

COMMENTARY

The value of community

Sean Sayers

Whether the policies of the Thatcher and Reagan years brought any overall economic benefits is doubtful; that they have had high social costs is now quite evident. The unfettered pursuit of self-interest has weakened social bonds and led to social decay and disintegration on a scale which is causing alarm right across the political spectrum. Until recently such concerns were voiced only from the Left, but now the Right is also waking up to them: witness, for example, the Conservatives' recent and mercifully inept 'Back to Basics' campaign. Communitarians like Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel have attempted to articulate these ideas in philosophical terms and develop a critique of 'liberal' individualist social theory on this basis. Against this background, their view that community is a reality and a value has great intuitive appeal. However, the more one goes into it, the more problematic it seems to become.

Contemporary communitarianism does not constitute a united school. Nevertheless, its main proponents are agreed in rejecting the liberal account of the individual and society and the attempt to found a universal conception of justice or the good upon it. The communitarian critique focuses particularly on the 'autonomous' individual of liberal social theory, who is supposed to exist prior to, and independent of, social relations. We are essentially social beings. Our needs and desires, our ability to reason and choose, our very being and identity as moral selves, are formed only in and through our social relations and roles. *Pace* the likes of Lady Thatcher, there is such a thing as society, and it is prior to and constitutive of the individual. What Sandel calls the 'unencumbered' self of liberal theory is a myth.

Two versions of communitarianism

These ideas provide a compelling critique of the philosophical foundations of liberalism. However, when it comes to trying to derive practical – moral and political – implications from them, communitarian thinkers are drawn in two apparently contradictory directions.

Neither is to be found in pure form in the writers I have mentioned. With that qualification, however, one of them may be illustrated with reference to the work of MacIntyre (*After Virtue*, Duckworth, 1981). He argues that in modern society we have lost the coherent social order which gave a sense of value and identity in traditional societies. The ties and bonds of traditional community have been shattered. Modern society has been dissolved into a mass of atomic individuals each pursuing their own arbitrary desires and preferences. The picture of the individual and society given in liberal social theory is thus, according to MacIntyre, in some important respects true: not as an account of universal human nature, but as an account of the way people have actually become in modern society. Though he acknowledges that there can be no return to the past, MacIntyre looks back to the Aristotelian tradition of the 'virtues' as a model for communitarian values with which to criticise liberal modernity.

This is an appealing story; but, as has often been pointed out, it does not sit easily with the social ontology of communitarianism. If we are necessarily and essentially social beings, then modern society cannot be understood as the mere negation – fragmentation, destruction, loss –

of community. If the idea of the unencumbered self is a mythical creation of false theory, it cannot give a true picture of the self in contemporary society.

These points are made by writers like Walzer and Taylor. Liberal policies, they argue, are not really leading to the dissolution of community – they cannot possibly do that. ‘The deep structure even of liberal society is . . . communitarian,’ writes Walzer: ‘we are in fact persons and . . . we are in fact bound together. The liberal ideology of separatism cannot take personhood and bondedness away from us. What it does is take away the *sense* of personhood and bondedness’ (‘The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism’, *Political Theory*, vol. 18, 1990, p. 10). To restore this sense, to overcome the alienation of modern liberal society, we must recognise and recover our sense of the understandings and bonds we do in fact share as members of a common community.

MacIntyre is indeed open to this criticism; but the alternative proposed by writers like Walzer and Taylor is not a satisfactory substitute. In the first place, the notion of ‘shared understandings’ cannot do the work that these philosophers require of it. No doubt, as members of a common society, we do share certain understandings; but these are not of the kind that can ground a satisfactory identity or generate any determinate ‘communitarian’ values. For example, we in this country are members of the British (or should that be English?) nation. As such we share certain understandings. But these provide a framework within which there exist radically different values and conflicting ideas about what direction this society should take. In response to a philosophy like Walzer’s, one must therefore ask: who are ‘we’? Whose ‘shared values’ are we talking about? (Even within the Conservative Party, divisions about ‘basic values’ reduced their ‘Back to Basics’ campaign to the level of farce.)

Second, the appeal to the notion of ‘shared understandings’ robs the communitarian philosophy of its critical force. By portraying the idea of loss or lack of community as illusory, the suggestion is that nothing more is needed to overcome it than a change in our understanding. Everything is all right as it is. The fault is in our minds, not in reality. Neither Walzer nor Taylor wish to endorse this conclusion, but their theories imply it nevertheless.

Taylor, for example, blames the ideology of liberal individualism for the increasing rate of family breakdown. In response, he in effect urges rejection of this ideology and an attempt to ‘retrieve’ the values of family life. However, separation and divorce are *normal* phenomena in modern society. Literally millions of people find the structures of the traditional family incompatible with fundamental aspects of their identities. To suggest that all these people are simply mistaken about their situation is absurd and untenable. The slogan of the sixties had it right: ‘do not adjust your mind, the fault is in reality.’

It seems that MacIntyre is nearer the truth when he maintains that modern liberal society is characterised by radical and irreconcilable disagreements about values and ends. Indeed, it may be argued that the only agreement about values that exists in liberal society is the agreement to differ. This is essentially the view taken by Rorty, who defends what he calls ‘postmodernist bourgeois liberalism’ in these terms, and by Rawls in his ‘political not metaphysical’ account of justice. Modern liberal society, they argue, is already a ‘community’ of autonomous individuals.

There is something in this, as I shall argue in a moment. However, like the notion of ‘shared understandings’, it denies, if not the reality of the fragmentation of liberal society, at least its critical significance. For it suggests that liberal society is the best possible form of community, and we must simply live with any dissatisfactions it engenders.

Although the contrast MacIntyre draws between traditional community and modern fragmentation is too crude and simple, there is an important element of truth to it. The effect of modern society – more specifically of social relations based on private property and market exchange – *is* fragmenting and destructive: not of community or society *as such*, but rather of a particular form of society, namely traditional society. The result is not the mere dissolution of community, but the replacement of traditional community by a new and different form of social life.

Similarly, the 'unencumbered' self of liberal social theory is not mere illusion and error. As MacIntyre rightly sees, the concept contains an important measure of truth. To be sure, individuals in liberal society are not unencumbered absolutely, of all social relations. They are, nevertheless, unencumbered *relatively*: freed from many of the particular ties that bind the individual in traditional society. However, this process occurs only by 'encumbering' the modern individual with new and different social bonds and relations, of the kind which obtain between *relatively* autonomous individuals. Such relative autonomy is a real feature of the modern self. It is not a universal human trait, but nor is it a mere illusion of liberal theory. The relatively autonomous, relatively unencumbered self is the result of a real social and historical development which neither version of communitarianism can satisfactorily comprehend.

Evaluative implications

This historical picture of the modern self helps to clarify what is true and what is false in these communitarian pictures of modern society. What are its evaluative implications? In the first place, it calls in question the moral outlooks of these two forms of communitarianism. Both portray the impact of modernity as negative. They lament the destruction or the danger of destruction of traditional forms of community, and oppose the value of community to that of individual autonomy as if these were exclusive of each other. However, if contemporary society is not simply the negation of community but rather a different form of it, then it cannot validly be criticised by appeal to the abstract notion of community as such.

In order to justify the communitarian critique we need a specific and determinate concept of community as a value. There is no reason to identify this with the traditional community we have lost; nor can it be derived from present 'shared values'. Does this mean that the idea of community as a critical value should be abandoned altogether? At first sight, the historical picture I have just sketched appears to suggest this. It seems to lead to a form of relativism which implies only that traditional and modern forms of society are successive and different, but nothing about their relative values.

However, there is another way in which these changes may be viewed. The transition to modernity has not been an entirely negative process. The destruction of traditional social relations has occurred through their replacement by new and different ones. What communitarianism portrays as a process of mere loss can also be seen as the creation of the autonomy of the self and an individual identity relatively independent of family and social position.

There are no transhistorical standards by which one can demonstrate that these changes should be valued positively, as 'gains' (as liberalism attempts to do). Nevertheless, they are in fact very widely regarded and valued as such. Though one may, in many ways, regret its passing, few would wish to return to life in a traditional community and to the restraints this would entail for the individual. That is the truth of Rorty's and Rawls's form of liberalism. However, they are wrong to suggest that modernity is a pure gain and generally valued as such. The problems of community and identity are real ones in the modern world. This is the implication of the communitarian approach properly thought through.

Neither version of this philosophy does this; neither provides a tenable account of the value of community. For it is a misinterpretation of this value to believe that it could be satisfied either by a return to the past, or by preserving the vestiges of presently threatened 'community' and curbing the individual autonomy which seems to threaten it: for example, by making divorce more difficult in order to protect the family. What the historical view that I have outlined points to, rather, is the need to create new forms of common life which accept individual autonomy and differences of values as real features of the modern world, and which seek ways to satisfy current aspirations for identity and community on that basis.

Such a community did not exist in the past, and it does not exist in the present. It must be constructed in the future out of the wreckage left by the Conservatives. If it is hard to give any more specific content to this goal, perhaps this is due not so much to a defect of theory, as to the fact that it is at present only a vague yearning, which has yet to achieve a more specific form in the real world itself. But it is a valid one nonetheless.