A Communitarian Perspective on Sustainable Communities

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Until recently, the environmental and the communitarian movements have mostly progressed along parallel lines. The environmental movement often centred on the physical environment and the communitarian one on the body of society. It is important to note in this context, that the society is not a ‘social environment’ because society is not external to us but we are part of it and it is us; we are not an aggregate of individuals that constitute externalities to one another but we are interwoven, members in one another.

While there have been numerous environmentalists who showed great concerns and understanding of socio-economic and political factors, and there have been some communitarians who noted the parallel concerns with the common good that animates both movements, the focus has been rather different. When all was said and done, many environmentalists tended to focus on Mother Earth, the atmosphere, the seas (and lakes and rivers), and so on, the well-known lists of priorities. Communitarians mainly concerned themselves with societal building stones: families, schools, neighbourhoods, and the community of communities (the society), on moral and social values and the infrastructure that sustains them.

Recently there has been an increased awareness of the deep connection between the physical and the social dimensions of our shared existence. Reference is made to sustainable communities and not merely sustainable environments. To give but one example: in 1995 the Board of Trustees of the Johnson Foundation decided that ‘our long standing interest in the environment should focus for the coming five years on...the development of sustainable communities’ (Bray 1996). Sustainable communities are said to include ‘...not only the physical environment, but the economic, social, political, and human environments as well. Justice, equity, voluntarism, and philanthropy contribute to the sustainability of communities. Strong families, healthy and educated children, a competent workforce, and jobs with decent pay are essential’ (ibid). And it is suggested that the indicators of the state of affairs should include not merely pollution levels, ozone depletion, and recycling but also measures concerning crime, poverty, and social justice.

The increased cross-fertilisation between the two movements seems to make good sense, given that both are dedicated to the common good. I turn next to provide an outline of communitarian thinking and then to discuss some of the issues that must be faced if the said cross-fertilisation is to be enhanced. In proceeding, I draw heavily on the Responsive Communitarian Platform, a manifesto of the communitarian movement (Communitarian Network 1991).

The Communitarian Platform was drafted in a specific context that deserves to be briefly highlighted because understanding the context will help to point out issues that must be taken into account if one is to draw on this approach in other contexts. The Platform was drafted during 1990 and 1991. It was endorsed by more than 70 American leaders from a wide variety of social and political backgrounds and served as the launching pad for the Communitarian movement. It was translated and adapted into German and UK English (Etzioni 1995).

The formulation of the Platform started in 1989, when I was teaching ethics at the Harvard Business School. I was deeply affected by the preoccupation of most of the students with ‘making it’ at practically any cost to others and often to self. A study came my way that reported that young Americans feel strongly about their right to be tried before a jury of their peers if they are charged with having committed a crime but, when asked to serve on a jury,
they sought to avoid serving. This finding became a symbol that reflected much other evidence of excessive individualism, of a sense of entitlement to rights but shirking of social responsibilities. (The environmental equivalent may be those who wish to consume the earth’s resources but not contribute to its sustainability.) We hence argued that ‘strong rights presume strong responsibilities’ – note that the argument is not against rights but for assuming corollary responsibilities.

The context was American. Other societies differ from this viewpoint. As I see it, the UK and several continental societies have been drifting in the same direction but because they started from a higher level of social responsibilities, they have not become as individualistically obsessed as Americans. Asian societies, on the other hand, seem to be excessively duty bound and may well need a heavy dosage of individualism, especially recognition of rights. Moreover, under the influence of several factors, including the communitarian movement, the American society has become somewhat less individualistic since 1990. There is now a wide agreement, across most of the political spectrum, that individuals have to assume more personal and social responsibility: Time magazine reported in its September 9, 1996 issue that Clinton, Gore and Kemp all support the communitarian agenda; the Family Leave Act has been enacted; the character education movement has moved along significantly\(^1\) and communities’ role in providing social services has increased, to take just a few examples. The Communitarian Platform still applies, but a tad less so as part of its agenda has now been served.

The second issue the Platform addresses is the moral infrastructure. The basic assumption, spelled out in *The Spirit of Community* (Etzioni 1993), is that for societies to sustain a commitment to the common good – whether it is social, moral, environmental, or the very sustainability of the community – this concern needs to be undergirded with a set of social institutions. If

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\(^1\) The ‘character education movement’ believes that public schools have tried too hard to advance a ‘values-neutral’ curriculum; not only is a ‘values neutral’ curriculum impossible, but moreover harmful when values are learned on the street rather than in the schools. The character education movement aims to reintroduce into the public school curriculum the education of basic, core values which build character: values such as self-discipline, truth-telling, and empathy.

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these deteriorate they need either to be shored up or replaced, but one cannot simply do without them. They are to the body society what air, water, and nourishment are to the human body. It is here that the debate about the need for, nature of, and future of the family enters. It is the place historical commitment to the common good was first introduced to the new members of society. Schools were the second building stone for the last 1,000 years or so. And the conceptions of the role of the whole community as a social fabric ‘it takes a whole village…’, the third, and a view of society as a community of communities (rather than an aggregation of individuals), was the cap stone.

The Platform points out that to sustain a society one must:

‘…recognise both individual human dignity and the social dimension of human existence. A communitarian perspective recognises that the preservation of individual liberty depends on the active maintenance of the institutions of civil society where citizens learn respect for others as well as self-respect; where we acquire a lively sense of our personal and civic responsibilities, along with an appreciation of our own rights and the rights of others; where we develop the skills of self-government as well as the habit of governing ourselves, and learnt to serve others – not just self.

A communitarian perspective recognises that communities and polities, too, have obligations, including the duty to be responsive to their members and to foster participation and deliberation in social and political life’. (Communitarian Network, 1991)

The Platform stresses that the way to keep the balance between freedom and social order, the right to choose and commitments to the common – an essential balance if a community is to be sustained – is not to rely firstly on the state or merely on individual efforts: but we need to draw on the moral voice of the community, a factor often overlooked or shied away from. It never ceases to surprise me how many good people are willing to fine or jail those who violate the social good (say dump toxic waste into a
river) but not shame them, for instance by publishing their name in the paper and on bill boards. The Platform says about this point:

'America's diverse communities of memory and mutual aid are rich resources of moral voices, voices that ought to be heeded in a society that increasingly threatens to become normless, self-centred, and driven by greed, special interests, and an unabashed quest for power.'

Moral voices achieve their effect mainly through education and persuasion, rather than through coercion. Originating in communities, and sometimes embodied in law, they exhort, admonish, and appeal to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. They speak to our capacity for reasoned judgement and virtuous action. It is precisely because this moral realm, which is neither one of random individual choice nor of government control, has been much neglected that we see an urgent need for a communitarian social movement to accord these voices their essential place.

The Platform anticipated a common criticism made in reference to the moral voice of communities and responded:

'Communitarians are not majoritarians. The success of the democratic experiment in ordered liberty (rather than unlimited license) depends, not on fiat or force, but on building shared values, habits and practices that assure respect for one another's rights and regular fulfillment of personal, civic and collective responsibilities. Successful policies are accepted because they are recognised to be legitimate rather than imposed. We say to those who would impose civic or moral virtues by suppressing dissent (in the name of religion, patriotism, or any other cause), or censoring books, that their cure is ineffective, harmful, and morally untenable. At the same time divergent moral positions need not lead to cacophony. Out of genuine dialogue clear voices can arise, and shared aspirations can be identified and advanced.

Communitarians favour strong democracy. That is, we seek to make government more representative, more participatory, and more responsive to all members of the community. We seek to find ways to accord citizens more information, and more say, more often. We seek to curb the role of private money, special interests, and corruption in government. Similarly, we ask how 'private governments', whether corporations, labour unions, or voluntary associations, can become more responsive to their members and to the needs of the community'.

Maybe the point most often overlooked when communities are discussed is that they are not necessarily good or public-minded. One should not champion communities per se or hold that any set of group-values is ipso facto good merely because such values originate in a community. Indeed, some communities (say, neo-Nazis) may foster reprehensible norms. And all too often, communities glorify their own members and vilify those who are not members. Communitarians should, although they do not always do, insist that communal values be judged by external and overriding criteria. How to establish these is a challenge I cannot deal with in the confines of this article (see Etzioni 1996, Chapter 8).

Probably the biggest controversies have resulted from the communitarian view as to what constitutes the specific infrastructure of communities. The Platform urges that:

'The best place to start is where each new generation acquires its moral anchoring; at home, in the family. We must insist once again that bringing children into the world entails a moral responsibility to provide, not only material necessities, but also moral education and character formation.

Moral education is not a task that can be delegated to baby-sitters, or even professional childcare centres. It requires close bonding of the kind that typically is formed only with parents, if it is formed at all.'
At this juncture the Platform makes a point of utmost importance for the coming together of traditional environmental thinking and communitarian thinking. It speaks in favour of setting non-consumeristic priorities for those who have the resources they need for basic creature comforts, in effect for voluntary simplicity. While the argument is made in the name of children rather than Mother Earth, in effect both approaches concern our future and that of future generations.

The Platform states:

‘Fathers and mothers, consumed by ‘making it’ and consumerism, or preoccupied with personal advancement, who come home too late and too tired to attend to the needs of their children, cannot discharge their most elementary duty to their children and their fellow citizens.

It follows, that work places should provide maximum flexible opportunities to parents to preserve an important part of their time and energy of their life, to attend to their educational, moral duties, for the sake of the next generation, its civic and moral character, and its capacity to contribute economically and socially to the commonweal. Experiments such as those with unpaid and paid parental leave, flexitime, shared jobs, opportunities to work at home, and for parents to participate as volunteers and managers in childcare centres, should be extended and encouraged.

Above all, what we need is a change in orientation by both parents and work places. Child-raising is important, valuable work, work that must be honoured rather than denigrated by both parents and the community.

The discussion of schools, as the second element of the communitarian infrastructure, is more ‘American’ because European schools are still much more attentive to character building and transmission of values than American ones. It should, though, be noted that schools in general have an important role in sustaining communities even when families function perfectly. It is also the place many children get their first introduction to environmentalism and communitarian thinking and commitments.

In the US, suggestions that schools participate actively in moral education are often opposed, and the question is posed: ‘Whose morals are you going to teach?’ The Platform reasoned:

‘We ought to teach those values all share, for example, that the dignity of all persons ought to be respected; that tolerance is a virtue and discrimination abhorrent; that peaceful resolution of conflicts is superior to violence; that generally truth-telling is morally superior to lying; that democratic government is morally superior to totalitarianism and authoritarianism; that one ought to give a day’s work for a day’s pay, and get a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work; that investing in one’s own, and one’s country’s, future is better than squandering one’s income and relying on others to attend to future needs’.

The importance of sustainable communities clearly needs to be added to this list.

The fear that our children will be ‘brainwashed’ by a few educators is far-fetched. On the contrary, to silence the schools in moral matters simply means that the youngsters are left exposed to all other voices and values but those of their educators. For, one way or another, moral education does take place in schools. The only question is whether schools and teachers will passively stand by, or take an active and responsible role.

Turning to the third building stone, communitarians note that a person who is completely private is lost to civic life. The exclusive pursuit of one’s self-interest is not even a good prescription for conduct in the marketplace; for no social, political, economic, or moral order can survive that way. Some measure of caring, sharing, and being attentive to others and the community, is essential for society to thrive.

Here, the Platform evoked a principle which today is often referred to as devolution:
Generally, no social task should be assigned to an institution that is larger than necessary to do the job. What can be done by families, should not be assigned to an intermediate group, school, etc. What can be done at the local level should not be passed on to the state or federal level, and so on. There are, of course, plenty of urgent tasks (including environmental ones) that do require national and even international action. But to remove tasks to higher levels than is necessary weakens the constituent communities. This principle holds for duties of attending to the sick, troubled, delinquent, homeless and new immigrants; and for public safety, public health and protection of the environment—from a neighbourhood crime-watch to community-wide emergency resuscitation training, to sorting the garbage to enhance recycling. The government should step in only to the extent that other social subsystems fail, rather than seek to replace them.

One may readily question the merit of the last point, and see a larger and earlier role for the government, and still accept the importance of the community as a key partner.

Communitarians have much work to do when it comes to the question of the connection between equality and the sustainability of communities. It is too easy to declare that equality is essential or should be achieved. One must clarify what one means by equality: economic only? Also social? Does one mean that everyone will get the same share of everything, which even kibbutzim in their heyday could not achieve? If not, what degrees and kinds of inequality is one willing to condone? And does all equality advance sustainability?

The Platform left most of these questions open for future deliberations stating:

'At the heart of the communitarian understanding of social justice is the idea of reciprocity: each member of the community owes something to all the rest, and the community owes something to each of its members. Justice requires responsible individuals in a responsive community.

Members of the community have a responsibility, to the greatest extent possible, to provide for themselves and their families: honourable work contributes to the commonwealth and to the community's ability to fulfil its essential tasks. Beyond self-support, individuals have a responsibility for the material and moral well-being of others. This does not mean heroic self-sacrifice; it means the constant self-awareness that no one of us is an island unaffected by the fate of others'.

For its part, the community is responsible for protecting each of us against catastrophe, natural or man-made; for ensuring the basic needs of all who genuinely cannot provide for themselves; for appropriately recognising the distinctive contributions of individuals to the community; and for safeguarding a zone within which individuals may define their own lives through free exchange and choice. Communitarian social justice is alive both to the equal moral dignity of all individuals and to the ways in which they differentiate themselves from one another through their personal decisions.

'At the same time, vulnerable communities should be able to draw on the more endowed communities when they are truly unable to deal, on their own, with social duties thrust upon them.

Many social goals, moreover, require partnership between public and private groups. Though government should not seek to replace local communities, it may need to empower them by strategies of support, including revenue-sharing and technical assistance. There is a great need for study and experimentation with creative use of the structures of civil society, and public-private cooperation, especially where the delivery of health, educational and social services are concerned'.

Turning to the society at large, the cap stone, it is easy to start with the polity. Being informed about public affairs is a prerequisite for keeping the community from being controlled by demagogues, for
taking action when needed in one's own interests and that of others, for achieving justice and a sustainable future.

Voting is one tool for keeping the polity reflective of its constituent communities. Those who feel that none of the candidates reflect their views ought to seek out other like-minded citizens and seek to field their own candidate rather than retreat from the polity. Still, some persons may discharge their community responsibilities by being involved in non-political activities, say in volunteer work. Just as the polity is but one facet of interdependent social life, so voting and political activity are not the only ways to be responsible members of society. A good citizen is involved in a community or communities, but not necessarily active in the polity.

If the environmental and the communitarian movements are to learn more from one another, idealism will have to be mitigated with a sense of political, social, and economic realities; of priorities and strategies. There is reason to envision a world in which people and nature will learn to live in easy harmony, and the society will be just, peaceful, and beautiful. Such visions inspire and guide our endeavours. They can also lead to gross disappointments, if we seek to jump so high and make so little progress (or even fall back) in our attempts to reach for the brass ring, if not the moon. Specifically, stringing one virtuous goal next to another, compiling lists of indicators that measure reality against a perfect model, may not be the only or even always the best way to proceed.

One question that needs to be addressed, an issue which both movements struggle with daily, is what can be achieved in the near future? Given our limited capabilities, how are they best focused? Answering this question requires a major analytical exercise, as well as a moral dialogue to ensure that the normative implications of such priority-setting are both explicated and shared. And one must answer the question: How can the natural compatibility of the environmentalists and communitarian endeavours be drawn upon to enhance the sustainability of the earth and its communities?


References


2 The Platform is available by calling or writing to The Communitarian Network,
2130 H Street, NW Suite 714J, Washington DC 230052, 1-800-245-7460. The entire text can also be found on the world-wide-web at http://www.gwu.edu/~ceps