
STUT Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

November, 2010, NO.4 pp. 85-101

**On American Creed:
Individualism vs. Communitarianism**

I-Hsin Kai

Abstract

Individualism and communitarianism are two conceptions fundamentally contradictory to each other. However, since the 1990s, American society has undergone such contrastive opposition, shifting between the two ends, with one side exalting the self-centered and interest-oriented individualism and the other promoting communitarian affiliations and communal goods. Sociologists such as E. J. Dionne and Charles Murray criticize that the public discontent with government and pervasive unhappiness in American society stem from the permeating emphases of capitalistic ideology of egocentrism, the core of traditional western individualism. Hence, the two scholars propose to adopt and adapt eastern core values of communitarianism (NOT communism). This paper aims at analyzing the challenges that communitarianism may encounter in American society in terms of American creed.

Keywords: American Creed, communitarianism, individualism

I-Hsin Kai, Assistant Professor, General Education Center, National Taiwan Sport University

Email: kaiih@yuntech.edu.tw

南台人文社會學報

第四期 2010 年 11 月 頁 85-101

論美國精神：個人主義 vs. 社群主義

開一心

個人主義與社群主義本為互相對立的觀念。然而自二十世紀九〇年代起，美國社會經歷兩組對立思潮的衝擊；社會上一方面強力主張美國應固守傳統西方以個人為中心利益為導向的個人主義，一方面則提倡回歸群體利益的社群集體關係。社會學者如迪昂、莫瑞提出要導正美國社會不滿必須揚棄個人中心、私利導向的個人主義思維，轉向重視社群利益導向的集體關係。本文旨在析論此一違背美國傳統精神的主張所可能遭遇之挑戰。

關鍵詞：美國精神、社群主義、個人主義

開一心，國立體育大學通識教育中心助理教授

電子信箱: kaiih@yuntech.edu.tw

“That’s the promise of America... the fundamental belief that I am my brother’s keeper; I am my sister’s keeper... we must also admit that fulfilling America’s promise will require more than just money. It will require a renewed sense of responsibility from each of us...”

Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention

Introduction

As I read Murray’s and Dionne’s proposals of the little platoons¹, the communitarian affiliations, and community norms² as resolutions to some problems that face America nowadays, one idea flashes through my mind: This is simply not American; even un-American. Moreover, even President Obama himself, according to Amitai Etzioni, also draws heavily on communitarianism, emphasizing on “the importance of community, the common good, and service.”³ What has driven President Obama and both authors into making such bold proposals to people who have been living in a society dominated almost exclusively by individualism and self-centeredness? Are there any justifications for such proposals in reality?

As displayed in Murray’s and Dionne’s discourses, America in the 1990s is permeating a pervasive unhappiness with things as they are. Discontent comes to be the prevailing disposition when authority, hierarchy, specialization, and expertise are widely questioned or rejected. It seems America has gone back again to times in which “confidence in the justice or reasonableness or existing authority is

¹ Murray, Charles, *In Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), esp. pp. 260-92, and 297.

² Dionne, Jr., E. J., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), esp. pp. 13-4, and 314.

³ Etzioni, Amitai, “Conservatism is Dead: Long Live Liberalism? (Part III),” posted July 16, 2008, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amitai-etzioni/conservatism-is-dead-long_b_113096.html.

undermined; where old loyalties fade, obligations are felt as impositions, law seems arbitrary, and respect for superiors is felt as a form of humiliation; where existing sources of prestige seem undeserved, hitherto accepted forms of wealth and income seem ill-gained, and government is sensed as distant, apart from the governed and not really 'representing' them.”⁴

Such being the case, Americans come to hate themselves: Because they are not themselves.⁵ Hence, Americans start looking for some “direction” to guide them back to their forefathers’ Eden. However, American people are not desperate yet. They are not like those who, threatened to get drowned in the ocean, are looking only for some floating board to stay alive in an unfathomable abyss of yet another despair. They want something firm and stern. They want something that is the best, as always do. Then, is the communitarianism the ideal that American people are craving for? This paper intends first to display the core values of the American creed and the background and the key points to Murray and Dionne’s communitarian proposal; second, to probe into the core values of communitarianism to see if any compatible passages can be found in the two contradictory sets of conceptions.

The Core Values of the American Creed

What is in American people’s mind is a distinctive source of American national identity: The core political values of the American Creed. The principal elements of the Creed include:

⁴ Palmer, R. R., *The Age of Democratic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 1:21. Cited from Huntington, Samuel P., *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), p. 92.

⁵ Huntington, Samuel P., *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 92.

- (1)The individual has sacred rights.
- (2)The source of political power is the people.
- (3)All governments are limited by law and people.
- (4)Local government is to be preferred to national government.
- (5)The majority is wiser than the minority.
- (6)The less government the better.⁶

The core values are virtually values of “liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of law under a constitution.”⁷ Since the Creed is to “delegitimate any hierarchical, coercive, authoritarian structures,” it is “basically antigovernment and antiauthority in character.”⁸ In short, American value liberty, individualism, and equality, uphold popular control of government and the openness of government, and simultaneously stress strong and intense “hostility toward power (the anti-power ethic).”⁹

However, while Americans subscribe to ideas of constitutionalism, individualism, liberalism, democracy, and egalitarianism, as the aforementioned, conflicts arise as certain value being taken to extreme, such as liberty versus security and individualism versus democracy.¹⁰ And thus there ensues the Americans’ dilemma of demanding for more security with liberty truncated or enjoying more liberty with no protection and security guaranteed. As Morone and Dionne comment:

“American politics is characterized by both a ‘dread and a yearning.’ The dread is a ‘fear of public power as a threat to liberty.’

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

The yearning...is ‘an alternative faith in direct, communal democracy’ [in which] Americans could ‘put aside their government and rule themselves directly.’ Put another way, Americans yearn simultaneously for untrammelled personal liberty and a strong sense of community that allows burdens and benefits to be shared fairly and willingly, apportioned through democratic decisions.”¹¹

Thus, when in American society the dominant extreme individualism and self-centeredness has failed in meeting the public needs and in solving the problems confronted, the dilemma evokes trends that run somewhat counter to the core values of the American Creed. Social reformers start blaming the current ills on the loss of community and resorting to earlier periods that are characterized by fellow feeling and mutual concern.¹² Especially when they find two hundred years ago Jefferson himself also asserts Americans to “unite in common efforts for the common good, [and] restore to social intercourse...,”¹³ American people become convinced that “community [is] prominent...[and] that reclaiming the role community formerly played is necessary to encounter the negative effects of individualism and liberal thinking,”¹⁴ Moreover, it has also been suggested that individualism and liberalism should be moderated to allow for considerations of the common good and the public welfare.¹⁵ Consequently, this nostalgia of an ideal past society “characterized by

¹¹ Morone, James A., *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), esp. pp. 1-30 and 322-37. Cited from Dionne, p. 330.

¹² Phillips, Derek L., *Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 18.

¹³ Jefferson, Thomas, “First Inaugural Address,” in *Living Documents of American History* ed. by Henry Steele Commager (Taipei: Hsin Ya Publishing Co., 1976), p. 53.

¹⁴ Phillips, p. 18.

¹⁵ Mill, John S., *On Liberty*, Everyman Edition (London: Dent, 1972), p. 170.

shared values, respect for tradition, commitment to the common good, and similar attributes”¹⁶ enforces Americans’ craving for matching rights and responsibilities and their belief in balancing social concern and self-reliance.¹⁷ And after it is proved that small institutions close to home such as communities tend to do better and influence more, and that private moral choices usually have social consequences, social reformers and political thinkers then prevail American society with the notion that “individuals are never detached from their society, culture, and history and that if they are to properly understood they must first be examined in these contexts.”¹⁸ As a result, people like Murray and Dionne, not necessarily coincidentally, present proposals of strong communitarian tendency.

Little Platoons and Communitarian Affiliations

Murray demonstrates his communitarian tendency as he presents his ideal triggering mechanism of affiliations for achieving the state of happiness by upholding Burke’s best-known passages:

“To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind.”¹⁹

Murray agrees to Burke’s idea that “[m]en are not tied to one another by papers and seals, [but] are led to associate by resemblances,

¹⁶ Dionne, p. 314.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Avineri & de-Shalit, cover-page.

¹⁹ Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. M. Dent, 1960), p. 44. Cited from Murray, p. 260.

by conformities, by sympathies.”²⁰ Murray therefore proposes to form little platoons to help develop each individual’s public affections. Because, as Murray indicates, every individual belongs to a few ‘little platoons,’—the strongly bound communities with complex public functions—and his/her daily-life great joys and sorrows, satisfactions and pre-occupations are defined in terms of them.²¹ And being in some little platoons engenders in the individual a feeling of intimacy and belongingness, which, according to Maslow, is one of the master resources of happiness.²² To attain this end, Murray proposes to use affiliations as the mechanism, for from an affiliation behavior one forms new relationships with others. And these affiliations are not contractual and imply no conscious interest; they are merely cumulative effective effects over time and natural results of interactions among people;²³ they are a means whereby people of common values are enabled to live by those values.”²⁴

Dionne manifests strong tendency toward communitarian norms in his ascribing Dukakis’ failure to his unwillingness to uphold a set of public values and to use government to “promote, encourage, and...enforce the community’s shared moral commitments.”²⁵ In addition, Dionne regards Bush’s attack on Dukakis as an attack “of individualism that was seen as always preferring the rights of an

²⁰ Murray, p. 261.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

²² Maslow, A. H., “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50 (1943): 370-396. According to Maslow, to achieve happiness in life, one needs to satisfy five human needs, namely, physiological needs (e.g., food, sleep, stimulation, activity), safety needs (e.g., security; protection from harm), love and belongingness needs (e.g., love, friendship, comradeship), esteem needs (e.g., self respect, personal worth, autonomy), and self actualization Needs (e.g., personal growth to full potential).

²³ Burke, p. 44.

²⁴ Murray, p. 263.

²⁵ Dionne, p. 314.

accused individual over the claims of the community.”²⁶ Still another example of Dionne’s tendency toward communitarianism is his assail, as well as Robert Reich’s and Fred Siegel’s, on Americans’ lack of “a strong ethical core,” their lack of a strong sense of “we” to replace “‘us’ and ‘them,’” and their lack of definition of “the public good apart from the sum of individual claims based on the principle of social solidarity, [and] the weaker claims of altruism.”²⁷

Both Murray and Dionne make clear that what America needs most is a set of values that are hardly found in the American Creed but rather run counter to the core values of the Creed. In a word, their ideas are closer to the core values of communitarianism.

Core Values of Communitarianism and Challenges

A. Core Values

A key word about communitarianism is “community.” As Dionne defined it, a community is “a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices....Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past.”²⁸

Communitarians hold that it is essential for man to achieve his true identity in the public life of a community and that a man can only achieve his/her highest and most complete moral existence by means of

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

²⁸ Phillips, p. 11.

being a member of a community. They are convinced that a community involves fraternal sentiments and fellow feeling and a community possesses the realization of the human good as its shared aim. Hence, communitarians advocate involvement in public life, increased participation in small communities, firms and clubs, “whose primary bond is a shared understanding both of the good for man and of the good of [the] community, and where individuals identify their primary interests with reference to those goods...a shared history, shared practices, shared meanings, a common tradition, and common ideals about a life together...[and which are] being ‘held together by sympathetic feeling and by coincidence of interest.’”²⁹

Communitarians regard community as a normative ideal because it is a place where individuals cooperate either for the sake of achieving their private ends or in order to attain certain shared final ends. Therefore, the individual cannot be conceptualized apart from his/her community, its practices, culture and values. The individual is constituted in the community and by the community. “Social processes and institutions, the family, the church, political and educational systems, shape [him/her] into a social being who experiences emotion, who desires, who has understanding of and attitudes towards the social world and her place in.”³⁰

Synthesized from the afore-mentioned, the most fundamental premise of communitarian is the belief that “communities have a communal life, and the success or failure of a community’s communal life is part of what determines whether its members’ lives are good or

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁰ . Frazer, Elizabeth, & Nicola Lacey, *The Politics of Community: A Feminist Critique of the Liberal-communitarian Debate* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, Simon & Schuster International Group, 1993), p. 108.

bad”³¹ and “the collective acts of a community constitute its communal life.”³² Hence, “on the metaphysical view of integration, a community is a super-person, and its collective life embodies all the features and dimensions of a human life.”³³

To sum up, the principal elements of communitarianism include: First, human life will become better when people’s lives are guided and constructed by communitarian, collective and public values; and second, “[e]mbodied individual is a more true and accurate model, a better conception of reality than liberal individualism or atomism or structuralist.”³⁴ In all, the core values of communitarianism are virtually values of self-denial, altruism, collectivism, and other-oriented attachments.³⁵

B. Challenges

As we can see from the above, communitarians put much emphasis on collective goods, community values, and public virtues. But, speaking of the so-called community values, questions arise: What kind of values should be at issue? Whose values should they be? Where should they proceed from? Their status? Their identity? And, above all, why? Since communitarians place the primacy of the collective life over that of the individual, they ascribe supreme value to the community itself rather than to its individual members. As a result, communitarians tend to judge the appropriateness of people’s conduct in terms of the requirements of the collective. D. L. Phillips

³¹ Nozick, Robert, “Distributive Justice,” in Avineri and de-Shalit, p. 207.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³⁴ Franzer, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.108.

impeaches this as he says:

“For [communitarians], what counts as good or bad, right or wrong, normal or abnormal on the part of individual behavior is derivative from the needs of the community and its realization of the common good.” 36

But what about American people? To be flat, Americans will NOT accept this, for Americans, being rational and self-directed individuals, believe that human beings are rights-bearing creatures. “By virtues of [their] reason and free will--i.e., [their] ability to shape their lives in accordance with some chosen concept of the good--they are all entitled to be treated as ends, not means.” 37 This, to Americans, is simply the wrong-headedness of confusion of the good and the rights.

In addition, Phillips also questions the efficacy of the communal solidarity in precluding disagreement and conflicts, and in assuring consensus about good life.³⁸ He questions the common good based on shared purposes and standards is fundamental to a people’s way of life, when communitarians argue that since “both individual conduct and a society’s institutional arrangements...ought to be in accordance with a shared conception of the common good...certain communal practices and ends can be accepted by everyone as the basis for a politics of the common good.³⁹ As Nozick says: “There are only individual people, with their own individual lives.”⁴⁰ Hence, when the communitarians uphold that “[t]he preferences and actions of individual men and women

³⁶ Phillips, p. 175-76.

³⁷ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 32-33. Cited from Sargent, p. 83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Nozick, p. 33.

are to be evaluated in accordance with their contributions to that common good, [and that] the same hold true with regard to a society's institutional arrangements,"⁴¹ American people will simply regard this as another confusion of the preferences with the rights. Just as Hayek argues,

"Human institution, arise out of unplanned interaction of individual human interests. Without firsthand knowledge of each other and without any necessary agreement about values, the spontaneous, self-seeking activities of separate individuals create order and cooperative enterprises."⁴²

Therefore, no deliberate design about individual preferences and interests is necessary in American society. While communitarians call for the return of community and place special emphasis on its relational aspect on mutual involvement and participation, these practice may enhance the establishment of a web of interconnection by creating trust, joining people together, and making each individual aware of his/her reliance on the community, but simultaneously they may also impede the development of each person's individuality and deprive of his/her rights in the name of "shared practices as central elements of community."⁴³ This is simply dictatorship in the Americans' eye.

Another point that causes assault on communitarianism is that communitarians see people's affiliations are not the sort that are formed entirely voluntarily or broken at will. A common locale helps assure that people's ties to other community members are to some extent

⁴¹ Phillips, p. 20.

⁴² Hayek, F., *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Cited from Sargent, p. 81.

⁴³ Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Cited from Phillips, p. 12.

unwilled and non-voluntary. This unwillingness and non-volunteering also violates the principle of the American Creed.

Finally, communitarians emphasize the embedded and embodied status of the individual person. That also contradicts to central themes emphasized in particular in American thought which construct an abstract and disembodied individual. When communitarians tend to emphasize the value of specifically communal and public goods, and conceive of values as rooted in communal practices, again this contradicts to American liberalism that emphasizes individual rights, and conceives of the individual subject as the ultimate originator and bearer of value. Moreover, "...interest representation generates incentives for community-based organizations to play a more active role in mobilizing the electorate and monitoring the legislature by both protecting and ratifying authentic representatives."⁴⁴ Hence, while communitarians scold modern society's preference for short-term gratification over long-term commitment, love of things instead of values, and modern people's flight from responsibility toward selfishness,⁴⁵ the proposal of imposing communitarian norms to people may not work effectively as expected, but may result in more selfishness, more short-term commitment in the name of "for the common good," for the common good of certain group of people, such as the privileged, the collective "plunders," to name a few.

⁴⁴ Guinier, Lani, *The Tyranny of the Majority* (New York, The Free Press, Macmillan, 1994), p. 100.

⁴⁵ Dionne, p. 13.

Conclusion

America has been advocating the belief that men are separate, individual persons, each with own aims, interests, and conceptions of the good. Americans have been seeking a framework of rights that will enable each individual to realize his/her capacity as free moral agents, consistent with a similar liberty for others. Such being the case, Americans' liberalism is individualistic, is the politics of rights, while communitarianism is the politics of the common good. This suggests that liberalism is about how to limit the sphere of politics while communitarianism is about how to extend it. Since, "[m]ajor reforms [have been] attempted in political institutions in order to limit power and reshape institutions in terms of American ideals,"⁴⁶ the distinction between communitarianism as the politics of extension and liberalism as that of limitation perhaps is the key for Americans to shun communitarian norms and stay with liberal norms.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Huntington, p. 87.

⁴⁷ Bellah, et al., pp. 7-8.

References

- Avineri, S., & De-Shalit, A. (Eds.). (1992). *Communitarianism and individualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (Eds.). (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, E. (1960). *Reflections on the revolution in France*. London: J. M. Dent.
- Frazer, E., & Lacey, N. (1993). *The Politics of community: A feminist critique of the liberal-communitarian debate*. NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, Simon & Schuster International Group.
- Guinier, L. (1994). *The tyranny of the majority*. NY: Macmillan.
- Hayek, F. (1960). *The constitution of liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Huntington, S. P. (1981). *American politics: The promise of disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Jefferson, T. (1776). First inaugural address. In H. S. Commager (Ed.), *Living documents of American history* (Article 9). Taipei: Hsin Ya.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review* 50, 370-396.
- Mill, J. S. (1972). *On liberty*. Everyman Edition. London: Dent.
- Morone, J. A. (1990). *The democratic wish: Popular participation and the limits of American government*. NY: Basic Books.
- Murray, C. (1988). *In pursuit of happiness and good government*. NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Nozick, R. (1992). Distributive justice. In S. Avineri and A. De-Shalit (Eds.), *Communitarianism and individualism* (pp. 149-182). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nozick, R. (1973). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. NY: Basic Books.

-
- Palmer, R. R. (1959). *The age of democratic revolution*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Phillip, D. L. (1993). *Looking backward: A critical appraisal of communitarian thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.
- Sargent, L. T. (1990). *Contemporary political ideologies: A comparative studies*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

