
The Concept of Community: Reflecting Changes in the Critical Frameworks of Liberalism in Contemporary Democratic Theory

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Abstract

Following the legacy of the 18th and 19th centuries controversy opposing the advocates of a republican conception of democracy inspired by Rousseau and the supporters of political liberalism (Pateman, 1970), a series of North American political theorists, quickly labelled within the field as "communitarians", developed critical arguments targeting liberalism in the 1980s (Sandel, 1982; Taylor, 1989; Walzer, 1990). Although initially developed by British utopian socialists in order to promote communal living during the first half of the 19th century, re-using the "communitarian" category to typify undoubtedly democratic, yet not much socialist (both in the utopian or materialist sense), philosophical propositions speaks volumes about the ideological transformations making for a new social democratic left in English-speaking Western liberal democracies after 1945 (Etzioni, 2014). Rather than promoting autonomous communities at odds with democratic social order and institutions - assuming a certain eschatology, "community" serves as a reactive concept for communitarians, whose purpose is to highlight the risks of the radical individualism supported by a liberal politics. Far from the communal ideals espoused by Owenites or by certain radicals inspired by Chartism, contemporary communitarians stress an ethical obligation. Discussions about the political principles that achieve democratic justice must take place within the framework of already existing community relations, for this would prevent political theory from yielding to the methodological atomism of liberal theories of social justice (Rawls, 1971).

The point of this paper is therefore to offer some insights into this conceptual shift. If communitarians have never combined the critical scope of community with normative propositions that we might refer to as a "politics of community" *per se*, what about the politics that underlies the ambivalent relationship between those theorists and the post-1970s hegemonic version of political liberalism? My proposition is to trace the origins of the communitarian critique of liberalism back to a deeper, structuring motif identified by American sociology as the "search for community" (Lichterman, 1996; Putnam, 2000). I will argue that the main characteristic of the concept of community in democratic theory lies in its relation to practices of civic engagement and the construction of the autonomy of democratic citizens, while distinguishing it from a conservative side of the Anglo-American communitarian critique of liberalism (Nisbet, 1953; McIntyre, 1981).

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