

ON COMMUNITARIANISM

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Not everyone buys my belief that we are fast heading, in America, to some combination of the works of John Rambo and Francisco Franco. After all, it'd be more pleasant to all just get along. Good beer, good food, good times. Those things seem a lot more attractive, to everyone, including me. True, such hopeful imaginings have more than a little in common with M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village*, where moderns retreat into an idyllic pre-modern existence and are protected from the horrors outside—until they're not. But if a pleasant future is indeed possible without first undergoing some traumatic societal purgatory, it might be achieved through what is generically called communitarianism, so that is what I want to examine today.

Every decade or so, optimists crop up who see a revival of communitarianism in America. Usually this is perceived as a path to healing our divisions. In the 1990s, Amitai Etzioni was prominent; he got a lot of play during the Clinton administration, and tried to develop communitarianism into a type of political program. That met with little success, probably because the program was confusing and people were so busy chasing internet riches there seemed little need to be nicer or closer to each other. Communitarianism has gotten occasional attention in the past twenty years, including from Jonathan Haidt in his Durkheimian attempts to bridge political chasms, but references to it have gotten more frequent since November 2016, usually from well-meaning centrists appalled at the divisions that have followed Trump's election. The most prominent of these is David Brooks, compliant house conservative of the *New York Times*. In talking about communitarianism, Brooks, unusually for him, is not serving as the Gimp for the Left. Rather, he is offering a genuine and heartfelt program, of which more below.

A common facile belief is that communitarianism is somehow associated with the political Left. Probably that's because, viewed broadly, it has a kumbaya, vaguely hippie-ish flavor. No doubt there are small groups on the Left that are very communitarian (anybody remember communes?), but then, there are also such groups on the Right, such as the Bruderhof. Or, more accurately, those groups aren't Left or Right at all; whether religious or not, they're just trying to exemplify

a well-known, but rarely practiced, lifestyle, exemplified in the West by early Christianity, though also found in some Eastern traditions. Communitarianism as a wider social phenomenon, as we'll see, could never be a Left phenomenon.

Nor is communitarianism a Right phenomenon. In caricature, the modern Right is Randian, all unbridled individualism seeking gain and pleasure without any regard for larger society, which is regarded with disinterest, contempt, and a magical belief that larger society will necessarily and always benefit from maximum individualism. Lending support to this caricature, for a long time, whether Randian or not, individualism reigned in conservative intellectual life, and almost all conservatives in public life viewed themselves as "classical liberals" in the mold of John Stuart Mill or, more commonly, a somewhat caricatured Adam Smith. The reasons for twentieth-century American conservatives endorsing classical liberalism probably have much to do with reaction against the massive increase in government power in the New Deal; the global spread of Communism, viewed (correctly) as anti-individualist; and being able to see apparent economic benefits while being unable to see, until later, resulting societal corrosion. Whatever the history, many conservatives have in recent years turned sharply against unfettered individualism, in Randian or more moderate guises, seeing it as atomizing and destructive of our social fabric. This process has accelerated as the Right has fragmented, and many, like Brooks and Rod Dreher, have stopped merely bemoaning the loss of intermediary institutions and started wondering what to do about it.

I think renewed communitarianism is essential to a flourishing post-liberal future. Atomized individualism, the necessary end state of Enlightenment thought, is the *aqua regia* of social bonds and of human societies, and as such, must ultimately destroy the societies it infects. Thus, its opposite, strong communitarianism, is found in my own political program, Foundationalism, which advocates a return to the pre-Enlightenment Western degree of emphasis on individualism. A justified focus on the individual rather than the collective was not a new concept to the Enlightenment, whatever lies its proponents may shriek, but rather always a key element of Christianity and the West. No to the Persian despot; yes to the free man under law and obligation. Leonidas, not Xerxes. Only through social attachments can people

achieve meaning and society achieve strength. The question for today, however, is whether there can be such a thing as a present-day *unifying* communitarianism—that is, one that bridges the political divide between Left and Right. Or can there only be communitarianism after one side has won the future?

True, as I have detailed elsewhere, our current political divide is best viewed as a quadrant, with the Left being divided into, roughly, neo-liberals and progressive liberals (and the Right divided, again roughly, into corporatists and populists/reactionaries). Thus, it is not a simple Left-Right dichotomy, which suggests that there might be a communitarianism that unites elements, but only elements, of the Left and Right. If we pitch the neoliberals and corporatists over the railings into the water below, perhaps there is something to be made? As we'll see, I think not, but let's work through the analysis.

First, we have to better define communitarianism. The word, a nineteenth-century neologism, is derived, obviously, from community, so a first-cut definition might be “furthering and increasing community.” That must mean local, rather than larger-scale, actions. It must also mean strengthening human relationships on that level. Beyond that, though, the word is pretty vague. It's one of those words that nobody is likely to say reflexively that it's a terrible idea, so it seems uncontroversial and unifying. But as always, the devil is in the details, and without details, the word is useless.

Before proceeding further, it is important to distinguish between communitarianism and its cousin, collectivism. The latter, beloved by the twentieth-century and today's Left, implies control by the central government; the former, subsidiarity and local, largely non-governmental, control. Collectivists like to lurk in communitarian clothing, since the latter word does not have the same negative freight and bloody connotations. This crucial distinction is exemplified by Hillary Clinton's famous, if little read, book, *It Takes a Village*. What Clinton meant was that the eponymous village, that is, the federal government, should remove the raising of children from the local level, and especially from their parents. That's collectivism. Communitarianism in this context would be if the parents could raise their children in any way they wanted, subject only to local strictures, mostly derived from church and extended

family, and the state and federal governments would be utterly and totally indifferent to the specifics of the child's raising.

So, to get some details about what real communitarians think today, let's turn back to David Brooks. In Brooks's mind, communitarianism is about "relationship building" and "weaving the social fabric." OK, but that doesn't help with a more precise definition, or what matters more, agreement on what applied communitarianism means. Brooks has written a book and started an organization, called Weave: The Social Fabric Project. Its tagline is "The Weaver movement is repairing our country's social fabric, which is badly frayed by distrust, division and exclusion. People are quietly working across America to end loneliness and isolation and weave inclusive communities. Join us in shifting our culture from hyper-individualism that is all about personal success, to relationalism that puts relationships at the center of our lives."

We can ignore that "relationalism" is not a word, and that in two sentences using two versions of the current high cant word of the Left, "inclusion," is disturbing. What we see here, a little clearer, is advocating attempts to rebuild community, with an implicit acknowledgement that something has been lost. What is not explicitly acknowledged is that until quite recently America was very, very good about building and maintaining community, and it is only since the 1960s, or perhaps the 1950s, that community has been destroyed, though erosion started earlier. The most obvious broad effect of this is the destruction of intermediary institutions, first noted by Robert Nisbet in *The Quest for Community* in 1953, and most fully documented by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*. More recently, Yuval Levin has examined the phenomenon from an dispassionate angle combining history and politics, in *The Fractured Republic*. The narrow, individual effects are as Brooks summarizes. Few would disagree that we've lost something valuable; the question is what to do.

Brooks's Weave project has ambitious goals. "If you can change the culture you can change behavior. If you can change how people think they should live then you can change the whole society. Social change happens when a small group of people find a better way to live and the rest of us copy them. That happened in the 1960s, that happened with the feminist movement . . . and so what Weave is about is trying to change the culture around the Weavers that are already existing.

There are millions of them. They're a movement that doesn't know they're a movement." This is somewhat incoherent, most of all because Brooks nowhere adverts that the social change he seems to regard as a positive in the recent past, feminism and the 1960s, are shining examples of the destruction of communitarianism, if they were not its main cause. Failure to acknowledge that suggests a crucial blindness, and calls for "movement" and "change" are stock meaningless terms beloved of politicians.

To try to understand further what Brooks is pushing, I watched a long video from April 2019, in which Brooks gave a keynote address to a conference hosted by the Global Philanthropy Institute. I had never heard of the GPI, and judging from the number of video views of the conference, nobody else has either. It appears to be a stock neoliberal umbrella group for slick non-profits and NGOs, an impression solidified by their paying Tony Blair to speak at this three-day conference. The slogan for the conference was "Reclaiming Democracy," and the main graphic showed a girl at a demonstration, chanting with raised fist, while wrapped in what appears to be an Egyptian flag. What that has to do with philanthropy I am not sure, but in any case, one of their three stated conference themes was "The New Localism," so hence David Brooks.

Brooks, and three other participants on a panel after his speech, offer very few specifics. The talk is almost all exactly what you'd expect from a group of smooth-talking consultants. All of them, Brooks included, are totally vague on specifics of what can be done, what is actually being done, and what has resulted. They offer endless buzzwords, mostly meaningless, such as "adaptive challenges." The only person who offered any specifics at all was Ann Stern, who runs a multi-billion dollar "community centered" non-profit in Houston. She repeatedly emphasized that "equity" was their main focus, with her examples being better public education for the poor and giving free legal services to illegal immigrants so they can stay in Houston and get "what they are entitled to." None of the panelists batted an eye when Stern lectured that we mustn't actually focus too much on the local, since "how do we enhance the support of the state and national policy" is necessary to local success—in other words, we need Big Government to impose the putatively local ends she desires.

Nor did any of the panelists suggest any change in personal behavior by anybody. Dan Cardinali, who runs something called Independent Sector, talking of education again, noted (amid a wash of consultant-speak) that “loving relationships are what really change kids.” Logically, then, repairing broken families should take priority. But heaven forbid there be any recognition of the destructive effects of the erosion of the family, much less attempts to reverse that. That would be judgmental! If Cardinali were being honest, he would admit that it’s not poverty that’s the problem with education, it’s the destroyed social fabric itself, exacerbated by that unions of government workers, such as teachers, are permitted at all. Instead, to the extent his gobbledygook can be interpreted, we get calls for nonprofits to band together so they can get money and do—something unspecified.

So, let’s pose a question. We need “common stories” and “common projects,” Brooks tells us. The panelists at the GPI event loudly and proudly proclaimed their support for “community involvement,” and in particular parental involvement in education and schools. Would they react favorably to parents getting involved in schools to demand an end to forced “Pride” celebrations? Would they react favorably to neighbors banding together to build and patrol a wall, to protect their community against invading migrants? Would they support parents working with schools to arrange for gun training as part of the school curriculum? Would they support school walkouts to advocate limiting abortion? Uh . . . no. The reverse of these things, though, such as parents banding together to push gun control in the school, would undeniably be happily celebrated and eagerly funded with some of the many billions of dollars these people command. That is, the words used by these people sound as if they are of general applicability, but in practice, what they mean is they only apply either to advance Left goals, or to advance neutral goals wholly compatible with Left ends. None of this, Brooks or the CPI, is actual communitarianism—it is either mere calls for generic Christian charity, conditioned on acceptance of Left dominance, or the manipulation of words to boost and reinforce Left dominance.

The reason the Left can never get behind real communitarianism is simple. Real communitarianism must imply unbreakable commitments, which implies both unchosen bonds and sworn, enforceable commitments. If commitment is merely chosen, or not binding, it is nothing

at all. (This is why Foundationalism will sharply restrict divorce. It is also why the revolting term now being forced on us, "chosen families," is revolting.) I don't want to beat up on Brooks, but he's changed both his wife and his religion. The reasons why don't really matter. The fact is that he has not kept his commitments. He may have good reasons, or he may not have chosen divorce himself, but that's not the point. Everybody has what he thinks are good reasons. What is often called communitarianism today by people like Brooks is merely bromides about love, with no actual restrictions on fulfilling whatever are the personal desires of the moment of each person. Talk about love is no threat to the Left, which hijacks the term to cover whatever formerly frowned-upon behavior they insist must now be celebrated, and simultaneously uses it as a useful propaganda weapon with which to beat conservatives who actually threaten Left hegemony, by accusing them of lacking love. Communities are united by love, or can be, but shared mandates and prohibitions are required as well. A community where each person does exactly as he pleases and faces no consequences for any action is no community at all. Enforced expectations of the community are what create the community, and that the Left cannot tolerate.

Why is unbreakable, often unchosen, commitment anathema to the Left? For the modern Left, whether neoliberal or anti-neoliberal, emancipation from unchosen bonds is one of their two main political goals (the other being "equality," a protean beast). Atomized individualism, the poisoned fruit of the Enlightenment, is at the very core of their political principles. This has been true since the French Revolution; manifestations of this philosophy vary, but they are all basically the same. For a while, with the American experiment, it seemed that a successful society could contain a limited version of these Enlightenment principles and not destroy itself, but now it is clear that all roads lead to the same end, and our seeming success was simply eating the seed corn of a uniquely virtuous society. As Robert Nisbet noted sixty years ago, the inevitable result of unbridled emancipation is to destroy all intermediary institutions, and to leave nothing between the individual and the State, which performs, badly, the functions formerly served by the community, but can be controlled to achieve Left ends.

This explains the seeming paradox, that the Left welcomes Brooks and his message, though what he advocates, even in his pauperized

version, if logically examined is philosophically incompatible with their project. Brooks is a supplicant, asking for their approval. He is accepted only so long, and to the extent, he in no way contradicts any premise or desire of the Left, and can prove useful to them. This is simply the old Left pattern, of no enemies to the Left and no compromise to the Right. As I have noted before, the most naked expression of this I have seen was a debate in 2017 between the editors of the (excellent) new magazine *American Affairs*, who eagerly sought to build bridges with the Left, and the editors of *Dissent*, a longtime pillar of the intellectual Left. The latter made very clear, channeling their inner Robespierre, that first obeisance and laying down of arms was required, at which point the Left might accept *American Affairs* as a junior useful idiot. No compromise was permitted or could even be considered; only surrender. The *American Affairs* editors just didn't know what to do with that; they sat there, startled and disarmed. It was painful to watch.

Now, I bet that if I put this set of facts to Brooks, he would respond that whatever the organized Left says or wants, what matters is that normal people make connections. That sounds responsive. Who could object to that? But it's not an answer, since the Left politicizes everything, and will not permit normal people to make such connections. We got a fantastic example this week when the very large social media site Ravelry, a place where those interested in the fabric arts (knitting, etc.) share and connect, announced they would immediately and permanently kick off their platform any member who at any time expressed any support of any kind for "Donald Trump or his administration." Presumably this includes activity outside of the platform itself, as Facebook and other supposedly neutral platforms now do, but it explicitly includes anything within the platform, which is designed for communication. Naturally, Ravelry encourages anti-Trump expression; there is no suggestion that political talk in general is not desired. So, when Brooks says that people need to make connections, the Left responds they may make connections, if they publicly agree with the Left on everything and agree to be totally ruled by the Left. Otherwise, they are to be punished by society and the government, and cast into the outer darkness. In the communitarianism of the Left, believing Christians (say, for example, bakers), or anybody else not fully on board with the Left's program, can never be permitted to exist in the community.

Brooks might then respond that the *Dissent* editors, or Ravelry, don't actually represent the Left, and there are millions of people on the political Left aching to make connections. Aside from that there is no evidence of this, that's irrelevant. When every organ of power on the Left takes a particular position without any pushback or complaint from the rank-and-file, it's impossible to argue that position isn't representative of the Left as a whole. Making connections can therefore only mean compliance with, and obedience to, their positions. I'm sure David Brooks is a very nice man. That's what Rod Dreher keeps telling me, anyway. But he's a blind patsy. If he ever dared to actually offer something that threatened or contradicted what the Left demands, they would instantly gut him, flay him, and wear his skin as a cape.

This basic dishonesty of the Left, masking totalitarianism within sweet-sounding words, frequently crops up when the Left is trying to impose its will. Another example is the repeated demand for a "national conversation" on whatever issue is important to the Left at the moment. It is painfully obvious to even the village idiot that the use of this is Orwellian, since what is desired is the very opposite of a conversation. Rather, what is demanded is compliance to immediately and strongly moving the political needle to the Left (often aided by the base use of some emotionally wrenching event). When the Left uses the term communitarianism, it is exactly the same rhetorical maneuver, one in which what matters is the end goal and getting and using the power to obtain that goal.

Nor is the Bernie Sanders Left an exception to this rule, as I mentioned earlier. Such a thing as a working class Left used to exist, represented in the writings of George Orwell. That only seems to exist in England now, and not strongly. The Bernie Sanders Left wants not opportunity for the working man, and a shift of power from capital to labor, but more government power to redistribute a supposedly static economic pie. At the same time, they are strongly committed to emancipation, not a concern of the working man. It is the emancipatory Left wearing a slightly different guise. Thus, there will be no cooperation in building community with any substantial element of the Left, which, no matter what happens, isn't going to be a part, any part, of a reborn communitarianism.

But communitarianism of the Right's isn't aborning, either. Right communitarians don't have the guts to do what it takes, which is push their program through without the Left and over the objections of the Left. Oh, there seem to be Right communitarians—not just Brooks, but people like the senators Ben Sasse and Mike Lee, or Arthur Brooks, of the American Enterprise Institute. All those men have written recent books on the topic. They're patsies too, though. They're tolerated, or even lionized, by the Left, for now, because they do not actually suggest, much less insist upon, any areas, any at all, where individual choice should be limited. Instead, they attack the Left's political enemies, and are praised in the *New York Times* book review section, and then they return to their think tanks and post-government service consulting gigs (never in the localities they came from, of course), well compensated for being tools, and never achieving any actual result. Talk is cheap.

What will a real communitarianism look like, since I demand specifics from others? It will involve a radical devolution of power. Here are some semi-random examples of it in practice. Rules and mores will be enforced, though far less by government than by private action. Churches, unions, mutual aid organizations and the like will decide who gets charity, how much, and under what conditions and obligations, with the goal that all be productive and valued members of society. Schools and other parents will unhesitatingly act *in loco parentis*. State and federal government will be permitted to say nearly nothing at all about how a community runs itself. Bad behavior, from drunkenness to wife beating, will be punished by the community. Good behavior will be rewarded by the community. Divorce will be extremely difficult. The elderly will be integrated into their families and the larger community and looked after with love, not warehoused in "living centers." Abortion will be rigorously criminalized (killing the young destroys the community and is the epitome of selfish individualism). Different, though not wholly different, roles for men and women will be strongly encouraged (blurring those roles, and especially making two-income families the norm, destroys the community). The rich will feel and execute on a duty to those not rich. Chain stores and excessive internet use will be discouraged, the former by law and the latter by social pressure. Peddlers of vice, such as drug dealers and pornographers, will be flogged; repeat offenders

will be swiftly hanged. And much more, to develop organically from a society of renewed virtue and vigor.

Of course, none of this could happen in the current system—but communitarianism of any kind can't happen in the current system. And even if this does happen, it will not be a utopia, any more than past strong American communitarianism was a utopia. It's just far better than what we have now, both for individuals and society (in the sense that only a society like this can flourish, or accomplish anything). Sometimes, even often, there will be too much restriction of individual freedom, or harsh effects on people. (Of course, the propaganda the Left has served us for decades, deliberately and falsely painting the America of the past in a bad light, grossly exaggerates these problems.) And local government, or local quasi-government, is not a panacea. Local government is often corrupt; you don't have to buy fully into the narrative of police racism to grasp that local police forces do often contain racists. Not to mention that localities can easily be dominated by what Francis Fukuyama calls patrimonialism.

There is a fly in the ointment, though, with this vision. It's one Americans don't like to talk about. That is that diversity, far from being our strength, destroys community. In other words, up to some point, communities can contain or absorb people with different perspectives and beliefs (as long as newcomers are willing to change themselves). But as Robert Putnam, again, demonstrated, even a relatively modest amount of diversity in a community totally destroys trust, whether that's in Brooklyn or small town Utah. Brooks says "You can build trust around a common affection." What if there is no common affection? Then there's no trust. This poses a critical problem for the restoration of community—in a heterogeneous America, divided not only by politics but by many other essential characteristics, from race to religion to language, is communitarianism possible, even if power were devolved down to the local level? I don't know. Maybe you just can't have a successful country the size of the United States unless it is more homogeneous than we are now, since local communities must interact with each other, after all. Empires have always been held together by a common idea endorsed by both commoners and the ruling class (Rome), ethnic sameness (China, more or less), or some measure of both (Russia). We have neither, and we're not going to have ethnic sameness, whatever

the whack jobs may say. That leaves a common idea, and in theory we could have a societal rebirth based around that—but that seems to fit poorly with the idea of increased localism.

In any case, one thing is clear—the communitarianism of the future will not be able to include the Left. That implies that as long as the Left has any relevant power or influence, we will be unable to restore communitarianism. Someone must rule, if two systems are incompatible and co-located. Certainly, that implies the active suppression of the leading elements of the Left, individuals and institutions, but that alone is inadequate, because our entire society would have to get behind such a societal rework. You can't rebuild a society from the top down, though you can clear away the brush to make new, clean construction possible. And let's not forget that much of the Right, the portion that shares the premises of the Left with respect to atomized individualism, will also have to be reworked. All this is a tall order, and only possible in a society in flux, so all the conferences and books in the world will not create any communitarianism. Sorry, David. But if we know what we're aiming for, when the timing is right, perhaps something approaching a desirable communitarianism can be created.