

Le Québécois Libre



Montreal, September 1, 2001 / No 87

[<< page précédente](#)

Dr. Younkins is a Professor of Accountancy and Business Administration at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia.

CAPITALISM & COMMERCE

AMITAI ETZIONI'S RESPONSIVE COMMUNITY: A FLAWED PARADIGM

by Edward W. Younkins

Amitai Etzioni is the founding father and leading voice of contemporary communitarianism. His goal is to catalyze a national moral revitalization and preserve civil society. Consequently, he barely discusses communitarianism within its philosophical traditions. Instead, his sprawling, inconsistent, and intellectually deficient writings are pragmatic and aimed at an audience of activists and policy-makers rather than intellectuals. Etzioni wants to do for society what the environmental movement seeks to do for nature.

Socially constituted people

Etzioni states that there are not now, and never were, freestanding individuals. Rather, he explains that people are socially constituted and continually penetrated by culture, social and moral influences, and one another. Etzioni focuses on community as the basis for determining and affirming people's basic values and as the center of their responsibilities. He argues that people who claim rights must be willing to balance them with responsibilities to help others – people must all sacrifice, take care of their responsibilities, and do their share. According to Etzioni, what we need is a revival of the idea that small sacrifices by individuals can create large benefits for all of us.

Etzioni's agenda for the Communitarian Movement includes: 1) a moratorium on the minting of most new rights; 2) reestablishing the link between rights and responsibilities; 3) recognizing that some responsibilities do not entail rights; and 4) carefully adjusting some rights to changed circumstances. This agenda indicates that Etzioni is primarily an advocate of « positive » state-made rights rather than negative rights.

He states that we require a set of social virtues that we as a community endorse and actively affirm. Etzioni explains that growth in virtue is mainly achieved by instilling the proper values in children by the family, schools, and other character-building agents. Etzioni tries to give a normative justification for values by referring to the criteria of:

1) consensus-building within and across communities and societies, and 2) the manner in which values promote the basic social virtues that he claims are self-evident. He advocates relying on some traditional values, reformulating others, and creating new ones.

According to Etzioni, the basic shared core values of communitarianism include: 1) democracy; 2) acceptance and respect for the Constitution and Bill of Rights; 3) layered loyalties to the many communities that make up our polity; 4) a sense of voluntariness to membership in any given community; 5) tolerance, neutrality, and mutual respect for the beliefs of other subgroups; 6) a limited practice of identity politics in political movements; 7) fair treatment for all without prejudice or discrimination; 8) reconciliation with those estranged from us; 9) teaching the common heritage and values we share in America; and 10) small and large dialogues within and among communities. Etzioni believes that members of a community must feel that they have some core beliefs and values in common that are worth sacrificing for – otherwise, they will not look beyond their narrow partisan interests.

Towards a « community of communities »

Etzioni promotes the idea of a supra-community or « community of communities » in which citizens would engage in « megalogues » to determine their shared values and discuss national issues. He is searching for a secular Utopia to be constructed through: 1) megalogues circumscribed by « rules of engagement » designed so as to avoid debate about metaphysical fundamentals and through: 2) indoctrination, beginning in childhood, in shared values. These rules and values are apparently to be determined by a self-appointed elite of communitarians. As a result, Etzioni's communitarianism is an example of secular intellectuals' on-going will-to-power.

Etzioni endorses a variety of social structures to inculcate values and virtues including families, schools, communities (such as voluntary associations, churches, and public spaces), and the « community of communities ». These represent the social basis for the moral voice. Although small size characterizes three of his four social formations, Etzioni focuses an inordinate amount of his attention on the fourth – the community of communities.

« In Etzioni's communitarian view, people must feel they are part of something larger than themselves – they must be willing to sacrifice for the welfare of others and for society as a whole. »

He is inconsistent and ambivalent about wanting to turn the clock back to an imagined past. On the one hand, Etzioni finds some types of community as more valid than others – he especially prefers families and neighborhoods over the voluntary forms of community. On the other hand, he states that he does not want to return to traditional communities with their authoritarian power structures, rigid stratification, and discriminatory practices against women and minorities. He also says that he wants to create new, non-geographical communities to fulfill many of the moral and social functions of traditional communities. Etzioni is open to recognize virtual communities, feminist communities, and gay and lesbian communities. However, displaying his bias against economic institutions, he does not include corporations as communities.

On limiting individual autonomy

Etzioni says that he is reluctant to write morality into the law since autonomy is basic to communitarianism. For example, instead of censorship, he favors informal social mechanisms to curb inflammatory or obscene speech. Those who say things communitarians don't like or agree with will be kept in line by means of ostracism and intimidation (i.e., the tyranny of the majority). Etzioni has a difficult task in explaining how miscreants are to be made to conform if their behavior is simply anti-social and not illegal. This is especially touchy in light of his espoused core

value of tolerance, neutrality, and mutual respect for the beliefs of others.

Revealing a belief in the non-absolute nature of a person's negative rights, Etzioni says that the common good of the United States is the relevant community limiting individual autonomy. He argues that some persons may be inconvenienced by some measures, but the greater good of the community will be served. In his communitarian view, people must feel they are part of something larger than themselves – they must be willing to sacrifice for the welfare of others and for society as a whole. In his opinion, only with such a feeling will people respond to the « gentle prodding » he so frequently refers to.

Etzioni is willing to engage in debate with respect to virtually any domestic policy issue including: the right, usefulness, and constitutionality of police to conduct random checks of motorists' sobriety; the free speech/hate speech debate; non-elective monitoring of HIV; drug testing; mandatory national service for high school graduates; child-rearing methods; the influence of political action committees; etc.

He personally would want moderate restraints on privacy like sobriety checkpoints and greater testing for HIV. To combat hate speech, he encourages more speech rather than censorship. Etzioni also wants policies that strengthen childcare, discourage divorce, promote moral education in the schools, and require high school graduates to perform national service involving participation in agencies such as the Peace Corps and Vista. In addition, he would like to see nationally standardized public school curricula, community courts as an alternative to the official judicial system, public financing of elections, a ban on political action committees, and free broadcast time for candidates. With respect to drugs, he states that they should not be legalized because laws communicate and symbolize the values that the community holds dear.

Society's largest problem

Etzioni would reject the right of the motorcycle or automobile rider to decide for himself whether or not to wear a helmet or a seat belt. He reasons that if they are injured, the public may have to defray the cost of their injuries. It follows that the riders have a duty to protect themselves so as not to inflict a burden on society through their injuries. Etzioni's repudiation of the right of the rider to choose with respect to helmets and seat belts is predicated on the supposed existence of another right – that the injured person has the positive right to be cared for at the expense of the public. Etzioni's claim of that right is thus employed to deny the negative right of the rider to choose for himself. Here, and in other cases, Etzioni and other communitarians want to deny particular negative rights in favor of other positive rights. In other words, he wants to reject negative liberties and assign to society the power to regulate the behavior of individuals in order to lessen society's potential liability.

Etzioni claims that excesses of economic freedom constitute society's largest problem. He advocates legal remedies to reform campaign financing, slow down or stop the removal of tariffs and other trade barriers, and create community jobs. He also wants people to agree to work sharing and to live a simpler lifestyle. Etzioni also believes that the privatization of social security would erode the spirit of community and solidarity expressed in social security and replace it with a sense of atomistic individualism.

Etzioni also believes that society has legal and legitimate authority to determine who will own, control, and benefit from the corporations that it creates. He declares that the right to participate in the governance of a corporation should be shared by all stakeholder groups, rather than only by stockholders. He argues that the corporation should be treated as property of those who invest in it including stockholders; employees (especially those who worked loyally for it for a great many years); the local community (to the extent that it provides special treatment to a corporation); creditors who provide start-up, working, and expansion capital; and clients who continue to purchase a company's products and services when it could either purchase them at better prices or on better terms or buy products of better quality from other businesses.

Etzioni's communitarianism does not reveal a coherent system of substantive principles. As can be seen,

case after case is settled through a combination of common sense observation and pragmatic techniques. His « I vs. We » paradigm is deeply flawed at best.



[Previous articles by Edward W.Younkins](#)

[<< retour au sommaire](#)

[PRÉSENT NUMÉRO](#)

[page suivante >>](#)