

Liberal Communitarianism: an Interview with Amitai Etzioni at 92

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2021

Daniel Gordon and Andreas Hess (Coeditors in Chief of *Society*). You composed your article in the present issue of *Society* before President Biden began his term. You mentioned in an e mail that you could tie the article to what the Biden Administration is now doing. Can you explain?

My main thesis is that capitalism works best when well-contained and that it causes great harm when it breaks through its moorings. Decades of deregulation; court decisions that allow corporations to make, in effect, unlimited campaign contributions; and, above all, changes in the moral culture, turning it less communitarian and more individualistic, have all led to the current condition of capitalism, making it a corrupt and harmful economic system.

President Biden shows some signs that he seeks to be a transformative president by advocating for some re-regulation, for programs that advance social justice, and for the common good. However, the scope of the changes that are needed and the resistance they face, including from red-state Democrats and unrealistic leftist dreamers (not to mention the Republicans), are so considerable that it will take a major social movement to change the values and build up the political force to contain capitalism properly.¹ Nevertheless, the US and the world will benefit from some restraining of capitalism, even if much will still remain to be done.

You were born in Germany 1929. You were smuggled out of Nazi Germany and into Switzerland in a motorcycle, and you then settled in Palestine. You joined the Haganah, the underground army of the Jewish community of Palestine, when you were sixteen. You knew about bombs and muskets. Your life seems to have changed entirely once you undertook your doctorate in sociology at Berkeley in the late 1950s. In short, you became an academic and a “peacenik.” However, you have been described (e.g., by Richard Posner) as one of the last of the great “public intellectuals.” Finally, we note that you have published

many articles in *Society*. Is being a public intellectual and writing for a journal like *Society* a kind of synthesis of the academic and the insurgent?

I should note first that my experience in combat made me abhor violence, and led me to demonstrate against the war in Vietnam and against nuclear arms in the streets of New York City and in Trafalgar Square in London; to participate in endless teach-ins; and to write *The Hard Way to Peace, Winning Without War*, and, more recently, *Avoiding War with China*. Kevin Hudson gives an incredibly effective summary of my position in a ten-minute video available on YouTube, called “The Making of a Peacenik.”

My life as an activist professor was forged soon after I graduated from Berkeley. During my first year as a professor at Columbia, the 1958–1959 academic year, I wrote a review of the movie *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, focusing on the pro-peace message that I took from it and connecting it to my position against war and my activism against nuclear weapons. Soon after, I was called into the office of Paul F. Lazarsfeld, the chair of the sociology department, where I was told that my movie review was threatening to the reputation of the field of sociology, which was still tenuous after over a generation of effort to legitimize it as a science. I was warned to stick to my sociological specialty for the sake of my career. I was married, had a two-year-old son, student debts, and a lease. However, after much thought, I decided that I could ‘do no other.’ I continued my activism but doubled up my academic work. Ever since, I have tried to follow the course that I charted in that pivotal year. *Society* has been and is one of the few publications in which public intellectuals can express themselves, allowing professors like me to find a voice.

Does being a public intellectual and what you call “an activist professor” mean that one is committed to being explicit about what one is willing to die for? The question may seem odd, but you have, in your work, distinguished different communities in terms of “how far one is willing to go” for them? We are wondering if your passion for communitarianism bears traces of the life-and-death situations you confronted in your early years?

¹ On this social movement, see Etzioni, A. (2019). *Reclaiming Patriotism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. I turned this book into an open-source publication, so one can download it without a charge.

Those are interesting questions that I have never explored before. I did put my life on the line for a community I believed (and still believe) in, the Jewish community, as it was seeking to invest itself in a state, which became Israel. I would do it again in a heartbeat if I felt the community was endangered. My 92-year-old legs do not carry me very far anymore; however, if there was another assault on the Capitol—and if I was nearby—I surely would try to step in. So, I believe, would most others.

One of the key concepts in your article in this issue of *Society* is, of course, “capitalism.” You began your scholarly career by writing about complex organizations and it is not evident in the early work that you would emerge as a major critic “capitalism” and defender of “communitarianism.” When did “capitalism” and “communitarianism” come to the fore in your work and why?

In 1991, I observed that Americans were proud of the way the United States won the Gulf War, yet did not want to serve in the armed forces, and did not want their children to serve, either. I wrote that, while individual rights surely matter, these rights must be balanced with commitments to the common good—for instance, protection of the environment and public health. These ideas and similar ones held by colleagues became the basis for a movement, one that even had its own platform.² I called the movement “communitarianism.”

I added one more idea to the mix. I pointed out that the various liberation movements of the 1960s (civil rights, women’s rights, sexual liberation) had brought down the old regime; undermined authority figures from fathers to labor leaders, from priests to presidents; and also cast by the wayside the accepted standards of upright conduct. Many of these old norms were racist, sexist, and authoritarian, but the liberation movements failed to create new shared moral understandings, thereby allowing for a moral vacuum. The need was *not* for a return to the bad old days (the agenda of social conservatives dismayed by the 1960s) but for new understandings. Formulating new rules through moral dialogue would be the mission of communitarians. The time for these ideas had come. Americans, Brits, and others suffering from an overdose of Reaganism and Thatcherism had discovered that when everyone just watches out for number one, the result is a rough-and-tumble society, one that is too self-centered and isolating. They looked for more togetherness and more attention to the common good. Polls showed that people welcomed the balance between the “I” and the “we” that communitarianism offered, and the line “the Me needs the We to Be” was very well received.

I taught ethics for two years at the Harvard Business School. I found that most of my colleagues were teaching classes that were in effect promoting unethical conduct. The marketing department taught students that if you put small

items in large boxes, you can charge more; if you put hot colors on the box, they lead to impulse buying; and so on. The finance department told students that if you buy a corporation and fire a lot of workers, the stock price goes up; then you sell it for great gain and repeat the process. Most students drank the Kool-Aid and believed that the economy works best when everyone is out to maximize themselves. They believed that this was what capitalism was all about. I held (and hold) that that is empirically wrong and morally obnoxious.³

Are capitalism and communitarianism opposites? Or is communitarianism simply a supplement?

Communitarianism is an encompassing social philosophy that has implications for all sectors of society, including the economy. (I see myself as a liberal communitarian, because some communitarians are authoritarian, as they view the common good as dominant and shortchange individual rights. Liberal communitarians view both individual rights and social responsibilities as basic principles and seek to work out the tensions between the two.⁴) Capitalism is a form that one subsector of society—the economy—may take. Communitarianism suggests that capitalism needs to be strongly contained by the common good as well as social and political institutions.

Does your idea of “capitalism” differ in important ways from that of Marx and other classical economists and sociologists? Is the fundamental difference that you accept capitalism as the framework of modern life but seek only to “encapsulate” it with morally restraining policies and attitudes?

Early Marx viewed history as a march from commune to commune and toward the abolition of the state. This is a very communitarian idea, as it means that society will rely on most people doing what must be done because they believe these duties to be legitimate, and those who do not do their part will be subject to social pressure. Marx also was correctly concerned about the dominance of technological and economic forces over normative and social institutions. However, he favored revolutionary change, which often involves mass bloodshed and leads to societies that are worse than the capitalist ones.

The European social democrats, who favor strong social markets, provide the closest model to encapsulated capitalism that I have seen so far. Unfortunately, they have been bitten by the bug that leads to weakening the moorings that are needed to contain capitalism. Sweden, for example.

³ See Etzioni, A. (1988). *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics*. New York: The Free Press.

⁴ See Etzioni, A. (1993). *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda*. New York: Touchstone; Etzioni, A. (1996). *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*. New York: Basic Books; and Etzioni, A. (2015). *The New Normal: Finding a Balance between Individual Rights and the Common Good*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

² See “The Responsive Communitarian Platform.”

In the article, you mention that a recent poll found that only 56 percent of Americans have a positive view of capitalism. But you note elsewhere in the article that the present decline in confidence in capitalism is not necessarily unique. One thinks of the 1930s. How do you see the current crisis of capitalism, if one may call it that, in historical perspective? Or if we may put the question in different form: Is your assessment of capitalism in this article different from what it was, say 25 years or more ago? Are you not reformulating the same criticism and simply using current data to sustain it?

Americans are not close to understanding the extent to which capitalism is overreaching and has become corrupt. They are distracted by political tribalism, racial conflicts, and the very real threat to democracy. There were periods in which they came closer, especially during Franklin Roosevelt's reign and the Kennedy-Johnson years. There are now signs that the resistance to a more active role of the government in containing capitalism and correcting for its ill effects is abating to some extent. However, as I already pointed out, the work is long and the day is short.

Do you consider yourself a person of the “Left” or “Right” or “Center” or “Nowhere?”

One of my many shortcomings has been and is my tendency to seek common ground among various factions. As a result, liberals tend to argue that I am a moderate, if not a bit of a conservative, and conservatives maintain that I am a liberal donning conservative camouflage. I am an advocate of peace but not a pacifist—there are some things I would fight for; I am for social change but against revolutions; and so on. The media, which very often sees things in red and blue, and has little room for people in the middle, often overlooks liberal communitarian positions by others and myself.

What does the term “political correctness” evoke for you: a real problem on the Left, or an ideological construct of the Right? You regard unbridled libertarianism as a problem. Has “political correctness” contributed significantly to it? For example, is not the preoccupation with personal pronouns and the proliferation of alternative pronouns an example of grammatical libertarianism?

I believe in restorative justice. Even killers, if they show true remorse and pay their dues to society, should be helped to be reintegrated into the community. Most anyone deserves a second chance. I hence am sorry to see some cases in which the punishment did not fit the crime, for instance in the forced resignation of Senator Al Franken and of some *New York Times* editors and reporters. However, given the scale of social inequality, highlighted by the pandemic, and the threats of right-wing populism, and the corruption of capitalism, these issues should not be allowed to distract from the main issues of the day.

What do you see as the greatest strengths and weaknesses of academic social science today? Are there partic-

ular disciplines you regard as particularly creative at this time? Others that you see as going off-track?

Large parts of the social sciences reveal four trends:

1. Scientism – pretending to be scientific by using mathematical models and regression analyses while actually not providing new accurate data or insight.
2. Ideologization – using social science terms to advance one's political positions.
3. Irrelevance – choosing socially inconsequential topics to study.
4. Egotism and Rationalism – drawing on a model of people and society that assumes that people are self-centered and logical-empirical creatures, who are seeking to maximize themselves and ignoring the other and the common good.

Worst are the economists, who—despite tons of evidence by behavioral economists—still hold on to their egotistical and rationalistic theories. Next are those political scientists who try to emulate the economists. Other political scientists often are doing good work.

Psychology is divided into a number of subfields that vary a great deal from each other, and each has its own albatross to bear. All are too often not possible to replicate. To assess them in detail would require an essay.

For me, sociology has the greatest potential to understand the person within the societal context, and offers the way both can be changed. Anthropology is a kind of sociology. Historians are making major contributions to understanding our current condition. I find a lot of interest in legal studies, especially constitutional law. They are doing social analysis and prescription, using different terminology than social sciences but often producing very sound and relevant work. (I hence have published about a dozen articles in law reviews.)

I am very grateful to the new editors of *Society* for this opportunity to share some of my ideas. For those who would like to find out more about them, here are a few leads. I consider by far my most important work to be *The Active Society*, which is a theory about the ways societies can be changed to respond to basic human needs. I am sorry to say that it is my least-read work. In *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message*, I examined my activism and repeated failures. I gave up too early in fighting the war in Vietnam; after seven years of futile campaigning, I resigned a year before those who opposed the war finally carried the day. I was too late in arguing that the funds invested in reaching the moon should be invested in the inner cities (in *The Moon-Doggle: Domestic and International Implications of the Space Race*, published in 1964). I was way too early in writing a book about bioethics (in *Genetic Fix: The Next Technological Revolution*, published in 1973.)

My year in the Carter White House showed the limits of my ability to be heard. I did have my fifteen minutes in the sun

(well, a bit more) when communitarianism became quite popular in the early 1990s. In the process, I was hounded by the FBI and CIA, as well as by personal tragedy.⁵ Those who prefer a much shorter treatment of some of my key ideas may turn to a ten-minute video, “The Making of a Peacenik,” as well as “The Five-Minute Communitarian,” among a score of others available on YouTube.

My latest project is CivilDialogues.org. Civil Dialogues is an online agora, a place people meet to deliberate and to form a consensus on urgent matters. No aliases, no fakes; only people who are willing to show their true face. Identities are verified. A place to allow the kind of continued, extended

deliberations that democracy requires. A place to form resolutions and vote on them. A site to make a record once consensus has been reached. A platform on which online communities are formed that carry over offline. I hope readers and I can meet there, as well as on these pages, to extend social science analysis and public activism.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

⁵ See Etzioni, A. (2003). *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. pp. 137–315.