

288. "Communitarianism." *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, (Oxford University Press: UK, 2001), 158.

COMMUNITARIANISM is a social philosophy that maintains that societal formulations of the good are both needed and legitimate. Communitarianism is often contrasted with classical liberalism, a philosophical position that holds each individual should formulate the good. Communitarians examine the ways shared conceptions of the good (values) are formed, transmitted, enforced and justified. Hence their interest in communities (and moral dialogues within them), historically transmitted values and mores, and the societal units that transmit and enforce values such as the family, schools, and voluntary associations from social clubs to independent churches.

While laissez faire conservatives and welfare liberals differ mainly with regard to the respective roles of the private sector and that of the state, communitarians are especially concerned with the third sector, that of civil society. They pay special attention to the way social responsibilities are fostered by informal communal processes of persuasion and peer pressure.

While the term "communitarian" was coined only in the mid nineteenth century, ideas that are communitarian in nature are to be found in the Old and New Testaments, Catholic theology (e.g. emphasis on the Church as community, and more recently on subsidiarity), and socialist doctrine (e.g. writings about the early commune and about workers' solidarity).

While all communitarians uphold the importance of the social realm, and in particular of community, they differ in the extent to which their conceptions are attentive to liberty and individual rights. Early communitarians like Ferdinand Tönnies and Robert Nisbet, stressed the importance of closely knit social fabric and authority. Asian communitarians are especially concerned about the values of social order. In the 1980s, Robert Bellah and his associates, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer criticized the excessive individualism of classical liberalism, America under President Reagan and Britain under Prime Minister Thatcher. Most recently, Alan Ehrenhalt's book *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America*, questioned the value of enhancing choice, achieved at the cost of maintaining community and authority.

In the 1990s, responsive communitarians such as Amitai Etzioni, Philip Selznick, William Galston, Mary Ann Glendon, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, emphasized the need to balance commitment to the social good with respect for individual rights, to reconcile the promotion of social virtue with liberty. They issued a platform endorsed by a wide range of leading Americans, published a quarterly (*The Responsive Community*) and formed a communitarian network. They have often been credited with having influenced leaders of different persuasions in a number of Western countries.

Responsive communitarians have developed several specific concepts and policies, drawing on their philosophy. They favor shoring up families, but not traditional-authoritarian ones but peer marriages (in which mothers and fathers have equal rights and responsibilities). They fostered schools that provide character education rather than merely teach, but oppose religious indoctrination. They developed notions of community justice, in which offenders, victims and members of the

community work together to find appropriate punishments and meaningful reconciliation. Responsive communitarians favored devolution of state power, and the formation of communities of communities (within national societies and among nations), among many other policies.

Communitarian economics (or socio-economics) replaces the assumptions of neoclassical economics with the premises that actors seek to both advance their self-interest and abide by their moral commitments; that actors often make non-rational choices; and that actors are individuals who are deeply affected (albeit not fully determined) by their communities rather than act as independent individuals.

Communitarian concepts have been gaining following in response to excessive individualism in the West and a retreating from collectivism and authoritarianism in other parts of the world. They also serve as an antidote to religious fundamentalism. However, both as a social philosophy and as a public conception, it is a young discipline, so far not widely known nor followed.

(See also Democracy; New Social Movements; Pluralism.)