

The brave new world of community

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Charles Handy

THE HUNGRY SPIRIT

Beyond capitalism – a quest for purpose in the
modern world272pp. Hutchinson. £14.99.
009 180168 0

The *Hungry Spirit* is particularly timely. The triumphant celebrations that followed the collapse of Communism and the adoption of capitalism by most nations have long died down. There is a growing awareness of the tensions between global economic forces and those who seek to maintain a civil and humane society, between global corporations and national democracy, between efficiency and the social contract. And an old, nagging query is being faced with renewed intensity: where does the relentless pursuit of wealth lead us? That is the focus of this book.

Charles Handy writes in readily accessible terms, to appeal to a wide audience. His book is full of evocative personal observations and little tales borrowed from the experience of others, without being preachy. It begins by establishing that capitalism is the best economic system, but also that it leaves our spiritual needs profoundly unsated. Left unchecked, this superb economic engine has degenerative side-effects on the individual, the community and the environment. All this may sound as old as the young Marx, but Handy reflects the dominant post-1990 view that the quest for other economic systems is futile, that while we must augment capitalism, we cannot replace it. It is a mark of the time that Handy does not see the need to go into greater detail to justify his assumption.

The road to a reconstituted society starts with self-examination. Handy asks each of us to look back on our lives from the perspective of its imagined conclusion. He urges us to think about coming to heaven and meeting the person we would have liked to have been. From this and other such exercises, a person is to come to realize that a relentless pursuit of material self-interest does not satisfy an important element of the self. In the defining passage of the book, Handy writes, "we only really find ourselves when we lose ourselves in something beyond ourselves, be it our love for someone, our pursuit of a cause or a vocation, or our commitment to a group or an institution". From this observation, Handy builds the notion that true responsibility to self entails responsibility to others and to community. (*Responsibility and community*, two New Labour terms, are the most often repeated concepts of the book.) Handy calls this new theology "Proper Selfishness", an odd term given that there is nothing selfish about the concerns he advances, but he seems to feel that anything that does not smack of self-centredness will scare away those he aims to reach.

Handy does better than many other popular advocates of self-reconstruction, in that he fully recognizes that the individual is embedded in societal institutions, and unless these are reconstructed, developing one's self will not be able to advance a great deal or be sustainable. Hence he favours a broad reconstruction of numerous social institutions. Corporate employers are to

become responsible citizens, who treat their employees as members of a corporate community. And the communities in which corporations are embedded will have a veto over decisions that might be detrimental to them, for instance those concerning the environment. Government ought to enable citizens to be more active on their own behalf by returning select responsibilities to the people, especially through devolution. In the process, Handy embraces numerous currently popular ideas such as greater reliance on referendums, citizen juries, taxes earmarked by citizens, and job creation through "Employee Mutuals". At this point, the book turns into a virtual encyclopaedia of communitarian ideas.

Policy-makers will criticize Handy for failing to respond to many of the questions that have been raised about the proposals he champions. (For instance, the results of referendums are deeply affected by the ways in which they are worded and by those who have deep pockets to organize support, and are undemocratic because they make it difficult for conflicting parties to work out compromises.) Nor does he deal with the question of whether it is possible for a corporation to be only half-heartedly competitive and still hold its own on the global level. However, one must face these issues only if one accepts Handy's agenda. His power is in pointing to the core issues that confront us, not in working out the small print.

The distinctiveness of Handy's approach stands out most clearly when it is compared to those of others. Britain is one of the few countries in the world in which religion is not popularly 'hought to provide the answers to the spiritual hunger Handy correctly focuses on. His attitude to religion is, therefore, a peculiarly British one. He sees religion not as a source of the solution but as part of the escape from responsibility ("God will provide . . ."), at best a promise that there is purpose to life, but he adds, curiously, that "it does not, and should not, offer . . . any prescription of what that purpose should be".

Handy also rejects what is left of the Left in two ways. First, he does not view society as an arena for conflict, in which one class confronts the other, but as one community that can constructively examine its culture and institutions and change them. Second, he makes a strong case for the role of ideas and ideals, as well as dialogue on social and moral issues, as useful forces of change, rather than strikes, boycotts, or mobilization of the masses.

The book lacks a clear conception of who will constitute the force for social change, beyond newly self-conscious and responsible individuals – the role the proletariat plays in the Marxist scenario. As I see it, major social changes are not achieved unless they become the cause of a major social movement, whether it is socialist, religious, or separatist. Handy does not call for such a movement, but he does provide a text for one. Although Handy avoids the term "communitarian", his endeavour, combined with the outstanding work of Jonathan Sacks, means that Britain now has major native communitarian gospels and advocates of its own. Henry Tam's forthcoming book will further enhance this impression. The United Kingdom may be ready to embrace communitarian thinking on a much larger scale than has been the case up to now.

Amitai Etzioni's book *The New Golden Rule* was published earlier this year.

UK £2.00
USA \$3.75

REVIEWS

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

SEPTEMBER 26 1997
No 4930