
ON ETZIONI'S CONCEPT OF A RESPONSIVE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Communitarianism of Amitai Etzioni is one of the socio-philosophical concepts that arose in response to the liberal understanding of society, mostly to the liberal atomism. Communitarians concentrate on the importance of socially rooted individual in community and deal with the role of communities in nowadays society. Some critics argue that it is better to avoid the term 'community' as it is too vague. However, communitarians are convinced that a community can be defined very precisely, particularly through the definition of its basic characteristics. In the text, I will analyse Etzioni's concept of a 'responsive community' and outline the application of this concept in the reality of current Europe, especially in the terms of European community and the EU.

Keywords: communitarianism, community, responsive community, European Union, moral dialogue

1. Introduction

Etzioni defines communities as “webs of social relations that encompass shared meanings and above all shared values” [1]. Communities are the main social entities that promote relationships based on understanding the other as the goal on itself, what makes them distinguished from the instrumental nature of such relations as in the market and civil society. Sullivan sees the communities as certain “institutions, complex wholes that guide individual activity and sustain identity” [2]. I agree that a group can be understood as community provided that it embraces a wide range of interests and activities that take into account the person as a whole, not only scope, benefits and roles of that person, and that there exist certain common responsibilities and common culture within it. I believe that in this sense the definition of community is sufficiently meaningful and flexible at the same time to contain all kinds of communities. Common life and shared values are what people have in common in the community. They also have obligations to each other, which are based on the interdependence and the consciousness of common identity.

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Etzioni distinguishes a number of characteristics that are typical for communities. "First, communities provide bonds of affection that turn groups of people into social entities resembling extended families. Second, they transmit a shared moral culture (a set of shared social meanings and values that characterize what the community considers virtuous versus unacceptable behaviour) from generation to generation, as well as reformulating this moral framework day by day." [3] These characteristics distinguish the community from other social groups.

This requires adherence to a set of shared values, norms and meanings, it shares a common history and identity, thus a common culture. Communities are therefore not only aggregates of persons acting as free players, but also units that have their own identity and purpose and can act as separate units and wholes. They make up the history and set the context of the acting of an individual in society. Another notable feature of the community from Etzioni's point of view is the "relatively high level of sensitivity" [4]. This means that the real community is not considered a social unit that oppresses their members and responds to their false needs. As Selznick states, normal communities take account of how people actually live, and want to live, not only how we want them to live [5].

2. Community as a concept

In the past there existed a model of community that is called 'traditional'. Gardner defined it as a community that "commonly demanded a high degree of conformity" from its members [6]. Traditional community was not very friendly to those who were not part of it, and was rather closed to the communication from outside. It relied on the history, tradition and continuity, and often was "authoritarian and oppressive" [1, p. 25].

Compared with the past, today's communities are typical for a number of elements of heterogeneity; they not only experience changes, but they often even seek them. They are more diverse, adaptable and promote individual freedom and responsibility in the context of obligations to the group. They are in continual active contacts with the outside world and their values are accessible to all. Current communities lost the advantage of continuity that traditional communities had, so they at least try to constantly present and emphasize the common culture, and consciously promote the values and standards that maintain their integrity.

In this context, communitarians appeal to the need to create interconnected networks of communities because people are the members of several communities that provide them with support on various levels and in different contexts (family, school, workplace, settlement, town, church, youth organizations, various interest groups, etc.) Etzioni argues that our society is neither without community nor communitarian enough. Neither is it a 'Gemeinschaft' (fellowship, community) nor 'Gesellschaft' (society), but it is a mixture of both sociological entities [7]. This society needs new communities in

which people have a choice and are ready to adapt to different subcommunities, however, keeping their mutual bonds. Working communities are “essential to the health of a free society” [6, p. 177].

Unity is one of the essential features of community in this sense. Unity, or ‘integrity involving diversity’, as a requirement arises from the fact of plurality of today’s society. Diversity requires tolerance and mutual understanding; the community, which includes a variety of elements, is capable of adaptation to a changing world. At the same time, community must show some degree of integrity and consistency, otherwise it is not able to act in terms of shared values and goals. Integrity of the community must not stifle their internal diversity, the possibility of internal opposition, and the possibility of creating subcommunities; but, rather, it should promote a philosophy of pluralism. On the other hand, diversity must not undermine the integrity of the community, so there must work certain institutional arrangements, agreements that reduce polarization (e.g. via mutual understanding groups in the community through coalition-building opportunities, by addressing mutual conflicts etc.). I can only agree with the communitarian persuasion that what we should appreciate about the community the most is not any kind of unity at any price, but the unity that preserves the integrity of the parts.

Another defining character of the community, and perhaps the most important, is a “reasonable base of shared values” [6, p. 170]. These values should be anchored not only formally, in the form of laws and rules, but also in customs and traditions, and they should present shared vision and understanding of the common good and the future of the community. A comprehensive system of shared values must have a social sense and it must be protected by community. The members of community should be raised in the spirit of these values. Although the current society is pluralistic, communitarians assume that each community will – except its particular values - respect and actively promote the ideals of freedom, justice, equality and human dignity.

Care, trust and cooperation also belong to the essential features of community. Good community supports climate of cooperation, requiring respect for individual differences and for the value of personal integrity. In a good community, its members are aware of interdependence, responsibility and the need for mutual trust. All this can be achieved through formal institutional agreement on the rules and way of resolving conflicts, but only if the individual members of the community are involved in common tasks, which ultimately strengthens their ties to the community.

This is connected with the active participation of community members, which is important in establishing the identity associated with the community. It is a participation in the life of the community in a variety of areas: culture, civic education and municipal politics, strong civic organizations, active neighbourly relations, free media, open and accountable political processes, open forums, voluntary services and so on. It would be naive to require the same level of participation from every member of community and it is only natural that some

members seem more, others less interested in active participation in community life.

One of the features of a healthy community is a constant creating of its own morals and validating its values and ideals. It appreciates those who are exemplary members, and presents its symbols. To maintain the community it is necessary to have a working institutional system, which can have various forms and shapes and which enables effective communication not only within the community but also outward to other communities and to society in general.

Communitarians emphasize the role of so called “constitutive communities” in the life of an individual [8]. These are communities that people mostly feel to belong to, and that constitute them as individuals in large extent. Constitutive communities answer the basic question *Who am I?* and provide the space for meaningful thinking, acting and decision-making in the context of the answer to this question. Moreover, they are characterized by the fact that if an individual “loses a commitment to a constitutive community at a price of being thrown into a state of severe disorientation where one is unable to take a stand on many things of significance” [8, p. 103].

In Western culture and society constitutive communities are often related to the place in a geographical sense. Mostly it is a place associated with home, the place where we have family, relatives, friends and neighbours. Bell calls such a community a “community of place” [8, p. 103]. One of the examples of community of place is a town. Debnr states that “...a town is the space in which we are created, a space that shapes us and that is our living space...” [9].

Another type of communities are “communities of memory”, which have their own history in the sense that they constituted the past [8, p. 124]. Common history going back several generations is the most important feature of these communities. Nation or language are typical examples of a community of memory. The third type of constitutive communities are “psychological communities” [8, p. 170]. Such a community is a group of people who are involved in joint activities and experience that community to achieve common goals. Psychological communities are based on immediate interactions and are managed by trust, cooperation and altruism in the sense of common good of the community members. Unlike community of place, psychological community is not necessarily defined and tied to location and physical proximity. From the community of memory, it differs by being based on face to face personal interaction at one point in time point, and consequently tend to be restricted in size to a few hundred people. As an example of a psychological community, family groups, long-lasting civic associations, or religious groups can be mentioned. Religion is undoubtedly one of the most influential phenomenon that helps us to answer the question of who we are and where we belong to [10].

3. Responsiveness of a community

In a democratic society there are accepted only communities that are not repressive, intolerant and immoral, on the contrary, they must be responsive to

the needs of their members and open to justified changes. Authentic society is a kind of prerequisite susceptible for the communitarian concept of responsive community. Such a society is characterized by an appropriate balance of social order and autonomy. How to construct a society that protects its members against each other (from civil wars to violent crimes), and does so without any oppression? According to Selznick, only a coherent unit can enable and promote the survival and development of its components. This applies not only to the bonds between communities and society, but also to the bonds between communities and their members. Individual demanding respect and protection of his own autonomy is the most important 'unit' here. Hence in the community there is not appreciated the unity and cohesion of any kind, but always "unity that preserves the integrity of the parts" [5, p. 39].

Only community that is responsive to the needs of all its members - both in terms of the nature of its core shared values, as well as in its social shaping - can minimize the penalties resulting from the order and the dangers arising from the autonomy. Etzioni calls such a community 'authentic' [4]. All the others are called 'partial' or 'distorted', which means that in the long term perspective they have unstable social order. Hence communities that are not authentic do not respond to the needs of their members and jeopardize the autonomy of their members and various subgroups.

'Responsiveness', sensitivity or accessibility is thus the cardinal feature of communities. Etzioni states three conditions of responsiveness. He assumes that "(1) there is a strong measure of built-in contradiction between the common good and the needs of community members; (2) as the community's responsiveness is enhanced, the scope of this fundamental contradiction can be significantly reduced (but not eliminated); and (3) the ways a community can be made more responsive can be specified" [4]. Further he admits that there is a fundamental contradiction between the society's need for order and the individual's quest for autonomy. "This fundamental contradiction can be reduced by means other than fitting people into social roles - namely, by rendering the social order more responsive to the members' true needs." [4] Although the contradiction between order and autonomy built into the human condition can be eased by enhancing responsiveness (not only through socialization and social control), it cannot be completely eliminated.

While individual decisions to some extent support the responsiveness of a community, the main characteristics of this process sees Etzioni as follows: "(1) Individuals' actions are often deeply affected by groups and communities of which they are members and by the dysfunctional effects of being denied group membership; (2) much relevant social action takes place when groups act in unison, rather than when individuals act alone; (3) individual choices and actions reflect affect and values more than do 'evidence' and 'reasoning'; and (4) the mobilization of groups and coalition-building among them are among the most powerful factors that affect final societal outcomes - the extent to which a society's responsiveness is enhanced or diminished" [4]. Moreover, responsive communities are characterized by diversity and tolerance.

4. Community of communities

Communitarians believe that what can be done in families should not be forwarded to any other, advanced community. There is, of course, a number of urgent tasks requiring a national, even international action, but transferring the task to higher levels than necessary, weakens the communities. This principle applies to the obligations associated with the unhealthy, disabled, offenders, homeless, new immigrants, as well as public security, public health and environmental protection. The government should interfere in these matters only to the extent to which other social subsystems fail, not entirely replace them. Delegating these tasks from state downward, “citizens will have more opportunities to participate in their own government, and are more likely to become politically engaged” [3, p. 52]. From the communitarian point of view, strong economy, redistribution of welfare, environmental programs and respect for the fundamental law can be enforced only if small communities are a part of a larger, more extensive communities.

The concept of ‘community of communities’ should be understood in the context of communitarianism in close connectivity to the question of social justice, which is summarized in the claim that people have moral responsibility to help themselves best they can [7, p. 144]. Those who are unable to help themselves (disabled, unemployed, discriminated, etc.), are dependent on the help of others, yet they should actively participate in improving their lives. This is the position based on the conservative concept of human dignity, according to which people should not exempt from responsibility for themselves, for their own good. The second line of responsibility for the individual goes to the nearest community: kinship (family), friends, neighbours etc. These people know best what are the real needs of the individual, and are able to provide him with adequate help if necessary (much better and more focused than the authorities). [11]

Societies that are nothing but communities of communities, they must help those communities whose ability to help their members is limited. This is room for social justice as a matter between the communities, not only as internal affair communities. Communitarians therefore begin with personal responsibility for oneself, for members of their own community and its moral requirements then extending outward from the community.

Nowadays societies are heterogeneous and they are facing the problem of multiculturalism. In terms of communitarianism it is necessary to address the issue and requirement of preserving ‘diversity within unity’ [7, p. 155]. Some concepts of multiculturalism do not enforce the preserving of one exceeding community in which various subcultures have their rightful place. I do not refer to constitutive communities discussed above, but the communities of communities, thus societies as wholes (e.g. American society, European society, etc.). Without a strong sense of the one community of communities (i.e. supracommunity), there is a serious risk that the constitutive communities turn against each other.

Good community as well as society benefits from the diversity of cultures that enrich people's lives through art, music, dance, socializing, cuisine and so on. Etzioni points out that such a multicultural society cannot flourish without a shared framework, which itself will evolve over time. Its elements include commitment to a democratic way of life, basic laws or constitution, to mutual respect, and, above all, to the responsibility to treat all others as ends in themselves. "Diversity should not become the opposite of unity, but should exist within unity." [3, p. 53]

According to the communitarian agenda, the more we emphasize strengthening of communities, the more it is necessary to ask whether the communities actually perceive themselves as part of a larger whole, not as separate and antagonistic units. Etzioni considers it unrealistic to appear something as a 'community of communities' in a sense of 'world family'. A much more plausible and acceptable normative position is the development of social processes that support and promote what he calls "layered loyalties" in members of various communities [4]. Ultimately, the members of community perceive themselves and act as members of not only one but several communities. People who are loyal to the region are also loyal to the nation etc. Efforts to develop new layered loyalties are now reflected in the transnational and international integration, which can be illustrated by the example of the European Union.

5. The European Community and requirement for moral dialogue

The European Union was established primarily as an economic union. Now there is also a political integration in many areas. Anyway, can we call the European Union a real community?

Deeper integration into the European structures should be preceded by a broader moral dialogue, not only as one-off referendum e.g. on the introduction of the Euro. Today we face not only the support of the expansion of the European community, but there are also many Eurosceptic voices which must be taken seriously.

Etzioni in his work stresses the need to build a sense of community. The European Union has so far tried to operate on the basis of sort of administrative law, but the call for the formation of strong common institutions and stronger leadership will not make it the real community. Common interests of member states are insufficient. Europeans primarily see themselves as citizens of their (national) state and, secondly as 'European citizens', so if the requirements of the EU are not in accordance with the interests of their nation, they are willing to support them only partially. However, should the EU overcome the existing challenges (monetary union, immigration crisis, etc.), it needs more than just a lot of economic corrections and institution-building. According to Etzioni, the EU must develop a 'European demos' to the extent that its members did not act in the way threatening community or tried to plunder the treasury of more responsible members in favour of the irresponsible [A. Etzioni, *Creating a Sense*

of Community, http://www.atlantic-community.org/index/articles/view/creating_a_sense_of_community].

One of the ways to find the solution to the current situation and to move from purely economic and administrative integration level to real community based on the ‘European demos’, according to communitarians, is the realization of vote (referendum) on key issues on the same day in all member countries of the EU. The results of referendum must be made mandatory for the entire European Union and not subsequently modified or repaired by the European Commission or the European Parliament. Such issues include, for example way of dealing with legal immigration, Turkish membership in the EU, military involvement in current conflicts and controls of countries that have economic instability or economically irresponsible behaviour. Suggested involvement of European citizens in the resolution of important common problems should contribute to the feeling of being more European and less nationalists. Unless a meaningful building of such a common understanding begins, the EU citizens will increasingly incline to the belonging to their own nation, not to the European community.

Mutual respect, obligations to democracy and respect for individual rights represent a set of shared core values of the Western cultural tradition. Communities can pursue their own values without compromising the society if they accept these shared values ensuring certain framework of the unity in a pluralistic Western society [12]. Etzioni in this context emphasizes the investment in mutual relations within community [7, p. 123], but also the formation of friendly environment within communities, working institutions, order and active participation of their members in the life of community.

Moral culture in contemporary communities should not be unchangeable, but in the sense of the requirement of responsive community, “moral culture is continually recast to reflect new social needs, demands, insights and, above all, moral claims“ [3, p. 34]. As Selznick regards, “finding ways of accommodating the abiding values of ‘particularism’ and the just claims of ‘universalism’ is a major part of the communitarian project“ [5, p. 27]. When considering the Western culture, I agree with Palitefka who writes that a human of the West is conscious of continual becoming (forming), the sight is headed to the past and to the future [13]. This actually corresponds with the communitarian view.

Moreover, moral culture can also serve to strengthen the social order significantly. There are forms of behaviour that society deems unacceptable and must try to suppress. Moral culture of the community helps to define and suppress such antisocial behaviour and also encourages desirable acting. Even the laws are more easily made and respected on the basis of anchored common moral understanding.

Moral dialogue, which is a prerequisite for finding and modifying the shared values, supports the maintenance of moral culture and ethics within the community. It is a mean of changing and adapting of moral culture: “Moral dialogues are ‘give and take’ discussions that engage values rather than merely interests or wants. They involve more than facts and reasons: they engage our

beliefs.“ [3, p. 34]. This applies also to the debate on issues such as duty to protect the environment but also on specific issues relating to gay marriages, the death penalty etc. Only in open dialogue and wide public discussion we can seek the solutions to the current problem of immigrants and the clash of cultures in the European space.

6. Conclusion

Practically, any member of a community or society can initiate a moral dialogue, but it depends on the public how this challenge is taken up the dialogue unfolded. Yet they are not only the dialogues of experts, but especially the dialogues of citizens and are largely based on factual and logical arguments, but in essence these are ethical rather than empirical. Although the course of such a dialogue in the community can seem disordered and chaotic, according to communitarians, the most important thing is that during the moral dialogue people often modify their behaviour, feelings and beliefs. Etzioni emphasizes that if community needs to change the social structure fundamentally, moral dialogues are necessary to generate change in individual and social behaviour and support public policy. Engaging the public in discussions about fundamental changes in policies, especially those relating to moral and social issues, does not facilitate these changes, on the contrary, the government has a more difficult task. Such dialogues are time consuming and do not necessarily lead to conclusions that are consistent with the government program. On the other hand, it is questionable whether it would be possible to achieve a deep and lasting social change without them.

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