

## COMMUNITY

With the weakening of social mores and traditional myths, there is a greater sense of anomie in society both in terms of threats to the society from others (whether hysteria about asylum seekers, single mothers, the collapse of the family, islamophobia and global terrorism) and in terms of existential dilemmas (ever greater social differentiation in the job market, the challenges of constructing a personal biography, increasing rates of suicide and people living alone). In consequence there is a political impetus to attempt to supply community where currently there is felt to be only atomisation (see [individualisation](#)).

The question is what is meant by “community”. Late modernists have come to think of communities not simply as geographic communities but also as communities of people with circumstances or beliefs in common (e.g. people with the same medical condition or the same religious belief).

One particular problem is whether it is possible to create communities intentionally or whether they can only be formed successfully if they are formed organically by people coming together as an act of communal (but also individual) will.

Another question is whether or not communities are always positive things. In Northern Ireland the communitarian divide is a site of pain and conflict, whereas in other contexts a community connects lonely individuals with other people.

The further question considered below is how individual autonomy is furthered or interfered with by a focus on communal activity and community-based policies.

### Community in a just society

*The following sections are culled from [Towards a Just Society](#), published in 1999. Written originally before the Labour victory in the General Election of 1997 and then updated in the period immediately thereafter by someone who had been very involved in the development of policy on legal affairs and in groups attempting to construct a political ideology for the Labour Party – a process which failed, frankly, to put a core of beliefs and values in place before electoral success required policy to be created on an ad hoc basis – the following discussion is concerned with the meaning of “community” particularly as it applied to a political party which wished to support communities, which had been hard hit by mass unemployment and Thatcher’s notion that there was no such thing as society, without having a clear conception of what the term “community” means in the late modern world.*

### *The importance of community*

The issue of community is becoming more and more important for the Labour movement. Ever greater reliance is placed upon the ideal of community by political scientists of both the left and right wings of the political spectrum.<sup>1</sup> In the British context, however, this ideal contains a number of dangers. Indeed, while the ideal commanded a portion of the political zeitgeist in the 1990's, it remains a dangerous ideal on which to base a political strategy: primarily because it is a concept with an uncertain meaning. Communities are potentially dangerous and prejudiced arenas in which individuals are oppressed and discriminated against, as well as contexts in which groups can nurture their individual members and achieve common goals. The history of Northern Ireland is an abject lesson in the potential for communities to foster hatred and violence between identifiable communities or within geographic areas. Gay men and lesbians growing up in small village communities often speak of the oppressive sense of the community watching each other, knowing each other's business, and censoring signs of otherness in any individual. Nevertheless, the radical centrist [New Labour] approach to community is generally enthusiastic, drawing on modern American communitarianism as well as classically socialist conceptions of collective power in some instances.

### *The meaning of "community"*

In the historical context, the notion of community is orientated primarily around the geographic locus. Communities are areas of people of similar class and occupation. A community is best identified by the things which binds it together. The best example of a British community is probably the North Eastern English and South Welsh coal communities where the people lived in terraced housing ranged around the pit-head. Education, shopping and leisure was carried on within that geographic area by its inhabitants in predominantly similar ways. That automatic cohesion in our society has been broken down by the development of communication, transportation systems and by the collapse of support for the family as an institution. It is not obvious how society as a whole will now come to conceive of new communities: unless we are certain of this, it remain a shifting sand on which to build a reformist programme.

The root of the word "community" involves the meaning "commune": the need to communicate and to come together. Among the most obvious anthropological observations is the drive among human beings to come together and form groups. At the centre of this grouping is the advent of language. The traditional human community on the nineteenth century model, has begun to splinter. The nuclear family is increasingly an historical fact rather than a current reality. New ways of communicating this human interaction are necessary. Community now depends upon understanding the ways in which human beings as citizens in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries will come together. Community will become a more fluid concept based around the idea of freeing individual's choices and thus liberating the ways in which people conceive of their own communities.

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<sup>1</sup> See Blair, *The Third Way*; Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*.

The issue is therefore: what does community mean in the modern context? Have the old myths of community been destabilised? Are communities said to exist in any physical space, or virtual space in which people share an activity or a characteristic? In what sense is the Internet possibly generative of communities or do communities require face-to-face inter-action? The difficult question for modern society is the possibility of a community being forged without face-to-face inter-action. It is difficult to think in traditional terms of a community which does not involve personal inter-action. Yet, the growth in support groups for people who share medical conditions or can only communicate about their shared interests by telephone, are current examples of voluntary ways in which people are coming together without the requirement for physical contact.

The resulting question is then whether the Internet, or other public electronic mail systems, could lead to the building of communities. This example is more useful to us than might at first appear. While the Internet is currently a fashionable instrument, it is just another technological advance like the television or the telephone. To make it possible for the individual to participate in this community, the technology must be made available and affordable for all of those who wish to become part of the given community. The Internet offers potential for the forging of community on this basis or it offers the possibility of control by the corporations who control the phone lines and the machinery. A political stratagem built on making community building possible, must consider the means of allowing access between people. Communities will only build themselves if, first, the people want to build a community and, second, the opportunity to join the community can be accessed.

The broader conception of community, encourages us to think of cultural politics rather than geographic community politics. The underpinning problem is then how to build a viable political programme on the basis of cultural politics. The notion of community is really being replaced with something which more closely resembles cultural groupings. If a community can be established on the basis of groups of people who share common interests and attributes rather than the baggage of the traditional model, then that is a cultural link. In the tradition of libertarian socialist values, the pre-eminence of human rights makes it more difficult to enforce normative beliefs about the direction which society should take if the political structure is orientated around free-moving cultural currents.

One of the new forms of community has been mentioned already: “the Eastenders community”. This idea pursues the notion that a community will generate itself around “shared points of cultural reference”. A soap opera watched by millions becomes a form of community which is orientated around the shared reference points of those watching. In the post-modern arena, this form of community is every bit as valid as one which lives, works and shops together. There are other cultural meeting points. Tribal social culture: music and fashion, football, shopping, media association, advertising, information superhighway, and dance “rave” culture. Law fits into this pattern as one arena in which this cultural context can be shaped and developed.

### *Courting communitarianism*

On the Left, the most important work has been done thus far in the marriage of social democracy and American Communitarianism. However, this is a dangerous marriage. Social democracy continues to emphasise the role of rights whereas Communitarianism is concerned with the imposition of responsibility. The limitation of communitarianism is that it is an American conception, centred on the need for individual action in the absence of a welfare state. In the American context, welfare is the remedial safety net stretched out for the underclass. The core danger in American communitarianism is that it permits of a sufficiently broad interpretation to accommodate the thought of Murray<sup>2</sup> within the language of active communities as well as the more liberal thought of Etzioni.<sup>3</sup> While both Etzioni and Murray have much to say about family structures - much that is similar in a communitarian context - Murray advocates the bell curve theory of educational abilities based on racial, genetic differences.

For the radical centrist position, there is a dilemma in seeking to balance the language of responsibility with the traditional notion of rights creation. In Etzioni's model, communitarianism emphasises responsibility to the exclusion of rights.<sup>4</sup> This programme holds within it the danger of failure to regenerate civic life - one of the core aspirations of the European Left in the wake of the monetarist experiment. The intention is that by imposing responsibilities, you also impose correlative rights on behalf of others. The communitarian thought process does not account for this shift in the power balance. It is pointless imposing responsibility without also creating rights which enable the individual or community to live up to those normative claims. It is pointless to require obligations without creating a viable legal system in which those obligations can be moulded and put to work. Where the communitarians fail is in the lack of principle or political philosophy to underpin their normative claims. The rhetoric of the communitarian movement is typically delivered in the register of newspaper editorials: that is, sensationalist and opinionated, but superficial.

### *The communitarian movement and the challenge of liberal autonomy*

Etzioni's notion of culture revolves around the imposition of moral claims which are shared by the communitarians. There are two main objections to this approach. First, it cannot demand the support of the entire population because it deals in morals which that society cannot share in their entirety. Secondly, it offends the principle of autonomy of moral choices which we have outlined above.

The splintering of society is the subject of the philosophy of ethics as well as politics and sociology. Macintyre<sup>5</sup> argues that modern society has moved away from a coherent social order which gave a sense of value and identity in traditional societies. Rather than a

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<sup>4</sup> Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community*.

<sup>5</sup> *After Virtue*.

cohesive social structure, the modern age is peopled by a mass of individuals, each pursuing their individual and distinct desires and preferences. The picture of the individual and society which is painted by Macintyre holds water as an account of the way people have actually become in modern society. Macintyre uses this insight to use the Aristotelian tradition of the ‘virtues’ as a model for communitarian values with which to criticise modernity.

Walzer objects to the loss of self in the welter of fluid cultural communities:

“If we are necessarily and essentially social beings, then modern society cannot be understood as the mere negation - fragmentation, destruction, loss - of community. If the idea of the unencumbered self is a mythical creation of false theory, it cannot give a true picture of the self in contemporary society ... we are in fact persons and we are in fact bound together. The liberal ideology of separatism cannot take personhood and bondedness away from us. What it does take away is the *sense* of personhood and bondedness.”<sup>6</sup>

Taylor blames the breakdown of society on liberal individualism. However, separation and divorce are all a part of modern life: therefore, it is not a deterioration of society, rather it is a difference in the structure of that society. Divorce has become a feature of the new structure: rather than heralding the end of the world. we are living in a time of change. This is the view taken by Rorty, who defends what he calls ‘postmodernist bourgeois liberalism’ and by Rawls in his ‘political not metaphysical’ account of justice. Modern liberal society, they argue, is already a ‘community’ of autonomous individuals.

As Sayers puts it:

“...social relations based on private property and market exchange - *is* fragmenting and destructive: not of community or society *as such*, but rather of a particular form of society, namely traditional society. Such relative autonomy is a real feature of the modern self.”

The question then arises whether modernity is itself a negative thing in the communitarian conception:

“Both [views of communitarianism] portray the impact of modernity as negative. They lament the destruction or the danger of destruction of the traditional forms of community, and oppose the value of community to that of individual autonomy as if these were exclusive of each other. However, if contemporary society is not simply the negation of community but rather a different form of it, then it cannot validly be criticised by appeal to the abstract notion of community as such ... The transition to modernity has not been an entirely negative process. The destruction of traditional social relations has occurred through their replacement by new and different ones. What Communitarianism portrays as a process of mere loss can

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<sup>6</sup>Walzer, *The Communitarianism Critique of Liberalism*”, *Political Theory*, vol.18, 1990, p.10.

also be seen as the creation of the autonomy of the self and an individual identity relatively independent of family and social position.”

If the radical centrist position is to embrace the idea of autonomy, it must ensure that the way it treats communities must reflect the commitment to individual autonomy. The only sensible link between autonomy for the individual and fairness for society, is to allow communities to evolve without governmental interference except to the extent that it is entirely necessary (a principle of subsidiarity in fact). Perhaps this radical centrist politics is to be built on a contract between personal autonomy and community. The question then is whether or not community here should be defined as “a system of culturally-linked individuals”?

### *Social justice in a changed world*

How is social justice to be generated in this maelstrom of changing social relations? Social relations are, it is suggested, becoming hyper-complex as the mass of society moves away from predictable patterns: individualisation (especially the “average exoticism of everyday life”). The [Thatcherite / Reaganite] New Right failed to meet this hyper-complexity issue by disempowering many organisations without creating a sufficiently viable social contract in its place. The theories of justice must work in a number of different spheres. Justice must operate in terms of economic lifechances, in terms of political power and in terms of reparation for claims (legal or otherwise). The system of justice provision must be regenerated. The Rawlsian conception of justice<sup>7</sup> is based upon the notion of a contract which is generated in the ideal speech situation of a new society being formed. Its inhabitants are placed behind a veil of ignorance, ignorant that is of their role in that society once the veil is removed. Rawls argument is that, if a society is formed in such a situation, the citizens would choose the structure of their society to reflect a more perfect notion of social justice than ever evolves in a market capitalist system.

While there are many possible critiques of this idealistic analysis of social justice, what is most important to take away from it is that it is an exercise in theory building: the grand European style. Rather than focusing too closely on the detail, what is most important is the use to which this theory building can be put. By discovering what we mean by the “just” society we can plan policy (or its presentation) to realise that end goal as closely as it is possible to do within the political environment of the time. Without the theory, the realisation of the goal is impossible. What Rawls offers is the notion of society in which justice approximates to equality of economic power. What we may choose to use as our lodestar of justice might be different.

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<sup>7</sup>See “the Theory of Justice” and “Political Liberalism”

The idea of fairness<sup>8</sup> might offer a closer approximation to equality of lifechances. This end-goal enables us to begin a debate about efficient welfare provision that is targeted at those with specific need or provided on a universal basis. The central tenet of a social contract is one which we may need to generate in policy on a new constitutional settlement or Northern Ireland but not in terms of regulation of the financial markets. The social contract might be a useful framework in which to present ideas of citizenship and inclusion in the radical centrist project. A positivist framework of rights provision will depend upon a sense of inclusion in this project on behalf of the population.

To build a project based on social justice, as part of a project of social regeneration, issues of poverty and welfare provision must be addressed at the same time facing the issues of the new agenda. The welfare state socialists' ordinary values are central to a conception of social justice which people can understand even if they do not immediately accept all the potential consequences. To build a social contract, one must have agreement but before you can have agreement you must have identification. In modern Britain, the power imbalance between have and have-not must be redressed, if not by changing economic relations per se, then by realigning the political symmetry of those goals. Law has a role to play in this development. Social justice will stem, in part, from the notion of community in the radical centrist project. It will only work in tandem with broader equality of outcome.

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<sup>8</sup>See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* or in the New Labour context Gordon Brown's Fabian Pamphlet on *Fairness*.