Communitarianism and New Labour

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This article offers a brief discussion of the main themes of communitarian
thought in the context of New Labour's invoking of 'community' as a core
constituent of its attempt to forge a 'new' political agenda. I outline
some of the basic elements of communitarianism, and raise typical critical
responses to them. I then assess the extent to which the New Labour agenda
might be subject to similar criticisms. I argue that while there are
divergences between the two, New Labour has tended, like communitarianism,
to accept as 'givens' certain aspects of the social, political and economic
status quo which would more healthily be treated as 'up for negotiation' in
political terms. This is epitomised in New Labour's wholesale endorsement
of the virtues of 'free market' economics - which, ironically, might
otherwise be regarded as a threat both to 'given' communal bonds, and to
the forging of a genuinely progressive 'project' of community.

Say there was a search engine which could locate all the instances in which a term is used across the whole of public discourse, from pub conversation to the international news media. Putting the word 'community' into such a search engine, it seems likely that we'd be struck by two things. Firstly, that the term is used a very great deal - perhaps increasingly so in the context of recent western politics. But secondly, that it's rarely used in exactly the same way twice. This is partly because 'communities' themselves come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. A community might typically be tethered to a neighbourhood, a geographically delimited site of (more or less) face-to-face relations. But the term is also, just as familiarly, applied to more abstract groupings defined by some or other shared feature, interest or purpose: the 'Sikh community', the 'business community', the 'community of geriatric leather-fetishists', and so forth. Sure enough, such uses of the term may be lax and imprecise, and may not by themselves tell us that much about the nature and scope of 'community' as a concept in social theory. Even so, their sheer non-uniformity accentuates the extent to which the concept of 'community' itself - whether invoked as an empirical entity, a value, a goal, or a project - is by no means self-evident. If its power is evidenced by its ubiquity in political discourse, so equally is its contested nature. It needs some unpacking.

One recent source of such unpacking has been the various strands in social, political and moral thought which have been bracketed together as communitarianism. Such thinking is itself the home of diverse currents, arising from different parts of the political spectrum (see Miller, 2000 and Frazer, 1998 for helpful mapping). There are communitarian elements in Marxism (Ross, 2003), but equally in traditional, 'one-nation' conservatism (Scruton, 2001) - both of these, of course, being traditions of long pedigree. But as a specific label, 'communitarianism' has come into prominence since the 1970s, primarily as a way of designating various responses to liberal individualist theory and culture (see below). Significantly, it has also, in a rather slippery way, been associated with the political project of New Labour. In this article I aim to outline some of the basic claims which communitarians make, the reasons why they make them, and consider whether, and in what sense, we might call New Labour politics 'communitarian'. Along the way, I raise some of the most common objections to communitarian ideas - and explore the extent to which their application in the hands of New Labour might be prone to such objections.

Communitarianism: themes and features

As a theoretical movement, communitarianism combines two main strands. One, as would be expected, is a concern for community life (however defined), and a claim that certain forms of communal relations have value in themselves. Typically, these relations would include trust, mutual understanding, and forms of reciprocity between individuals to which, it's claimed, only a shared situation, and a set of shared values, will give rise. Put differently, they are relations centred on the recognition and cultivation of a wider 'we' as well as a series of individual 'I's. In this sense, community is viewed both as a primary focus for any analysis of society, and as something in need of enhancement or protection. It might be presented as a force for good - a counterbalance to factors

perceived as threats to social cohesion and stability, from alienation or anomie among certain sectors of society, to the development of criminal subcultures or the growth in drugs misuse or teenage pregnancy. More generally, it might be invoked as the key to a rekindling of civic virtue, of a political culture which recognises the value of what individuals share, as well as what makes them different from one other. Pushed for a tight definition of the term 'community', the influential contemporary US proponent of the communitarian agenda Amitai Etzioni opts for: 'webs of social relations that encompass shared meanings and above all shared values' (Etzioni, 1995, p. 24). So in this respect, communitarianism is about identifying, and enhancing, such relations - and by extension, their attendant values.

The other strand is equally important. It is a kind of anthropological claim about the relation between individual and society - one which arises from an opposition to claims made by the liberal tradition in political theory. Typically (and especially in the eyes of its critics) this tradition has employed a methodological individualism, assuming that the basic elements in the social world are individual human beings, each with the capacity to form their own beliefs and life-plans. Society, from this angle, is a kind of by-product of the practices and decisions of these individuals. Liberals have also, relatedly, often been presented as subscribing to a sort of 'atomism': the idea that each individual is a discrete monad, only contingently related to others. The model 'liberal individual', one might say, is unsituated and unattached, finding its identity through the ordering of its own desires and preferences. The right to conduct this ordering without undue interference from others, or from the state, is a staple part of the liberal ethos. Recent communitarian philosophy, typified by the work of Michael J. Sandel (1982), Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), and Michael Walzer (1983), has tended to argue against both liberalism's methodological individualism, and the priority it places on individual rights over public goods. These theorists insist that far from being contingent 'baggage' which individuals just happen to carry around with them, our social circumstances are an integral part of the meanings of our lives, and the preferences we hold. In other words, we cannot understand the individual apart from the particular social contexts in which she is inevitably embedded - the identities and attributes with which she finds herself encumbered, her language, her heritage, her ethnicity, her locality.

What's crucial, for communitarians, is that these features of our lives are not chosen by us, or detachable from us (as liberal methodology might suggest): that they are always already 'there' in the individual's deliberations over her own priorities. Thus as MacIntyre puts it, 'we all approach our circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, this tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles'. These relations thus provide a sort of moral compass: we inherit from our social and traditional context 'a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations', which 'constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point' (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 220). Or rather, they *should* provide such a compass, as long as their significance is paid full attention.

For critics like MacIntyre, modern life puts that significance under threat. The trouble with the liberal approach is not just an intellectual affair: its concomitant assumptions now permeate contemporary western civil society. Most significantly, it has led to an erosion of the sense that we might have unchosen responsibilities as well as chosen ones; that we might 'owe' something to the community whose traditions and resources have helped make us what we are. From this angle, the ideal habitat of the liberal individual is a society of strangers, of a diluted, even abnegated sense of reciprocity between citizens. The liberal individual is often presented as a kind of idealised shopper: a lifestyle chooser placed in a supermarket of options arising from the activities of other such individuals, whose preferences develop according to what they put in their trolley, and into which aisle they push it next. She owes little to her fellow citizens except to respect their privacy, and live within the law. Communitarians may object that such a scenario is morally unedifying, but also troubling in an anthropological sense. That's to say, it shows an alienation of the individual from the community which provides the very conditions of her individuality in the first place.

If this captures something of the flavour of the general concerns which communitarians (whether self-labelled or categorized as such by others) tend to have about trends in contemporary society, it does not by itself suggest a solution to those problems. For many of critics, indeed, communitarian solutions are neither practicable nor desirable at the present conjuncture. The boat, one might say,

has already been missed when it comes to achieving the kind of organic community after which at least some communitarians seem to hanker. Now as we've already mentioned, communitarians are a diverse bunch - linked more by a sense of unease about the valorisation of individualism than by a shared agenda as to what would be required to counteract it. But often, their enthusiasm for community is presented as holding in common a kind of nostalgia for a pre-modern age when the idea of a relatively homogenous community, bonded by substantial moral and cultural bonds, was rather more plausible than it is now. It's doubtful, say its critics, that such a community *ever* existed. Even if it did, any surface appearance of harmonious cohesion would be easy enough to expose as a screen for rifts and inequalities and conflicts beneath: stark hierarchies of wealth, power, and opportunity. A world made stable by everyone knowing their place is by no means necessarily a world in which the places to which people are assigned are fair or just. And the passing of traditional hierarchies - and a *fortiori*, notions, such as the 'divine right of kings', which underlay them - will often be regarded as one of modern society's most *valuable* features.

Indeed, the very force of the communitarian critique of contemporary living - that the forces of liberal modernity have swept aside traditional bonds and senses of solidarity - is, one might say, indicative of the futility of any project based on retrieving those bonds in a 21st century context. And the idea that the structures and practices of given communities are, simply by virtue of their being communities, to be respected and preserved seems at best an empty, and at worst a downright irresponsible, notion. After all, the British National Party represents 'a web of social relations' with identifiable 'shared values'. Moreover, the very delineation of separate, discrete communities requires that each operates by criteria of inclusion and exclusion: that there is an identifiable 'us' to which can be counterposed a (perhaps more vaguely defined) 'them'. Over-attention to the sanctity of given communities may have parochialist, chauvinistic, even persecutory implications. One can add to these concerns the familiar enough observation that we are rarely, if ever, members of a single community. As Etzioni himself acknowledges, 'people are at one and the same time members of several communities such as those at work and at home' (1995, 25) - some (we might add) chosen and some bestowed, some ephemeral and others more static.

Given *this*, the notion itself may have become rather too nebulous and unstable for us to be able to identify just how we'd set about enhancing 'community', as communitarianism enjoins us to do. There is a worry, then, about how communitarianism would work as a practical agenda. A key concern linking the various criticisms of the communitarian agenda in general is that in order to succeed, it must inevitably become an *authoritarian* project. That's to say, given the diversity, nuance and hybridity of contemporary social reality, any communitarian politics must *impose* some given model of community whose effects will be harmfully homogenizing, and - most crucially - override the rights of those individuals who fit least neatly with its demands. It is thus - so the charge goes - characteristic more of traditional conservatism's ideological concern for order, stability and the maintenance of the socio-political status quo than with a genuinely progressive agenda of increasing equality and social inclusion at the level of community relations. It will tend automatically to place respect for established or traditional values, structures and practices ahead of any call to reorientate society around new, perhaps fairer norms.

Admittedly, this picture seems out of step with the visions of 'community' evoked in communitarian literature - which tend not to sign up explicitly to a conservative agenda. Indeed, the term retains a certain progressive promise, and a rare rhetorical force. As Zygmunt Bauman has put it, the 'feel' of the idea remains positive, however we conceive its content or its feasibility (Bauman, 2001, p.1). Perhaps this is one reason why the ever jargon-conscious New Labour project has seen fit to endorse it as a core value.

Community, New Labour and the Third Way

In a pamphlet written shortly after he came to power as Prime Minister, Tony Blair writes that 'We all depend on collective goods for our independence; and all our lives are enriched - or impoverished - by the communities to which we belong'. He continues: 'A key challenge of progressive politics is to use the state as an enabling force, protecting effective communities and voluntary organisations and encouraging their growth to tackle new needs, in partnership as appropriate' (Blair, 1998, p. 4). These are unsubstantiated claims; their source only a brief, non-academic sketch of Blair's 'vision', as

it then stood, of a Third Way 'moving beyond Old Left and New Right'. But still, we might see them as pairing up with the two strands of communitarianism outlined above. The first is a kind of anthropological, or ontological claim about the preconditions of living a meaningful life: one which emphasises the interdependence of individuals, and the resultant significance of mutuality. The second shows concern for the quality of community life itself by appealing to ways in which it might be protected - specifically, in this case, by the actions of a suitably purposive state. Thus in rhetoric at least, we can see in New Labour politics an attempt to reflect the importance of community, and to place the enhancement of it at the centre of its agenda. So to this extent, it does indeed have much of the flavour of contemporary communitarian thinking - an influence to which, like Bill Clinton's New Democrats before them, New Labour have indeed been happy to own up.

What has this meant, in practice? Certainly, New Labour has explicitly aimed to put its communitarian money where its mouth is. In the first of Anthony Giddens' books on the Third Way project, published around the same time, he asserts that 'The theme of community is fundamental to the new politics, but not just as an abstract slogan. … "Community" doesn't imply trying to capture lost forms of local solidarity; it refers to practical means of furthering the social and material refurbishment of neighbourhoods, towns and larger local areas' (Giddens, 1998, p. 79). Perhaps the most familiar, and resonant, of the 'abstract slogans' deployed by Blair in the context of community's importance has been gleaned from Etzioni's work: that *rights entail responsibilities* (Etzioni, 1993, pp. 144ff). Against the idea that members of a society may, simply as such, be entitled to unconditional benefits or services, the idea here is that the responsibility to care for each individual should be seen as lying, first and foremost, with the individual themselves (Ibid,, p. 145). For Blair and Giddens, then, community is invoked very deliberately as residing in *civil society*: in lived social relations, and in 'commonsense' notions of our civic obligations. The Third Way is presented as avoiding what its proponents see as the full-on individualism entailed by the Thatcherite maxim that 'there is no such thing as society', and on the other hand the traditional social-democratic recourse to a strong state as the tool by which to realise the aims of social justice - most notably, equality. For Blair, 'the grievous 20th century error of the fundamentalist Left was the belief that the state could replace civil society and thereby advance freedom' (Blair, 1998, p. 4). The state has a role to play, certainly, but as facilitator, rather than guarantor, of a flourishing community life.

But as many have noted, the putting-into-practice of the New Labour agenda has seemed, in fact, to take rather a different course. Its character has been rather more authoritarian - and thus, centred more on the usage of the state apparatus to deliver particular outcomes - than is suggested by the rhetorical appeal to the relatively autonomous powers of civil society to deliver progress and fruition by itself. For example, as Home Secretaries, both Jack Straw and David Blunkett have made much of a perceived need to be seen as 'tough' on crime. Zero tolerance policing, the crackdown on 'squeegee merchants', the punitive treatment of asylum seekers, the (abortive) plan to introduce on-the-spot fines for various forms of anti-social behaviour - all of these have been presented as necessary responses to threats to 'our' community life, and to the values of 'decency' which make it strong. But each has taken the form not of the cultivation of an organic, 'bottom-up' sense of responsibility between mutually interdependent citizens, but of an identification of a particular, external threat to what is cherished most, followed by the dispatch of a forceful policy initiative in its direction. For all the contemporary resonance of notions of 'social inclusion', the manoeuvre here might be taken as a deliberate exclusion of certain groups, in order then to readmit them to the social fold (if at all) on special, punitive terms. A necessary part of maintaining social order, many would argue. But a sign too of the way in which communitarianism might be said to work, in practice, by imposing rather than enabling the regularities of conduct required for the agenda to retain its coherence.

It may be, as some have pointed out, that this aspect of the New Labour agenda points to a fundamental tension within it - and arguably, indeed, within communitarianism itself. For the 'social and material refurbishment' of communities may become all the more far-fetched amid the general movement towards an embrace of free market individualism which New Labour otherwise endorses in the name of a wholehearted acceptance of the 'reality' of our present conjuncture (Callinicos, 2001, chapter 2). For ideologically speaking, free market individualism itself carries with it the very baggage of atomism and the priority of individual choice of which communitarians have been so suspicious. New Labour's enthusiasms for the deregulation of labour markets, the need not to be seen as anti-competition, anti-business, or anti-markets, and the general imperative to be seen as embracing

rather than counteracting the 'new', the 'modern' and the dynamic sit very awkwardly with its simultaneous appeal to an enhanced, inclusive moral fabric within the community. For the reciprocity and cohesion fostered by market relations themselves extend only to market relations, rather than moral ones as such. It's hard to hold the competing concerns for inclusion and a deregulated market in a single vision, unless one views inclusion as, first and foremost, inclusion in the economic marketplace as an empowered, self-responsible economic actor and consumer.

Yet this, in fact, is precisely the flavour of the New Labour project. It's not just with those identified as 'deviant', or as 'outsiders', that the requirements of that project lead it to impose a certain vision of the self and its appropriate relations to the community. It works at the general level of New Labour's conception of an appropriately 'modern' citizenry. Thus it is through education and skilling according to the demands of the 'new economy' - whether provided via the New Deal for those out of work, an emphasis on vocational, ends-orientated school-level education, or the goal of 50% of school-leavers entering higher education - that the active, reflexive, community-minded New Labour citizenry is to be realised. We are called upon to view ourselves as economic agents with a social role presented primarily in terms of its economic responsibilities.

So as Alan Finlayson puts it, here 'the national economy rests on "people" being encouraged to fulfil and manifest their potential', as meanwhile 'citizens' rights, roles and responsibilities all cohere (economically, morally, politically and psychically) around [a] commitment to what Jack straw calls "active community", a strategy of "social intervention" rather than "social engineering"' (Finlayson, 2003, 168). Because the market is taken as a 'given', an inevitable part of 'our' modernity to be harnessed rather than restricted in the name of social justice, the vision of community to which New Labour aspires is in fact one based, rather shakily, on the very thing which communitarians such as MacIntye regard as community's great nemesis: the dynamic but amoral, productive but also irreverent, influence of free-market capitalism. There is a kind of irony here. Marx famously regarded the modern age as one in which 'all that is solid melts into air'; in which the drive for capital accumulation sweeps before it all 'fast-frozen relations', all 'ancient and venerable opinions' (Marx, 1985, p. 83). And Giddens, as we've seen, recognises the pointlessness of any attempt to retrieve 'lost forms of local solidarity'. It seems that the New Labour project seeks to replace these with forms of solidarity compatible with an exaltation of the dynamic capacities of the 'new' economy.

The trouble here is that this is, to say the least, a taxing task. Attempts have been made before to ride at once the two horses represented by enthusiasm for the unfettered market on the one hand, and for enhanced and stable communal bonds on the other. Most significant of these has been the New Right project of the 1980s, characterised by the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and US respectively. This combined a remarkably similar cocktail of free-market fundamentalism and moral authoritarianism to that provided by New Labour in practice, if not always in theory. The failure of the Conservative government to ride both horses without falling off with a judder has led even erstwhile fans of the New Right agenda to conclude that there is no longer the historical space for coherent conservative thought (Gray, 1997, chapter 9). For Conservatives, the great problem was to combine moral traditionalism with the propensity of a deregulated market to throw up patterns of consumption hardly compatible with those values. To paint New Labour as *simply* rehearsing this predicament would be to ignore its genuine attempts to stake out a new progressive agenda which avoids the pitfalls of previous ideologies of both left and right. But at a basic level, the success of its project does seem to be faced by similar problems to those which undid the Conservative government in the 1990s.

Whither community?

One conclusion one might reach from this brief, highly selective discussion would be that any attempt to uphold the value of community is now doomed, in the face of what Giddens himself has called the 'post-traditional' nature of contemporary western society. For again, such a project will have to *impose* a communitarian order in the face of dispersed, mutually incoherent values and identities. Thus, it will precisely not centre on the thriving of the *given* values and identities to which communitarians such as MacIntyre make passionate appeal - a 'bottom-up' flourishing of what is most precious in the make-up of the community of which we're part. MacIntyre's picture seems characterised by (at best) rose-tintedness or (at worst) a rather staggering reification of community

which seems unwarrantedly homogeneous and consistently textured. But then, so indeed might any attempt to impose such uniformity, from above, according to given political priorities, seem (at best) ambitious and (at worst) downright oppressive.

But to package up *tout court* the significance and potential of community as a value with one or other of its communitarian articulations, or its treatment at the hands of a current government, would be an extravagant and costly move. As other contributions to this special issue will show, there are forms and implications of community that far transcend these particular mobilisations of the term. Our discussion here has done little to address specifically the nuances and possibilities of the notion of 'community' itself. To close, it is worth offering a useful distinction between two broad ways in which the notion might be fleshed-out.

The first appeals to 'the community' as a given, circumscribed entity. Typical among such appeals are references to the community as a kind of subject; something with a voice, with feelings; something that can be threatened, enhanced, or harmed. Here's a ready-to-hand, unexceptional example. A couple of years ago, a candidate in the local council elections stuck a leaflet through my door which said, more or less: 'In the 1950s, this part of Cardiff was a real community. You could leave your front door open all day. Everyone on the street knew each other, and looked out for each other. Now this has gone.' As it happens, the diagnosis offered for this decline in the moral fabric of Grangetown is that Labour councils have no respect for the values of the 'man on the street', for 'the way we have always done things around here'. As it also happens, the main demographic change 'around here' since the 1950s has been the multiculturalisation of the neighbourhood. One in three residents are now of Asian or Somali origin. To say that this is no longer a 'real community', then, is to say that it is less homogeneous; less consistently, predictably textured than once it was. Less charitably: it is to say that is no longer as purely white and Christian. The appeal here is a nostalgic one: to a community of tight networks, an identifiable unit which has been lost, or demolished, like someone coming round during the night and removing all the roadsigns. It is thus an appeal to community as thing: it is a reification, a naturalisation, a hypostatisation. There were delimitable contours of community life around here, definitive features, substantial bonds, and now they have been eroded. Once we knew our place; now we don't.

I take such a notion to be characteristic of *both* MacIntyre-style moral communitarianism, and the way in which communitarian notions have been put into operation by New Labour. For while the latter may protest that their appeal is not to some seamless pre-modern order which might somehow be retrieved by the appropriate political measures, their aim seems to be just such an order: at least, one in which the citizenry's perception of themselves has the sort of uniformity which is seen as being a requirement of a successful 'modern' economy. New Labour's vision seems to be of a society in which each of us acknowledges our place within the networks of an efficiently functioning political economy, and the responsibilities which that place carries with it.

At the opposite pole, there is what we might call community as a *project*, as something, by definition, yet to be acheived. Definitive of progressive politics of virtually all kinds, the appeal here is to a version of community which precisely tries to avoid the lapse into hypostatization characteristic of cruder, nostalgic alternatives. Community here is not a thing, not a structure to be built, and then nailed down in stasis. It is, rather, a process. The realisation of its possibility carries certain preconditions - perhaps on the part of individual subjects, and perhaps in terms of the appropriate kinds of structural conditions. It requires, too, a commitment on behalf of the community's members to a value - democratic participation - which is required in order that the operations of the community hinge on an adequately subtle recognition of the importance of social relations to our flourishing as individuals. But it does not at foreclosure. It does not pretend to delineate, in advance, the substantial content of community life as lived, or, even less, to rule out the possible flourishing of alternative modes of living. The place of community is as the condition of that flourishing. Rather than something which might happen to emerge from the lifestyle choices, the shopping habits, of individuals conceived as always-already atomised, community figures here as the political and moral precondition of a just, participative and genuinely inclusive public life.

Both contemporary communitarianism and the New Labour agenda have been painted here with very broad brush; neither has been explored in sufficient detail for a deep critique. But a concern about both, in these 'cartoon' forms at least, is that in their invoking of community as a 'given' they sacrifice

something else which from another angle, might be taken as a necessary part of the genuine flourishing of community life. In both cases, what is denied is the possibility for *politics*: for deliberation about, negotiation and re-negotiation of, ways of living. If community as a given is the only game in town, then politics becomes the discovery, or the imposition, of what was already there, or what should have been. This is precisely to deny the scope for political transformation - for community in the sense of a project.

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