

Communitarianism

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November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Communitarianism*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=39428>

Communitarianism is an ideology that emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to the community and the social importance of the family unit.

Terminology

Though the term communitarianism is of 20th-century origin, it is derived from the 1840s term communitarian, which was coined by Goodwyn Barmby to refer to one who was a member or advocate of a communalist society. The modern use of the term is a redefinition of the original sense. Many communitarians trace their philosophy to earlier thinkers. The term is primarily used in two senses:

Philosophical communitarianism considers classical liberalism to be ontologically and epistemologically incoherent, and opposes it on those grounds. Unlike classical liberalism, which construes communities as originating from the voluntary acts of pre-community individuals, it emphasizes the role of the community in defining and shaping individuals. Communitarians believe that the value of community is not sufficiently recognized in liberal theories of justice.

Ideological communitarianism is characterized as a radical centrist ideology that is sometimes marked by leftism on economic issues and moralism or conservatism on social issues. This usage was coined recently. When the term is capitalized, it usually refers to the Responsive Communitarian movement of Amitai Etzioni and other philosophers.

Origins

Communitarianism has been traced back to early monasticism, but in the twentieth century began to be formulated as a philosophy by Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. In an early article the Catholic Worker clarified the dogma of the Mystical Body of Christ as the basis for the movement's communitarianism. Communitarianism is also related to the personalist philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier.

Later secular communitarians began from analysis of classical republicanism, focusing on ancient Greek and Classicist writers. Since the beginnings of the 1990s they incorporated the post-modern concept of civil society into their philosophy. Soon, due to work of Robert Putnam, they mistakenly started to treat Tocqueville as a main theoretician of civil society and their primary ancestor. Thus they engaged in a direct clash with neo-liberal theory since Tocqueville was a liberal, not a republican theorist, giving new impetus to their work.

Philosophical communitarianism

Communitarianism in philosophy, like other schools of thought in contemporary political philosophy, can be defined by its response to John Rawls' A Theory of Justice. Communitarians

criticize the image Rawls presents of humans as atomistic individuals.

Communitarians claim values and beliefs are formed in public space, in which debate takes place. Both linguistic and non-linguistic traditions are communicated to children and form the backdrop against which individuals formulate and understand beliefs. The dependence of the individual upon community members is typically meant as descriptive. It does not mean that individuals should accept majority beliefs. Rather, if an individual rejects a majority belief, such as the historic belief that slavery is acceptable, he or she will do so for reasons that make sense within the community (for example, the Judeo-Christian conception of the imago Dei, or reasons deriving from secular Enlightenment humanism) rather than simply any reason at all. In this sense, the rejection of a single majority belief relies on other majority beliefs.

The following authors have communitarian tendencies in the philosophical sense, but have all taken pains to distance themselves from the political ideology known as communitarianism, which is discussed further below:

Alasdair MacIntyre - After Virtue

Michael Sandel - Liberalism and the Limits of Justice

Charles Taylor - Sources of the Self

Michael Walzer - Spheres of Justice

Christos Yannaras - A Greek philosopher and theologian whose ideas tend to view communitarianism from a theological and ontological perspective.

Ideological communitarianism

Communitarian political philosophy

Social capital

Beginning in the late 20th century, many authors began to observe a deterioration in the social networks of the United States. In the book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam observed that nearly every form of civic organization has undergone drops in membership exemplified by the fact that, while more people are bowling than in the 1950s, there are fewer bowling leagues. In recent years Putnam has revised this argument.

This results in a decline in "social capital", described by Putnam as "the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other". According to Putnam and his followers, social capital is a key component to building and maintaining democracy.

Communitarians seek to bolster social capital and the institutions of civil society. The Responsive Communitarian Platform described it thus:

"Many social goals . . . require partnership between public and private groups. Though government should not seek to replace local communities, it may need to empower them by strategies of support, including revenue-sharing and technical assistance. There is a great need for study and experimentation with creative use of the structures of civil society, and public-private cooperation, especially where the delivery of health, educational and social services are concerned."

Positive rights

Central to the communitarian philosophy is the concept of positive rights, which are rights or guarantees to certain things. These may include state subsidized education, state subsidized housing, a safe and clean environment, universal health care, and even the right to a job with the concomitant obligation of the government or individuals to provide one. To this end, communitarians generally support social security programs, public works programs, and laws limiting such things as pollution.

A common objection is that by providing such rights, communitarians violate the negative rights of the citizens; rights to not have something done for you. For example, taxation to pay for such programs as described above dispossesses individuals of property. Proponents of positive rights, by attributing the protection of negative rights to the society rather than the government, respond that individuals would not have any rights in the absence of societies--a central tenet of communitarianism--and thus have a personal responsibility to give something back to it. Some have viewed this as a negation of natural rights. However, what is or is not a "natural right" is a source of contention in modern politics, as well as historically; for example, whether or not universal health care, private property or protection from polluters can be considered a birthright.

Alternatively, some agree that negative rights may be violated by a government action, but argue that it is justifiable if the positive rights protected outweigh the negative rights lost. In the same vein, supporters of positive rights further argue that negative rights are irrelevant in their absence. Moreover, some communitarians "experience this less as a case of being used for others' ends and more as a way of contributing to the purposes of a community I regard as my own".

Comparison to other political philosophies

Communitarianism cannot be classified as being wholly left or right, and many theorists claim to represent a sort of radical center. Liberals in the American sense or social democrats in the European sense generally share the communitarian position on issues relating to the economy, such as the need for environmental protection and public education, but not on cultural issues. Communitarians and conservatives generally agree on cultural issues, such as support for character education and faith-based programs, but communitarians do not support the laissez-faire capitalism generally embraced by American conservatives.

Authoritarianism

Some people have argued that communitarianism's focus on social cohesion raises similarities with nationalistic communism, or various forms of authoritarianism, although supporters contend that there are substantial differences between communitarianism and authoritarianism, and that communitarianism has very little in common with Communism, which they see as not really valuing individual liberty at all.

Authoritarian governments often embrace extremist ideologies and rule with brute force, accompanied with severe restrictions on personal freedom, political and civil rights. Authoritarian governments are overt about the role of the government as director and commander. Civil society and democracy are not generally characteristic of authoritarian regimes. For the most part, communitarians emphasize the use of non-governmental organizations, such as private businesses, churches, non-profits, or labor unions, in furthering their goals.

Communitarian movement

The modern communitarian movement was first articulated by the Responsive Communitarian Platform, written in the United States by a group of ethicists, activists, and social scientists including Amitai Etzioni, Mary Ann Glendon, and William Galston.

The Communitarian Network, founded in 1993 by Amitai Etzioni, is the best-known group advocating communitarianism. One of the network's many initiatives to reach out to a broader public is the transnational project Diversity within Unity, which advocates a communitarian approach towards immigration and minority rights in today's diversifying societies. The project is endorsed by a diverse and international group of supporters, including former Dutch prime-minister Jan-Peter Balkenende from the Christian Democratic Appeal; Rita Süßmuth from the Christian Democratic Union; the Hungarian dissident and philosopher György Bence; British political scholar David Miller; and others.

A think tank called the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies is also directed by Etzioni. Other voices of communitarianism include Don Eberly, director of the Civil Society Project and Robert Putnam.

Influence in the United States

Reflecting the dominance of liberal and conservative politics in the United States, no major party and few elected officials advocate communitarianism. Thus there is no consensus on individual policies, but some that most communitarians endorse have been enacted.

It is quite possible that the United States' right-libertarian ideological underpinnings have

suppressed major communitarian factions from emerging. Communitarians are often easily villainized as those seeking big governments and nanny states.

President Bill Clinton was open about his support for much of Amitai Etzioni's philosophy, though whether this reflected on his actual policy program is debatable. It has also been suggested that the "compassionate conservatism" espoused by President Bush during his 2000 presidential campaign was a form of conservative communitarian thinking, though he too did not implement it in his policy program. Cited policies have included economic and rhetorical support for education, volunteerism, and community programs, as well as a social emphasis on promoting families, character education, traditional values, and faith-based projects.

Dana Milbank, writing in the Washington Post, remarked of modern communitarians, "There is still no such thing as a card-carrying communitarian, and therefore no consensus on policies. Some, such as John Dilulio and outside Bush adviser Marvin Olasky, favor religious solutions for communities, while others, like Etzioni and Galston, prefer secular approaches."

Criticism

Liberal theorists such as Simon Caney disagree that philosophical communitarianism has any interesting criticisms to make of liberalism. They reject the communitarian charges that liberalism neglects the value of community, and holds an "atomized" or asocial view of the self. If they are correct in this, then communitarian doctrine reduces to little more than traditionalism and cultural moral relativism.

According to Peter Sutch the principal criticisms of communitarianism are:

That communitarianism leads necessarily to moral relativism.

That this relativism leads necessarily to a re-endorsement of the status quo in international politics, and

That such a position relies upon a discredited ontological argument that posits the foundational status of the community or state.

However, he goes on to show that such arguments cannot be leveled against the particular communitarian theories of Michael Walzer and Mervyn Frost.