive legacy and the experience of the Great Depression, welfare liberals are more willing to permit the imposition of state machinery to mitigate market imperfections such as monopoly pricing, consumer fraud, corrupt business practices, workplace safety, and externalities such as environmental degradation. Welfare liberals are also willing to exert state intervention to level the playing field so that those who are less privileged have an equal opportunity to achieve self-determination (Hearn, 1997). This takes the form of ensuring due process and equal treatment under the law, guaranteeing civil rights of workers and groups outside the mainstream, and requiring broad citizen participation in policy decision and review. This may also mean the creation of a state support role in terms of jobs, education, housing, healthcare, daycare, food, and cash where the market provision has been inadequate.

**TOTALITARIANISM**

Totalitarian regimes represent the second wave of modern political institutions. They have historically arisen from the crises of liberal states especially in periods of disillusionment following wars or severe economic depression. While liberal regimes embody the triumph of individual rights over sovereign authority and the diffusion of state power to markets and associations of civil society, totalitarian regimes embody an egalitarian solidarity that submerges the individual in a total state and centralizes power in the hands of a revolutionary elite (Gregor, 1969). Totalitarianism promotes the ideal of a mythic nation reborn from the ashes of what is considered a decadent culture and demoralized state.
The regeneration of the nation takes place through the historic struggle for organic national community whose cultural and political presence transcends and transforms individual lives (Mussolini, [1933] 1995).

Totalitarian ideals stand in stark contrast to those of liberalism. In the liberal state the individual possesses rights and freedoms that are natural and exist prior to the state. Totalitarian ideology grants no such natural rights to individuals, rather they are understood to be essentially social beings whose freedom and fulfillment is derived from their association with others in an organic national community. This national community includes its complex culture, language, and rule systems that give continuity and identity to human actions. Since an individual cannot be understood outside of this particular community, freedom for the individual resides in choosing actions that bring them in conformity with its will. Self-fulfillment comes not from some egocentric standing apart from society but from total immersion with the will of the people and the state as the authentic expression of the mythical unity of values and consciousness (Gregor, 1969).

Concepts of human nature also diverge. Liberalism emphasizes human rationality, the capacity for independent moral judgement and self-perfection. Totalitarianism is less optimistic about human nature, describing individuals as driven by passions and petty concerns, unlikely to know their own will, and inherently reluctant to serve the community (Gregor, 1969).

Political solutions and institutional designs flow directly from these divergent views of human nature. Liberal institutions encourage rational deliberative decision-making and express optimism and trust in solutions so derived. Liberal institutions embody the values of participation, rationality, balance, and orderly process. There is an implicit disdain for passion, ceremony, ritual and the sacralization of state functions.

Totalitarianism disdains deliberation and celebrates direct action. Control of totalitarian institutions resides in an elite revolutionary vanguard and is embodied in a charismatic leader who intuits the real will of the people and acts decisively on their behalf. Given the limited understanding assumed of ordinary individuals, the totalitarian state plays a tutelary role, celebrating the emotive, using ritual derived from a romanticized past to evoke elemental myths. These myths encourage a type of civil religion that demands devotion and sacrifice and stirs the people to action (Griffin, 1995).

Legitimation in a liberal state derives from majoritarian rule, protection of individual and minority rights, full participation in the decision process, and an acceptance of the rule of law. Legitimation in a totalitarian state derives from the consensus of the people. This consensus is best reached through persuasion, the use of propaganda, and if necessary coercion. The appropriateness of these techniques is derived from the need for a total unity of will (Gregor, 1969). The necessity of the absorption of the individual into the will of the state may also lead to the use of terror in order to close any political space or even personal mental space for resistance. This is the logic of extensive state security, re-education camps, concentration camps, and the gulag (Arendt, 1966).

While liberalism celebrates a weak state and the expression of pluralist difference in a vibrant market and civil society, the totalitarian state suppresses pluralism in civil society and favors state or private corporatism in the market sector. The totalitarian position is that contentious interests lead to a diffusion of purpose and a weakening of moral unity. The strong state must stand in the way of this disastrous fragmentation of religion, class, ethnicity and group (Harris, 1966). The totalitarian state encourages an egalitarian solidarity through regimentation, such as the black shirts of the Fascists and the Mao suits of the Red Guard, redistributive policies such as those that make housing and health services uniformly accessible, and through the elevation of national and/or racial identity.

Liberalism seeks to limit the energy of the state by diffusing power broadly within the political structure and outside to the market and civil society. Liberalism exhibits a deep mistrust of charismatic leadership and aggrandizement of power. Totalitarianism celebrates power and will to action. Charismatic leadership is seen as a beneficial and powerful tool for embodying the unity of purpose and collective consciousness of the nation. The emotive and persuasive power of the charismatic leader is essential to the energy and survival of the state (Gleason, 1995).

In brief, the totalitarian state is a total state. Individuals are free only when they act within the norms of the rule and culture of the organic national community. The wills of the national community, the state, party and individual are substitution instances for one another.
This will is embodied in the cultic leader. The working out of the mythic destiny of the nation will liberate individuals and push society forward. As society increases in complexity so will humanity and freedom increase. But individuals cannot advance without society because their destiny can only be known insofar as they participate in the particular historical destiny of nation, race, and culture. None will go forward alone, all must advance together in solidarity of will and action.

COMMUNITARIANISM

The communitarian movement seeks to resolve the central tension of modernity by preserving the advantages of liberalism with its emphasis on human rights, universal tolerance, and free association, while attempting to revive a type of communal solidarity that is similar yet different from that found in traditional societies and totalitarian regimes. Rather than a middle way, it is better described as an alternative way that hopes to save liberalism from its excesses and respect tradition and solidarity without accepting unquestioned authority. Communitarians are attempting to construct a society of virtuous persons, who are ambitiously civic but not rigidly patriotic, who respect tradition but are not bound to its parochialism, who grow expansive communities rather than identity enclaves, and who responsibly assert common sense moral claims that avoid the ethical cul de sacs of liberal relativism and totalitarian absolutism (Etzioni, 1998b).

Communitarianism and Liberalism

The communitarian critique borrows from an ancient discourse concerning the origins of virtue through a shared understanding of the common good and through continuous engagement in civic life. Because liberalism does not lend itself to agreement about what is good, communitarians argue that the concept of virtue has been demoted from contemporary moral discourse (Hollenbach, 1995). In the declining levels of civic engagement in liberal states, communitarians find both a cause and effect of the loss of virtue in public and private life. Communitarians recite a litany of contemporary deficits: declining levels of electoral participation, a decreased sense of trust in government, the reduction of public discourse to acrimonious polarities, and generally negative trends in attitudes and conduct which reflect moral conditions (Renewal, 1998). Communitarians point most critically to the demise of institutions of civil society where character and civic virtue are first learned. These are the institutions of local life such as family, church, school, and neighborhood where persons are grounded in relational networks, learn norms of acceptable behavior through repeated interaction, and develop attachments through ritual and habituation (Putnam, 1995).

Communitarians identify two forces of liberal states, one centered in its political structure and the other in the market, that have drained energy from a concern for the commons and from engagement in civic life. Welfare state liberalism is criticized for replacing a spirit of self-reliance and community-based initiative with dependent clientelism and deference to expert knowledge (McKnight, 1984). The welfare state is blamed for overstimulating rights claims and entitlements with the result that adversarialism has replaced negotiation and consensus (Glendon, 1991). The growth of the liberal state is charged with creating a plethora of special interests so what was once a civil process of partisan mutual adjustment has degenerated into a cacophony of special pleading in which the loudest voices are those of the privileged (Lowi, 1969). And as the liberal state becomes mired in managing conflicting claims, its ability to ensure order or provide services based on consensus values is diminished. The result is a bitter and distrustful citizenry, filled with unrealistic expectations, separated by unreconcilable demands, and devoid of any hope of finding common ground (Landy, 1993).

The market is criticized for encouraging a brand of buccaneer individualism that saps the public weal. Amazingly seductive, the market absorbs creative energies, enhancing acquisitive instincts while diminishing interest in civic endeavors and a sense of responsibility for the commons (Hearll, 1997). Relationships become instrumental and commodified; the cash nexus diminishes intrinsic rewards. As the market mentality colonizes social interaction, craft production becomes mass production for wage labor; and even education, health, and other "caring" professions become corporate profit centers. New technological efficiencies centralize control functions, displacing what is unique, local and personal (Marcuse, 1964). Industries consolidate, communities whither, families fail, people disengage (Leroux & Grossman, 1996). Commodification corrupts all forms of intimacy, charity, and even resistance, profaning what is sacred through humor and satire, transforming seeming acts of community concern into opportunities for self-aggrandizement, and coopting the artifacts of rebellion into chic advertising campaigns.

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Frank & Weiland, 1997). The parasitic market succeeds by externalizing its physical costs to the natural environment and its social costs to residual institutions of kin, community, and culture. It offers only grudging recognition of its corrosive effects on the physical environment and the social infrastructure of civility and trust on which it depends (Daly & Cobb Jr, 1994).

To counteract the demoralizing effects of excessive liberalism and to stand between the centralizing tendencies of the welfare state on the left and global corporatism on the right, communitarians call for a new citizenship rooted in community and commonsense values. Communitarian thinking revises liberal dogma in most of its particulars, seeking a balance of individual rights and social claims. Where liberal theory contends that individuals exist prior to society, communitarians argue that individuals do not exist in isolation but are members of communities that have distinct histories, cultures, and values. Where liberal theory insists that individual rights trump social claims, communitarians contend that individual rights should be balanced with social responsibilities. Where liberal theory releases individuals to creatively seek their own gratification and enlightenment, communitarian thinking suggests that intense pursuit of self-gratification will produce only ersatz satisfaction and will pull persons away from common concerns and drive wedges of separation between them (Etzioni, 1998a).

Because communitarian theory attempts to balance rights with responsibilities, it finds expression in those areas where individual rights conflict with community values or where the liberties asserted by one individual affects the liberties of others. For example, where liberals may insist on noninterference in the disposition of one's property, communitarians would argue for the need to consider the impact of that activity on the community. For communitarians this may mean that industries that transfer jobs may owe communities compensatory damages or it may suggest some form of community ownership of economic enterprise (Spragens, 1998). In the area of free speech where liberals may insist on universal tolerance inclusive of hate speech, communitarians would insist that accusatory or demeaning speech has a chilling effect on the ability of others to exercise their rights (Abramson & Bussiere, 1995).

Communitarians criticize the liberal state for becoming progressively less able to assert reasonable moral claims and for becoming defenseless against the egregious assertion of individual rights in the public realm. Rather than concede the public realm to disruptive individuals or groups and retreat to the security of private enclaves, communitarians are willing to reassert commonsense community control. This may mean, for example, that repeatedly disruptive students are banned from public schools, that aggressive panhandling is not permitted on public streets, or that communities have a right to know when predatory offenders are released among them (Siegel, 1998). It may also mean that community libraries are encouraged to resist the claims of small minorities that certain materials be banned when these materials are generally acceptable to the community. Communitarians are cognizant of the dangers and difficulties of asserting these community claims, but, they insist that the rights of the community to set appropriate standards must balance the rights of individuals to deviate from them. Unlike liberals, they also understand that the failure to assert these commonsense moral claims will demoralize ordinary citizens, dissuade them from contributing to civic life, and reinforce the already strong tendency to seek private and exclusive solutions for public problems.

Asserting the need to balance community and individual rights has the potential to limit the voice of the diverse or marginalized populations. Consequently, it requires a more demanding type of citizen discussion, one that does not encourage partisan groups to dominate an adversarial decision process but advocates for inclusion of all voices in a process of discernment and consensus building. Communitarians creatively seek strategies that bring people together and provide them with social tools necessary for advancing commonly developed agendas (Taylor, 1995). They encourage efforts such as issue forums, civic education, and civic journalism that will help citizens understand complex issues and work toward consensus solutions. Because it is one of the cornerstones of civic education, communitarians strongly support public education and especially recognize the need for students to understand the governance process, learn the skills of deliberation, and practice citizenship roles and responsibilities (Barber, 1998).

In seeking to foster virtue in public life, communitarians see value in reviving a form of civil religion. They encourage the renewed interest in patriotic observances, democratic monuments, and the founding documents that record our national narrative and tell us
what we ought to value as a nation. They encourage greater understanding of our mythic leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, who raised our consciousness with patriotic and prophetic language as they engaged in the struggle to realize our democratic promise. Communitarians criticize liberal reluctance to support emotive expressions of national solidarity and recognize the need of citizens for common symbols and civic heroes (Frohnen, 1996).

Communitarians are dissatisfied with a liberal institutional framework, which expects little of its citizens other than paying taxes and casting a watchful eye over public abuses. Communitarians insist that such a limited and privatistic view has produced a nation of civic free riders who are paradoxically undermining the political structure that guarantees the liberties they cherish (Etzioni, 1998a). Communitarians stress the need for an engaged citizenry actively working to overcome a complacent reliance on bureaucratic service and professional politics. Communitarians encourage voluntary forms of co-production such as community stewardship efforts to restore public spaces or efforts such as food banks, day care, and outreach services provided by religious communities but supported by public funds (Boye & Kari, 1996).

Central to the communitarian agenda is a revival of civil society. Civil society is that realm of largely voluntary associative activities that are neither public nor private. Civil society is found in families, neighborhoods, schools, faith communities, political parties, social and mutual support groups, and workplace and professional organizations. Together these constitute communities of memory that anchor persons in particular histories and cultural traditions. Communities of memory are important because they are the training grounds for character and civic virtue. Unlike one-dimensional contractual exchange, interaction in situated local activities is multidimensional, information rich, and morally thick. The situated exchange is a carrier for shared knowledge and a vehicle for developing attachments through success in cooperation. Participants in the exchange provide bridges to larger relational networks, and through repeated interaction, they learn mental repertoires for responsible behavior which are tested in concrete face-to-face situations (Wuthnow, 1998).

Communities of memory are repositories of alternative values and sources of social creativity. While they may emphasize values that are divisive, they also emphasize the transformative, sacred and unique. Attachment to communities of memory acts as a "shield against the atomizing effects of the market and the totalizing effects of a central government" (Wuthnow, p. 210, 1995). In the commercial realm, moral repertoires learned in situated communities provide a language of resistance to the pervasive commercial persuasions and lures of personal gratification. In the political realm, evaluation repertoires learned from the strong assessment of face to face exchange, help citizens more accurately process information about candidates and issues. Those without these embedded repertoires will be more susceptible to character assassination, negative campaigning, and innuendo; all forms of weak assessment that are subject to manipulation, posturing, and appeals to intolerance and fear (Popkin & Dimock, 1995).

Communitarianism and Totalitarianism

While communitarians describe their work as a movement to reform liberalism (Selznick, 1998), their attempt to articulate a communal basis of moral behavior suggests some similarities with totalitarian traditions. The communitarian movement shares with totalitarianism a sense of the crisis of the liberal state. Both cite evidence of a demoralized and disengaged citizenry and both decry the permissiveness and immorality of the liberal state. Like totalitarian theorists, communitarians recognize that individuals do not stand apart from society but are grounded in a particular historical and cultural community. They both agree that individual perceptions are formed by attachments to these communities and that this social construction of reality shapes moral behavior. Both totalitarian and communitarian traditions see difficulties in the divisiveness of partisan interests and the need for unity based on egalitarian solidarity. Both political movements depend on building consensus, a common sense of the will of the people, for political legitimacy and consider majoritarian decision making to be divisive and adversarial. Totalitarians and communitarians agree on the tutelary role of the state to guide and shape civic attachments and the need for what might be called a civil religion: visible symbols, celebrations, and mythic stories of national leaders who have interpreted and renewed the national political experiment.

Beneath these apparent similarities, however, are essential differences. While both totalitarian and communitarian movements are grounded in a critique of liberalism, they appear at different historical moments
and propose different political solutions. Totalitarian movements are attempts to establish national unity at a time when national states are weak and divided. The communitarian movement arrives at the climax of the nation state when globalism is undercutting its legitimacy and localism is resurgent. In terms of solutions, totalitarian movements are intent on abolishing the weak liberal state, coopting or destroying the institutions of civil society, and establishing a strong central state. Communitarians, on the other hand, seek to preserve and reform the liberal state. They seek a reinvigorated civil society at the grassroots, grounded in communities of memory that will form a bulwark of sturdy citizens to support a legitimate and energized state.

Communitarian and totalitarian theorists agree that persons are grounded in a particular historical community. For totalitarians this requires the elevation of the historic national community above the individual and suggests that individual freedom be discovered in the working out of the national destiny. National identity is established in opposition to otherness. It leads to exclusion of outsiders, a rejection of difference, and submission of individuals to the total state. Communitarian thinkers struggle with the notion of historical rootedness. They recognize the potential for local tyranny but also understand that particular communities, ones close to the hearts and minds of individuals, are the dominant source of shared moral and social values. Communitarians suggest that this tension can be resolved by trusting that an enlightened reading of the communal ethic will provide an entree into a shared sense of human dignity—a universal outlook that transcends particularism. The communitarian approach allows wide latitude for local over national communities but also recognizes that traditional practices are not sacrosanct and that a test for their validity is the degree to which they represent a truly deliberative, rather than coercive, process, and share in universal human values (Etzioni, 1998a).

Both communitarian and totalitarian theorists agree that reality is a social construct of our cultural and historically situated experience. For totalitarians this means that all forms of knowledge, even science, should be put to the service of the state because the state is the repository of the revealed truth of national identity. Communitarians reject the notion of a single revealed truth, but recognize that granting legitimacy to multiple interpretations of the good has the potential to create divisive nihilism. While they honor the liberal decision to maintain neutrality among these interpretations, they also assert the necessity of finding common ground. They suggest that this will require self-restraint among claimants and the building of consensus solutions based on universal rather than particular values.

Communitarian and totalitarian thinking is in accord on the importance of consensus for legitimacy. Totalitarian regimes seek consensus through adroit persuasion or coerced adherence to a single notion of the right as it is revealed to its vanguard elite and cultic leader. Communitarians seek unity from a sense of engagement and participation in an enlarged public discourse. They respect diverse voices and encourage consensus building rather than majoritarian winner-take-all decision making as a way to reach a closure. Because the consensus process respects difference and seeks unity rather than compromise, it unites a community in action rather than encouraging continued position maintenance (Kaner, 1996).

There is apparent agreement in both traditions on the tutelary role of the state and the need for a civil religion. Totalitarian leaders are particularly adept at manipulating myth, ceremony and ritual to generate unquestioning obedience to the cultic leader and support of unity in purpose and call to sacrifice. Communitarians are cognizant of the problems of emotive appeals but recognize the human need for the embodiment of values in myth and hero. In promoting interest in national historical legacy, communitarians reject a single narrative of a triumphal past; instead they seek better understanding of how diverse cultural, social, and ethnic histories contribute to the common effort to redefine our nation and ourselves (Frohen, 1996).

COMMENTS

In this essay, I have argued that the primary tension of modernity, autonomy versus solidarity, has produced two uniquely modern political solutions, liberalism and totalitarianism. In establishing the polarities of liberal and totalitarian theory and by positioning communitarian theory between the two, I have been able to examine the extent that it shares, synthesizes, and is distinct from liberal and totalitarian traditions.

The evidence supporting a common lineage of liberal and communitarian thinking is compelling. Communitarianism is what it claims to be, a reformist movement intent on saving liberalism from the danger of excessive autonomy and privatism, the destruction
nihilism of moral relativism, and the disenchantment of citizens who have lost the language of community and consensus. But communitarian arguments for communal solidarity have a disturbing ring. Because the distinctions between totalitarian and communitarian thinking are sometimes subtle and often abstract, communitarians must be vigilant that proto-totalitarian groups do not seize their claim to the moral high ground. Only slight shifts in emphasis can change arguments for the national state into arguments for the global state, and preserving community values can easily become an argument for exclusion and intolerance.

Communitarian theory has much to recommend it. It is sophisticated enough to provide an intellectual home for those who feel that welfare liberalism has run its course but who cannot envision living in the rigid world of conservatives or the calculating world of libertarians. But its limits are also apparent. To provide a more compelling alternative to the other liberalism and to contemporary totalitarian tendencies, I would argue that the communitarian movement should: (1) move beyond the largely symbolic issues it has so far considered, (2) seriously address, both in theory and practice, the ideals it promotes but often leaves unexamined, (3) understand the difficulty of discerning community norms, (4) recognize its tendency to romanticize localism, civil society and the family, and realistically consider what type of solidarity and citizenship is possible for a persons entering the new century, and (5) seriously confront the overwhelming force of rationalization that continues to drive modernity.

Symbolic Issues

Communitarians have been content to define their turf using issues that are important but largely symbolic. Arguments over hate speech, national service, co-production, civic investing are familiar territory for liberal thinkers. These are non-threatening arenas for political discourse where reasonable people can disagree reasonably. They do not seriously confront the established order, either government or corporate. If communitarians wish to move beyond comfortable theorizing, they must develop a practical agenda for helping citizens sustain themselves against the inevitable forces of rationalization that constrain their real life chances and hopes for solidarity on a daily basis.

Unexamined Ideals

Communitarians should no longer be content to simply state the desirability of ideals such as consensus decision-making, the need for universal over particular values, or the importance of community stewardship models of co-production. They should be determined to understand how these work both cognitively and socially, why they are preferable to alternatives suggested by other traditions, and whether and how they result in the type of communal responsibility they find desirable. Discerning community norms: The communitarian belief that there exists an easily recognizable, common sense, uncontested set of community norms is not self-evident. Discerning norms in real communities seems a great deal messier than this. Building consensus across value-fissured, self-protection communities within communities, where structural variations in resources legitimate the voices of some and not others, is more of a task than is supposed. There are numerous cultural chasms that must be traversed. While communitarians purport to honor diversity, it may be a type of diversity defined primarily by liberal values. And while communitarians favor consensus building, consensus may simply be a new term for liberal reasoned discussion where the price of voice is acquiescence to appropriate norms of expression.

Romantic Localism vs. Market Realism

The communitarian hope that localism will overcome the rationalism of market and state is overly romantic. It is reminiscent of persistent calls to revive communities, restore the corner grocery, and save the family farm. The sad history of the latter notion is recorded in the demise of populist farm movements, the failure of well-meaning farm programs that unintentionally abetted large-scale enterprise, the centralization of farm technology production and commodity control in a few global corporations, and the empty farmsteads and no-growth populations of farm states that continue their long decline under the withering rationalization of markets and technology. In this unforgiving environment, what sentiment remains for community or solidarity must face the tough truth that, "get big or get out" simply means that most will "get out." While the lessons for small farmers are dramatic because their displacement separates them from a way of life which is so intimately tied with their sense of self, the demise of the family farm has its parallels in every small town, small business, industry, and even profession that has confronted the "creative destruction" of market rationalization.