

Deconstructing Communitarianism: A Debunking of the
Liberal versus Conservative Dichotomy

Dr. Gregory R. Howes, MBA, DM, PMP
The BlameBuster™

Table of Contents

Table of Contents2

Introduction.....3

Discussion.....3

The Dualistic Shortfall4

The Deconstruction of Dualism4

Freedom versus Accountability.....4

Liberalism versus Conservativism.....5

The Pluralistic Disguise6

Conclusion8

References10

Deconstructing Communitarianism: A Debunking of the Liberal versus Conservative Dichotomy

Do people write to help America become freer or safer? Are human beings individuals that use power to rationally construct networks for their mutual betterment, or are they attributes of a community for which they depend upon for their survival, similar to how the heart depends upon the body for its continued existence? Will America's future be more liberal or more conservative? The answer to these questions will be explored in this paper by deconstructing the communitarian writings of Amitai Etzioni.

Specifically, this paper will debunk the communitarian position through postmodern deconstruction techniques, and present the position that the future should not be a compromise between liberalism and conservatism as posited by communitarians, but instead should be a beautiful mixture of all styles and all flavors of humanity held together by a common attribute.

Discussion

The communitarian philosophy assumes that liberalism and conservatism are opposites, and that a balance must be maintained by choosing when the state should prescribe and enforce a value and when the individual should be permitted to exercise their rights. According to Etzioni, "no [individual] right is absolute and all must be balanced against the common good" (Etzioni, 1997). However, this dichotomy does not need to be a truism. Individual rights and social responsibility are not opposites, and only exist through the reification or demise of the self. Representations of reality are the outcome of a desire to order the world as a method of constructing the self (Knights, 1997).

The respect for self and for others cannot be separated in a moral society. They are one in the same and they co-exist with many other perspectives. The "golden rule", in one version or another, has been promulgated across all major cultures; this rule is the heart of morality (Morris,

1999). The golden rule, which states “do unto others as you would have others do unto you” recognizes that individual and collective rights are not traded back and forth, but instead coexist as one. The future American society will be one where individual and collective rights are not sacrificed at the detriment of the other, but coexist without infringement.

The Dualistic Shortfall

Before the deconstruction of Etzioni’s communitarian writings begins, the dualistic nature of the questions previously asked requires analysis. Many reasons exist for rejecting dualistic forms of analysis, which include privileging the episteme of the physical sciences over the social sciences, privileging one side over the other, and fostering binary thinking, which pits what is present against what is absent (Knights, 1997). It is possible and probable that both sides are equal in their scarcity and in their worth, and that this dualistic thinking of right and wrong, which promotes selection or compromise, should be replaced with the thinking of infiniteness within unity. It is not that one should be favored over the other or that more than two dimensions should be analyzed, but that their divergence should be shown as being false. “Deconstruction dismantles a dichotomy by showing it to be a false distinction” (Martin, 1990).

Thus, why cannot America become freer, safer, happier, poorer, more distant, more connected, more African, Latin and Asian, and more supportive of traditional American values? Why cannot humans need and construct communities? Why cannot America be both free and accountable, and why cannot America be more liberal and more conservative?

The Deconstruction of Dualism

Freedom versus Accountability

The United States’ populace has been beset with the polarization of individual freedom versus social accountability, and liberalism versus conservatism. All societies have a particular

balance between the common good and the individual right (Etzioni, 1996b), and the communitarian philosophy, as espoused by Amitai Etzioni, attempts to address this polarization by suggesting a “new representation”, which balances individual freedoms against social accountability. Etzioni recognizes the irrationality of dualistic thinking, and attempts to find a balance between them by creating a new representation. However, when his writings are deconstructed, it becomes evident that this new representation is neither novel nor creative. Instead, it hides more than it constructs, and selects one position over the other in a prescriptive manner. It is not a synthesis of ideals, but it is a selection between liberal and conservative attributes, which promotes a prescriptive state for social accountability at the detriment of individual freedom.

The communitarian position pits social liberalism (freedom) against social conservatism (prescription) in a never-ending balancing act. Etzioni (2000) states that liberal philosophy relies on each person to establish what is good, that conservative philosophy uses the state to enforce their list of values (Etzioni, 2000), and that through a process of continual correction a balance in the middle should be maintained (Etzioni, 1996b). However, America’s future should be a society determined by an infinite number of perspectives mixed in an ever-changing pattern associated by a common set of values and core beliefs.

Liberalism versus Conservatism

In the article, *The Good Society*, Etzioni begins by asking “The good citizen or the good person?” (Etzioni, 1999b). Etzioni suggests that individuals must be one or the other. This point is further expanded when Etzioni (1999b) states that liberals limit themselves to developing good citizens and conservatives want to develop the good person through the use of state prescription. He suggests that communitarians also wish to develop good people, although they do not wish to

do so by state prescription. Instead, they would use society and persuasion to promote these virtues. Etzioni (1999b) states thinkers who rely on society and persuasion to promote virtue by definition are not social conservatives, but have one of the characteristics of communitarianism. However, Etzioni's writings are beginning to show that the dichotomy of liberalism versus conservatism is limiting the definition of communitarianism. That is, because Etzioni's writings define communitarianism within the dichotomy of liberalism and conservatism, he enslaves this thinking to these concepts. Unitary, dualistic, and pluralistic reasoning are problematic because they constrain knowledge within the concepts that comprise the dichotomy (Knights, 1997).

The Pluralistic Disguise

Thus, it is important to recognize that in Etzioni's writings everything is either liberal or conservative, or some combination of them. Etzioni recognizes the limitation of dualism and attempts to reconcile these adversaries by creating the pluralistic position of communitarianism. Pluralist recognize that elevating one side over the other is a form of determinism that violates the dialectic nature of societies (Knights, 1997). However, in attempting to reconcile these two concepts, Etzioni shows a bias toward the prescriptive position, and attempts to hide this bias through a compromise of words. "Critical theorist conceal, behind a claim to be speaking on behalf of the oppressed or underprivileged, their own desire for exhaustive representations of the world as part of a project of self-autonomy and sovereignty" (Knights, 1997), and in this regard, Etzioni is displaying strong critical theorist traits. That is, Etzioni attempts to create a synthesis between liberalism and conservatism, but is just creating a new prescription that favors safety over freedom.

Communitarians suggest that individuals do not exist and instead they posit that only members of this or that community are real (Etzioni, 1999a). Etzioni is suggesting that in contrast to liberalism, communitarianism raises the rights of community above the rights of the individual. That is, individuals cease to exist. This reduction of the individual is furthered by Etzioni's quotation of Joseph de Maistre: "In my lifetime I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, [and] Russians.... But as for 'man', I declare that I have never in my life met him" (Etzioni, 1999a). Despite Etzioni's attempts to hide the lowering of individual and the elevating of communal rights through a pluralistic disguise, the pluralistic and prescriptive nature of his desires show. Although Etzioni is suggesting that communitarianism is emancipating America from liberal and conservative ideals, he is actually enslaving America to his prescription for safety.

Etzioni wishes the state to prescribe the requirement that the community be given more rights than the individual. This is evident in his article, *Communitarian Solutions/What Communitarians Think*, in which he outlines the basic approaches of communitarianism. In the article, Etzioni addresses what should be accomplished to improve the social conditions of family, hate speech, multicultural education, public health, public safety, public education, and political discourse. Of these seven areas, Etzioni suggests changing laws associated with five of them. Specifically, Etzioni recommends that the tax code and marital law should be changed, that government funding should be eliminated for universities that do not teach European elements while providing multicultural education, that everyone entering a hospital should be required to sign a form indicating their disposition toward organ donating, that the constitution should be interpreted to permit "suspicionless" searches, and that political action committees should be outlawed (Etzioni, 1992). "Religious social conservatives have long been willing to

rely on the powers of the state to foster behavior they consider virtuous” (Etzioni, 1999b), and Etzioni is willing to prescribe the communitarian ones.

In this regard, the communitarian model is very conservative. It uses the law to enforce its community rights model. Interestingly, this prescriptive community rights model is depicted in Etzioni’s article, *Community of Communities*. Again, Etzioni uses a dualistic or pluralistic approach to define his communitarian state. Etzioni compares the models of a melting pot, a rainbow, or a framed mosaic in modeling his communitarian state, and states that the framed mosaic is superior. “The mosaic is enriched by continuous elements of different colors and shapes, but it is held together by a frame and glue” (Etzioni, 1996a). The model depicts the steadfastness of the Communitarian position. Although sub-community differences are recognized, respected, and permitted to remain steadfast in religious, culinary, and cultural perspectives, they must remain set within the state prescribed value system.

Conclusion

A more appropriate model of America’s future is required: a model that recognizes uncertainty and insecurity. A postmodern model that emancipates instead of enslaves is required for America’s future. Postmodernist frequently adopt Nietzsche’s “difference”, which recognizes indeterminacy, Lyotard’s search for instability, and Derrida’s deconstructive methods (Boje, 1995). However, models by their nature attempt to prescribe and secure, and are subject to deconstruction. As Kilduff stresses, the articulacy of any writing depends on what it excludes and presents and reproduces exactly what it condemns (Kilduff, 1993), and this paper is no different.

Nevertheless, some models are more prescriptive than others, and a model that represents a beautiful mixture of all styles and flavors of humanity held together by a common attribute is

less prescriptive than Etzioni's communitarianism. Liberalism and conservatism are not opposites or opposing attributes, but are myths created to bring order where order does not necessarily exist. Thus, a model that suggests individuals, networks, societies, nature, politics, space, time, matter, spirit, God, people, etcetera are not a collection of different attributes that must be balanced against and traded in place of each other, and suggests that these are all one and are inseparable should prescribe the future of postmodern America.

References

- Boje, D. M. (1995). Stories of the Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as "Tamara-Land". *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(4), 997-1035.
- Etzioni, A. (1992). Communitarian Solutions/What Communitarians Think. *The Journal of State Government*, 65(1), 9-11.
- Etzioni, A. (1996a). Community of Communities. *The Washington Quarterly*, 19(3), 127-138.
- Etzioni, A. (1996b). How Americans Can Contribute the Common Good. *Fundamental Sources of Morality in American Politics, The Long Term View*, 3(3), 78-81.
- Etzioni, A. (1997). Balancing Individual Rights and the Common Good. *Tikkun*, 12(1), 66-67.
- Etzioni, A. (1999a). Communitarian Elements in Select Works of Martin Buber. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 33, 151-169.
- Etzioni, A. (1999b). The Good Society. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 7(1), 88-103.
- Etzioni, A. (2000). Law in Civil Society, Good Society, and the Prescriptive State. *Chicago Kent Law Review*, 75(2), 355-377.
- Kilduff, M. (1993). Deconstructing Organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(1), 13-31.
- Knights, D. (1997). Organizational Theory in the Age of Deconstruction: Dualism, Gender and Postmodernism Revisited. *Organization Studies*, 18(1), 1-19.
- Martin, J. (1990). Deconstructing Organizational Taboos: The Suppression of Gender and Conflict in Organization. *Organization Science*, 1, 339-359.
- Morris, T. (1999). *Philosophy for dummies*. Foster City, CA: IDG Books Worldwide.