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Roger A. Lohmann

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Communitarianism In Memorium: A Review Essay

Roger A. Lohmann
West Virginia University

In Memorium

News has been received of the recent demise of at least one wing of contemporary political ideology – the one that has come to be known as communitarianism. The victim was unofficially pronounced dead on election day, 1994. Death occurred when the victim was shown to lack a reason for being. Death came in the wake of massive Republican victories which resulted in a shift in party control of both houses of Congress. Oliver North, the candidate most closely allied with the political wing of the "religious right" was defeated by Charles Robb -- son-in-law of the late President Lyndon B. Johnson in the Senate race in Virginia. The point here is not that North's defeat represented some sort of Armageddon for the religious right. It is instead that North was defeated by local politics in which communitarianism as a fighting faith was completely irrelevant. Instead of rising to the inelegant communitarian calls, a coalition of the old politics proved sufficient; a "dirty deal" between bitter political rivals Robb and Virginia Governor Wilder appeared to do the trick.

Opposition to the religious right in politics had been one of primary reasons for existence of the ill-fated communitarian movement in the United States. A one-time liberal and distantly-related communitarian was heard to say at a wake held to try to recall the point of the victim, "I guess this means if we want to further community in this country, it might be better to begin to work with the religious right, rather than continuing to attempt to disenfranchise them." Representatives of rightist religious and political organizations, as is their wont, disagreed among themselves and blamed the liberal media.

North's defeat was only the latest in a series of insults, defeats and snubs in the short and ignoble life of the communitarian movement. Communitarianism was born in 1990 at a national meeting in Washington DC. The meeting was attended by two dozen participants from elite academic institutions and Washington interest groups. The working agreement -- which might be called "the M-Street Manifesto" -- was detailed by Professor Amatai Etzioni in a 1992 book, *The Spirit of Community*.

A high point for the movement came late in the 1992 Presidential campaign and the early months of the Clinton Administration, when both the President and Vice President and several other prominent members of the Clinton Administration made occasional vague noises and gestures about

being communitarians. But as others said at the time, that dog don't hunt, and things went pretty well downhill from that point on.

The cover of Etzioni's 1992 book looked great on television resplendent in red, white and blue. Looking good on television is an important consideration when you are attempting to mount a modern political movement. Unfortunately, closer reviews suggested the contents (and the movement) did not measure up. The essence of the communitarian platform was a four-fold program of: 1) a moratorium on the declaration of new rights; 2) reestablished links between rights and civic responsibilities; 3) assigning some responsibilities without rights; and 4) "adjusting" some rights to changed circumstances.

Charles Burck, reviewing Etzioni's book in *Fortune* magazine, was perhaps too arch in suggesting that "his target audience seems to be baby boomers slouching toward middle age." Slouching? Ouch! Then, however, spleen spent, the reviewer settled down and concluded "Etzioni has delivered a useful book. If more of us lived by and fought for the values he lays out, we'd be a lot closer to a better world." The unanswered question is, do those values make good politics or policy?

Early clues to the prospects of the movement, however, came when Bruce Frohnen, writing in *National Review*, panned it as a liberal parody of conservative values and William Sullivan in *Commonweal* characterized communitarianism as "technocracy cum emotivism". The *Commonweal* review also struck a blow near the heart of the American communitarian project: "Etzioni argues that the attenuation of the 'moral voice' of communities -- in the name of individual freedom -- has been a major factor in the widely noted decline in the quality of life." In other words, it wasn't declining urban infrastructure, the loss of basic industries, shifting employment or residual racism that created our urban problems. It was too much freedom! "*The Spirit of Community* seeks to carve out a new consensus; one attentive to the social roots of individual well-being." If memory serves, that's what John Dewey pointed to in *Individualism, Old and New* (Capricorn Books: New York. 1930)

In all likelihood, restrictions on personal freedom is not an intended objective of communitarianism; it is just one of the confusing range of possible implications emerging from its somewhat ill-formed core doctrines (like those noted just above). At any rate, in the second of two reviews it devoted to the book, *The Library Journal* summed up: "While many of Etzioni's suggestions are grounded in common sense, his book fails to grapple with the many important philosophical issues raised by (his) dual critique of liberalism and conservatism." Other reviewers found both good things and bad to say about the movement and the book.

Autopsy revealed the causes of death to be genetic: a fatal flaw in the ideology of the movement. The one point of consensus about Etzioni's book and the broader movement seems to be that it endorses decent and humane pro-social ends. There is also strong opposition to its means, however. Despite overwhelming evidence of incredible gullibility in the American electorate in recent years, the key communitarian premise of restricting the rights of others for the good of the community left the movement unviable from the start.

The victims' lifestyle also contributed to its demise. Although it was often featured as a topic for discussion at meetings and conferences sponsored by various professional and academic elites, and the book-jacket was displayed prominently on the CBS news program *Sixty Minutes*, communitarianism completely failed to stir the popular political imagination. This proved to be a fatal flaw in a movement purporting to speak to populist concerns, and death of the movement was long expected. With the exception of a few groups of academic social scientists, few communities actually answered the call of communitarianism.

The movement was thus left in the incongruous position of being a movement without visible supporters; a popular uprising sprung from the top with no clubs, organized membership, associations or grassroots infrastructure. Prior to its death, a vestigial establishment -- notably the newsletter/journal *The Responsive Community: Rights and Responsibilities* -- had been created to carry on *The Spirit of Community*. Professor Etzioni and the other survivors closest to the movement in its final hours deserve our respect and condolences.

Communitarianism: A Case of Mistaken Identity?

Communitarians take hope! News of the death of the erstwhile political movement known in the United States as communitarianism should not be confused with the surviving work of the same name by moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and political scientists Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel. Continued survival of these diverse doctrines is no thanks to conceptual sharpshooter Derek L. Phillips of the Universiteit of Amsterdam. In *Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought*, Phillips takes aim at all three with unmistakable deadly intent (as well as offering a few passing swipes at the Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart* volume). Every sharpshooter needs an accurate aim, however. While Phillips displays some brilliant histrionics along the way, in the end he comes up rather wide of all targets.

Phillips' method of operation is quite simple: He wishes to undermine the allegedly communitarian arguments of these authors by disproving the existence of the communities of the past which he asserts they wish to

recover. (Specifically, the alleged comity of the American colonies, the Middle Ages and Ancient Greece.) Apparently, projecting an imaginative community onto a past is an unacceptable strategy in his view. He begins this exercise brilliantly by examining various historical sources on the existence of community in the American colonial era. Had he continued in this vein, he conceivably might have produced a masterpiece.

Unfortunately, in looking to the middle ages, Phillips' principle target shifts from hard historical reality to the theoretical landscape of medieval community produced a century ago by Ferdinand Tönnies – author of the famous *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* distinction. Who among us would wish to defend the claim that the English term "community" is an adequate translation for the German "gemeinschaft", much less defend the claim that a sociological study done more than a 100 years ago ought to present an accurate and up-to-date history of medieval communities? Although Phillips footnotes a number of important contemporary studies of medieval communities, Tönnies appears to be his real target, and the existence of real medieval community is left largely unexamined.

Some of the complexities and ambiguities involved here can be illustrated with other sources. In the 1955 translation of Tönnies famous work, the key terms *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* are translated as community and association. Just two years later, another translation of the same two terms rendered them as community and society (Tönnies, 1957). This can easily leave one to wonder: which is it to be?

By the time Phillips reaches back to the ancient world, this mode of operations becomes even more threadbare. Aristotle is mis-cast in the role of social researcher, and his various writings are searched for clues to the existence of real community in Athens. The absence of an adequate picture of community is Again, a few historical and historical sociological works are cited, but not really explored.

Phillips basic argument – that communitarians are pointing backward to a series of “true communities” which in fact never existed – must be judged unconvincing. His thesis is probably correct in that most critiques of past "Golden Ages" reveal them to be less glorious than they are made out to be in the present. It is, however, seriously flawed and unconvincing in its particulars.

Despite a flawed central argument, however, this is not a book without merits. As mentioned, the review of the colonial American community is interesting and instructive. Moreover, Phillips' caution that following the communitarians into abandonment of a focus on individual rights and utilities could lead to serious violations of the interests of various minorities is a point worth heeding. (One can wish, for example, the Etzioni party reviewed above had heeded it more carefully.) As intellectual history goes,

his commentaries on Tönnies and Aristotle are also interesting and thoughtful (although hardly earthshaking); they just don't support very well his thesis of the non-existence of medieval and ancient communities.

The vast and depressing history of the twentieth century, with its various totalitarianisms, lends abundant evidence for this conclusion. What Philips ignores, however is that what he perceives as the collectivism of communitarianism is hardly alone in its abuse of individual freedoms and well-being. Liberal society and individualism, in the sense he intends these terms, also have pretty dismal records of acceptance or tolerance of slavery, nativism, xenophobia and extensive document violations of the "human rights" of Amerindians, Asians and dark-skinned peoples everywhere, as well as their own wives, sisters and daughters, and religious and other minorities.

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