

The Theme of communitarianism

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The theme of communitarianism, popularised by Amitai Etzioni, is a social philosophy that believes citizens have a responsibility toward their communities. This collective responsibility is achieved through shared values, passed from generation to generation and influenced by political, religious, moral and social factors. The most important element of the philosophy is reciprocity, for members of society to help one another.¹

Social institutions are an integral part of the belief and form the moral infrastructure of society, the concept of family being the cornerstone where shared values are passed on through the process of socialisation. For example, the infant's parents teach the child expressions of love and concern, which have a positive influence; school will give the child the first opportunity to learn to work and cooperate with others while also fulfilling the important role of developing the individual's moral self and rectifying any neglect that has been experienced at an earlier stage. However, communitarians also believe that this moral self needs to be continually reinforced as a citizen's commitment can decline.²

If there is to be any criticism of communitarians, Gideon Calder describes their 'nostalgia for a pre-modern age when the idea of a relatively homogenous community...was rather more plausible than it is now'³, however many argue whether such a community ever existed. Etzioni acknowledges that a citizen rarely belongs to a single community but to several such as those at work and at home, some are chosen and some are placed upon us.

In Focus: Amitai Etzioni

American academic Amitai Etzioni published *The Golden Rule (1996)* and is the founder of the Responsive Communitarians group. The belief of the movement is that a good society is based on 'a balance between liberty and social order, and between... (communal) and society-wide values and bonds.'

New Labour's Approach (1997-2007):

"In the 1950s and the 1960s the big question in politics was: what can the state achieve? In the 1970s and 1980s the big question was: what can the individual achieve? Neither of these questions is right for the new century. Today the question we must answer is: what can society achieve - not the state on its own, not individuals on their own, but all of us together in a community, where opportunity for all is matched by responsibility from all."⁴

¹ This is not out of charity but a greater sense of mutuality that will benefit all.

² The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology. Ed. Bryan S. Turner (Cambridge University Press 2006) pp. 81-83.

³ Communitarianism and New Labour, Gideon Calder, <http://www.whb.co.uk/socialissues/vol2gc.htm>

⁴ Addressing an audience in Southampton, 1997.

[Prime Minister Tony Blair, 1997]

In 1997 New Labour invoked communitarian values in its political agenda, that rights *entail* responsibilities. This change was not simply evident in speeches given by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair and senior politicians but by the alteration of the party's constitution, namely Clause Four stating 'the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe.'⁵ Therefore a citizen is not simply entitled to claim benefits or services but has a responsibility for supporting the well being of their community. New Labour's concept of communitarianism rejected the Thatcherite notion that the self-interest of the individual is important in society. Additionally, Blair's communitarianism reduced the role of government as provider but transformed it into facilitator allowing citizens to achieve desired community goals. This was evidenced by the Labour government's commitment to devolution and decentralising power from Whitehall.

Tony Blair's vision of progressive politics (known as the Third Way) introduced many rights for citizens during his premiership such as the minimum wage and enhanced legal rights yet the 'community' would underpin much of what was being announced. It is recognised that the community has inherent power, collectively it has the power to organise citizens to achieve collective goals and social change. A key challenge of progressive politics would be, as Blair claimed, to 'use the state as an enabling force, protecting effective communities and voluntary organisations and encouraging their growth to tackle new needs, in partnership as appropriate.'⁶ It is this acknowledgment that more can be achieved by communitarianism than simply looking after residential communities that is of the greatest importance.⁷ A central tenet to New Labour policy was that 'community' was deliberately labeled as 'residing in *civil society*: in lived social relations, and in 'commonsense' notions of our civic obligations.'⁸

In-Focus: *Communitarianism in action*

Communitarianism can take many forms within communities, here are some examples (and also how you can help as a citizen):

- Parents' Co-operatives (where fathers and mothers share childcare duties).
- Helping your neighbour/relative when they are ill or discharged from hospital.
- Joining support groups (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous, Shelter).
- Providing childcare for those who need/want to work (if you are staying at home).
- Working at your local charity shop (e.g. RSPCA, British Heart Foundation).
- Becoming a police community support officer.
- Joining a neighbourhood watch scheme.
- Applying to become a magistrate.
- Stand for election as a local councillor.
- Join a tenant and resident's association.
- Join a pressure group (e.g. your local Amnesty International Group).

⁵ "Tony Blair: A Communitarian in the Making?" The Times (London), (June 21, 1997), p. 20.

⁶ NewStatesman, Nick Cohen, 8th August 2005, Blair, 1998.

⁷ "Tony Blair: A Communitarian in the Making?" The Times (London), (June 21, 1997), p. 20.

⁸ Communitarianism and New Labour, Gideon Calder, <http://www.whb.co.uk/socialissues/vol2gc.htm>

Social justice and equality were particular goals thought to be attainable through this philosophy. Laws can be passed by Parliament to make hate crime or discrimination illegal in society, however this strategy on its own cannot ensure change due to long developed attitudes amongst a minority of individuals. It is therefore essential citizens choose to directly challenge this behaviour and transmit a positive message. While an individual should be responsible in this capacity, real power comes from the community's collective will challenging this undesirable behaviour with schemes such as neighbourhood watch.

In Focus: *Communities must root out extremists*

One of the greatest challenges threatening modern Britain today comes not from an external source but the very communities citizens live in. The dangers of terrorism have been visible since the 7/7 London suicide bombings, however within Muslim communities Islamic extremism against the West has quietly been brewing. Speaking ahead of the first anniversary of the bombings, Tony Blair criticised moderate British Muslims for not doing enough to tackle extremism within their communities, something he believed the Government was unable to defeat on its own.

"You cannot defeat this extremism through what a Government does. You can only defeat it within a community. "People should stand up and not merely say, 'You are wrong (but) you are wrong in your view about the West, you are wrong in your sense of grievance, the whole ideology is profoundly wrong'."

Adapted from an article in *The Sunday Times*, 'Blair says Muslim majority must stand up to extremists', July 4th 2006.

Communitarianism arguably has more in common with conservative ideology in that for it to be successful it must be *authoritarian*, ordered, creating the right conditions for a homogenous community. However, in doing so it dangerously excludes the goal of attaining increasing social equality and social inclusion that is the hallmark of progressive politics.⁹ New Labour's presentation of the philosophy has attempted to reverse this trend.

In New Labour's progressive society, citizens have rights yet the accompanying responsibilities are framed more than ever in economic terms. The then Government attempted to facilitate this by introducing policies such as the New Deal for those out of work and by placing a greater emphasis on vocational skills within schools, the more citizens could contribute to the growing British economy the better the future for all.

⁹ Communitarianism and New Labour, Gideon Calder, <http://www.whb.co.uk/socialissues/vol2gc.htm>