Communitarianism

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Communitarianism

A New Agenda for Politics and Citizenship

Henry Tam

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Preface

It is not uncommon in political discourse for a new set of ideas to gain wider currency and lose clarity of meaning at the same time. Some may even suggest that the two are inextricably linked. Such is the fate which has befallen the theory of communitarianism. Just when communitarian ideas are beginning to secure widespread recognition and political influence, they have also become frequently distorted and misunderstood. This is partly due to the fact that, although a number of thinkers have written about particular aspects of communitarianism, there is no single text which draws the different elements into a critical synthesis. In the absence of such a reference point, communitarianism has been attacked for whatever its opponents take it to mean, regardless of what it may actually imply.

My aim in writing this book is to bring together the different strands of communitarian ideas which have been developing in Europe and America and formulate a unified theory which carries clear implications for practical reforms. Central to my exposition is the ideal of 'inclusive communities', based on the three communitarian principles of co-operative enquiry, mutual responsibility, and citizen participation. I want to argue that we should move beyond the outmoded Left-Right divide, and recognize that the real challenge before us is to find a viable alternative to both individualist and authoritarian approaches to social and political problems. The politics of building inclusive communities is put forward to meet this challenge.

The book sets out what communitarianism is about at three interrelated levels. First, there is the theoretical level where the key communitarian principles and their implications for the evaluation of conflicting claims, the identification of common values, and the reform of power structures, are examined. Second, at the policy level, those principles are applied to questions concerning the education, work opportunities and protection which should be

secured for all members of inclusive communities as the basic condition of citizenship. Third, at the organization level, I turn to what citizens involved with institutions in the state sector, the business sector, and the third sector of voluntary and community groups can do to bring about the necessary reforms.

One of the difficulties in presenting any social and political theory is maintaining a good balance between breadth and depth. Without adequate breadth, a theory could be mistaken as only applicable to a small sub-set of issues. This has been one of the problems with many books on communitarian ideas, which give the impression that these ideas are just about the decline of community spirit in American cities in recent years. In fact, a rich tradition of communitarian ideas can be found in Europe, especially amongst British and French thinkers, and they have long provided inspiration to people who reject the pseudo-freedom preached by individualists as much as the oppressive conformity glorified by authoritarians. Accordingly, I have brought a much wider range of communitarian ideas to bear on my arguments, and have drawn examples from a variety of countries, many of which have developed communitarian practices independently from America. The result, I hope, is a comprehensive picture of communitarian reforms and their applications to, not just community and voluntary action, but action by government and commercial organizations. Furthermore, it should establish that it is not just families and schools in neighbourhood communities which should be measured against the yardstick of 'inclusive community', but also employers, unions, protective agencies, multinational corporations, and any organization which can impact on the physical, moral, or intellectual development of citizens across the world.

Lack of sufficient depth can pose a different kind of problem. Books on communitarian philosophy tend to provide intricate conceptual analyses, but seldom penetrate beyond that to real life problems, and it is difficult for students of politics to discern their practical relevance. On the other hand, populist books and think-tank pamphlets focus sharply on specific issues such as moral education, parenting skills or corporate responsibility, and they have been criticized for offering quick and simplistic solutions with little intellectual substance. By contrast, I have attempted to articulate and defend the key communitarian principles, and then apply them to tackling an interrelated set of practical problems. What I want to show is that there is a unified worldview which can be deployed against individualist and authoritarian arguments, and

guide us in reforming current social and political practices for the better. Of course, the depth in holistic exposition I strive for is different from the depth of the single discipline specialist. Inevitably, there are detailed arguments and case studies which I could not address at length in a book with the intended scope. However, the bibliographical references should provide a useful guide to where much more extensive treatment is given to particular topics.

In writing this book, I am conscious of the considerable intellectual debt I owe to the forerunners of communitarian ideas. I would mention in particular L. T. Hobhouse, Emile Durkheim and John Dewey for their contributions to the development of a communitarian form of liberalism in opposition to the individualistic liberalism which is so destructive of all that is good about community life. I am also grateful to the many contemporary theorists and practitioners who helped me set up the Communitarian Forum in 1995 which has enabled a wide range of issues concerning the development of inclusive communities to be discussed under conditions of co-operative enquiry. As Chair of the Forum, I have been fortunate in being able to draw on the ideas and support of the members of our Advisory Council, particularly Professor Peter Atteslander (Swiss Academy for Development), Professor Ferdinand Kinsky (Centre International de Formation Européenne, France), Andrew Phillips (Citizenship Foundation, UK), Professor Benjamin Barber (Walt Whitman Center for Democracy, USA), and Professor Amitai Etzioni (Center for Communitarian Policy Studies, USA).

Many other people helped me turn the ideas I have been discussing in the Communitarian Forum into the present work. I would like to thank my publisher Steven Kennedy for his advice on the style and structure to adopt for writing this book; Charles Handy, Robert E. Goodin and David Marquand for their encouraging remarks upon reading early drafts of the book; Terry McLaughlin, Jonathan Boswell, Tony Skillen, John Stewart, Chris Ormell and Antony Duff for the discussions we had on particular communitarian arguments; Carole Ulanowsky, Kevin Healy, Jonathan Pinkney-Baird and Chris Thorpe for their support in furthering communitarian debates; and the students from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge who participated actively in a number of seminars convened to discuss communitarianism.

Finally, and most importantly, this book could not have been written without the support of my family. Celia's encouragement and the understanding of our young daughters, Jessica and Antonia,

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HENRY TAM