



## The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism

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## THE COMMUNITARIAN CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

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### I.

Intellectual fashions are notoriously short-lived, very much like fashions in popular music, art, or dress. But there are certain fashions that seem regularly to reappear. Like pleated trousers or short skirts, they are inconstant features of a larger and more steadily prevailing phenomenon — in this case, a certain way of dressing. They have brief but recurrent lives; we know their transience and expect their return. Needless to say, there is no afterlife in which trousers will be permanently pleated or skirts forever short. Recurrence is all.

Although it operates at a much higher level (an infinitely higher level?) of cultural significance, the communitarian critique of liberalism is like the pleating of trousers: transient but certain to return. It is a consistently intermittent feature of liberal politics and social organization. No liberal success will make it permanently unattractive. At the same time, no communitarian critique, however penetrating, will ever be anything more than an inconstant feature of liberalism. Someday, perhaps, there will be a larger transformation, like the shift from aristocratic knee-breeches to plebian pants, rendering liberalism and its critics alike irrelevant. But I see no present signs of anything like that, nor am I sure that we should look forward to it. For now, there is much to be said for a recurrent critique, whose protagonists hope only for small victories, partial incorporations, and when they are rebuffed or dismissed or coopted, fade away for a time only to return.

Communitarianism is usefully contrasted with social democracy, which has succeeded in establishing a permanent presence alongside of and some-

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times conjoined with liberal politics. Social democracy has its own intermittently fashionable critics, largely anarchist and libertarian in character. Since it sponsors certain sorts of communal identification, it is less subject to communitarian criticism than liberalism is. But it can never escape such criticism entirely, for liberals and social democrats alike share a commitment to economic growth and cope (although in different ways) with the deracinated social forms that growth produces. Community itself is largely an ideological presence in modern society; it has no recurrent critics of its own. It is intermittently fashionable only because it no longer exists in anything like full strength, and it is criticized only when it is fashionable.

The communitarian critique is nonetheless a powerful one; it would not recur if it were not capable of engaging our minds and feelings. In this essay, I want to investigate the power of its current American versions and then offer a version of my own—less powerful, perhaps, than the ones with which I shall begin, but more available for incorporation within liberal (or social democratic) politics. I do not mean (I hardly have the capacity) to lay communitarianism to rest, although I would willingly wait for its reappearance in a form more coherent and incisive than that in which it currently appears. The problem with communitarian criticism today—I am not the first to notice this—is that it suggests two different, and deeply contradictory, arguments against liberalism. One of these arguments is aimed primarily at liberal practice, the other primarily at liberal theory, but they cannot both be right. It is possible that each one is partly right—indeed, I shall insist on just this partial validity—but each of the arguments is right in a way that undercuts the value of the other.

## II.

The first argument holds that liberal political theory accurately represents liberal social practice. As if the Marxist account of ideological reflection were literally true, and exemplified here, contemporary Western societies (American society especially) are taken to be the home of radically isolated individuals, rational egotists, and existential agents, men and women protected and divided by their inalienable rights. Liberalism tells the truth about the asocial society that liberals create—not, in fact, *ex nihilo* as their theory suggests, but in a struggle against traditions and communities and authorities that are forgotten as soon as they are escaped, so that liberal practices seem to have no history. The struggle itself is ritually celebrated but rarely reflected on. The members of liberal society share no political or religious traditions;

they can tell only one story about themselves and that is the story of *ex nihilo* creation, which begins in the state of nature or the original position. Each individual imagines himself absolutely free, unencumbered, and on his own – and enters society, accepting its obligations, only in order to minimize his risks. His goal is security, and security is, as Marx wrote, “the assurance of his egoism.” And as he imagines himself, so he *really is*,

that is, an individual separated from the community, withdrawn into himself, wholly preoccupied with his private interest and acting in accordance with his private caprice. The only bond between men is natural necessity, need, and private interest.<sup>1</sup>

(I have used masculine pronouns in order to fit my sentences to Marx’s. But it is an interesting question, not addressed here, whether this first communitarian critique speaks to the experience of women: Are necessity and private interest their only bonds with one another?)

The writings of the young Marx represent one of the early appearances of communitarian criticism, and his argument, first made in the 1840s, is powerfully present today. Alastair MacIntyre’s description of the incoherence of modern intellectual and cultural life and the loss of narrative capacity makes a similar point in updated, state-of-the-art, theoretical language.<sup>2</sup> But the only theory that is necessary to the communitarian critique of liberalism is liberalism itself. All that the critics have to do, so they say, is to take liberal theory seriously. The self-portrait of the individual constituted only by his willfulness, liberated from all connection, without common values, binding ties, customs, or traditions – sans eyes, sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything – need only be evoked in order to be devalued: It is already the concrete absence of value. What can the real life of such a person be like? Imagine him maximizing his utilities, and society is turned into a war of all against all, the familiar rat race, in which, as Hobbes wrote, there is “no other goal, nor other garland, but being foremost.”<sup>3</sup> Imagine him enjoying his rights, and society is reduced to the coexistence of isolated selves, for liberal rights, according to this first critique, have more to do with “exit” than with “voice.”<sup>4</sup> They are concretely expressed in separation, divorce, withdrawal, solitude, privacy, and political apathy. And finally, the very fact that individual life can be described in these two philosophical languages, the language of utilities and the language of rights, is a further mark, says MacIntyre, of its incoherence: Men and women in liberal society no longer have access to a single moral culture within which they can learn how they ought to live.<sup>5</sup> There is no consensus, no public meeting-of-minds, on the nature of the good life, hence the triumph of private caprice, revealed, for example, in Sartrean existentialism, the ideological reflection of everyday capriciousness.

We liberals are free to choose, and we have a right to choose, but we have no criteria to govern our choices except our own wayward understanding of our wayward interests and desires. And so our choices lack the qualities of cohesion and consecutiveness. We can hardly remember what we did yesterday; we cannot with any assurance predict what we will do tomorrow. We cannot give a proper account of ourselves. We cannot sit together and tell comprehensible stories, and we recognize ourselves in the stories we read only when these are fragmented narratives, without plots, the literary equivalent of atonal music and nonrepresentational art.

Liberal society, seen in the light of this first communitarian critique, is fragmentation in practice; and community is the exact opposite, the home of coherence, connection, and narrative capacity. But I am less concerned here with the different accounts that might be provided of this lost Eden than I am with the repeated insistence on the reality of fragmentation after the loss. This is the common theme of all contemporary communitarianisms: neoconservative lamentation, neo-Marxist indictment, and neoclassical or republican hand-wringing. (The need for the prefix “neo” suggests again the intermittent or recurrent character of communitarian criticism.) I should think it would be an awkward theme, for if the sociological argument of liberal theory is right, if society is actually decomposed, without residue, into the problematic coexistence of individuals, then we might well assume that liberal politics is the best way to deal with the problems of decomposition. If we have to create an artificial and ahistorical union out of a multitude of isolated selves, why not take the state of nature or the original position as our conceptual starting point? Why not accept, in standard liberal fashion, the priority of procedural justice over substantive conceptions of the good, since we can hardly expect, given our fragmentation, to agree about the good? Michael Sandel asks whether a community of those who put justice first can ever be more than a community of strangers.<sup>6</sup> The question is a good one, but its reverse form is more immediately relevant: If we really are a community of strangers, how can we do anything else but put justice first?

### *III.*

We are saved from this entirely plausible line of argument by the second communitarian critique of liberalism. The second critique holds that liberal theory radically misrepresents real life. The world is not like that nor could it be. Men and women cut loose from all social ties, literally unencumbered, each one the one and only inventor of his or her own life, with no criteria, no

common standards, to guide the invention — these are mythical figures. How can any group of people be strangers to one another when each member of the group is born with parents, and when these parents have friends, relatives, neighbors, comrades at work, coreligionists, and fellow citizens — connections, in fact, which are not so much chosen as passed on and inherited? Liberalism may well enhance the significance of purely contractual ties, but it is obviously false to suggest, as Hobbes sometimes seemed to do, that all our connections are mere “market friendships,” voluntarist and self-interested in character, which cannot outlast the advantages they bring.<sup>7</sup> It is in the very nature of a human society that individuals bred within it will find themselves caught up in patterns of relationship, networks of power, and communities of meaning. That quality of being caught up is what makes them persons of a certain sort. And only then can they make themselves persons of a (marginally) different sort by reflecting on what they are and by acting in more or less distinctive ways within the patterns, networks, and communities that are willy-nilly theirs.

The burden of the second critique is that the deep structure even of liberal society is in fact communitarian. Liberal theory distorts this reality and, insofar as we adopt the theory, deprives us of any ready access to our own experience of communal embeddedness. The rhetoric of liberalism — this is the argument of the authors of *Habits of the Heart* — limits our understanding of our own heart’s habits, and gives us no way to formulate the convictions that hold us together as persons and that bind persons together into a community.<sup>8</sup> The assumption here is that we are in fact persons and that we are in fact bound together. The liberal ideology of separatism cannot take personhood and bondedness away from us. What it does take away is the *sense* of our personhood and bondedness, and this deprivation is then reflected in liberal politics. It explains our inability to form cohesive solidarities, stable movements and parties, that might make our deep convictions visible and effective in the world. It also explains our radical dependence (brilliantly foreshadowed in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*) on the central state.

But how are we to understand this extraordinary disjunction between communal experience and liberal ideology, between personal conviction and public rhetoric, and between social bondedness and political isolation? That question is not addressed by communitarian critics of the second sort. If the first critique depends on a vulgar Marxist theory of reflection, the second critique requires an equally vulgar idealism. Liberal theory now seems to have a power over and against real life that has been granted to few theories in human history. Plainly, it has not been granted to communitarian theory, which cannot, on the first argument, overcome the reality of liberal separat-

ism and cannot, on the second argument, evoke the already existing structures of social connection. In any case, the two critical arguments are mutually inconsistent; they cannot both be true. Liberal separatism either represents or misrepresents the conditions of everyday life. It might, of course, do a little of each — the usual muddle — but that is not a satisfactory conclusion from a communitarian standpoint. For if the account of dissociation and separatism is even partly right, then we have to raise questions about the depth, so to speak, of the deep structure. And if we are all to some degree communitarians under the skin, then the portrait of social incoherence loses its critical force.

#### IV.

But each of the two critical arguments is partly right. I will try to say what is right about each, and then ask if something plausible can be made of the parts. First, then, there cannot be much doubt that we (in the United States) live in a society where individuals are relatively dissociated and separated from one another, or better, where they are continually separating from one another — continually in motion, often in solitary and apparently random motion, as if in imitation of what physicists call Brownian movement. Hence we live in a profoundly unsettled society. We can best see the forms of unsettlement if we track the most important moves. So, consider (imitating the Chinese style) the Four Mobilities:

1. *Geographic mobility.* Americans apparently change their residence more often than any people in history, at least since the barbarian migrations, excluding only nomadic tribes and families caught up in civil or foreign wars. Moving people and their possessions from one city or town to another is a major industry in the United States, even though many people manage to move themselves. In another sense, of course, we are all self-moved, not refugees but voluntary migrants. The sense of place must be greatly weakened by this extensive geographic mobility, although I find it hard to say whether it is superseded by mere insensitivity or by a new sense of many places. Either way, communitarian feeling seems likely to decline in importance. Communities are more than just locations, but they are most often successful when they are permanently located.
2. *Social mobility.* This article will not address the arguments about how best to describe social standing or how to measure changes, whether by income, education, class membership, or rank in the status hierarchy. It is enough to say that fewer Americans stand exactly where their parents stood or do what they did than in any society for which we have comparable knowledge. Americans may inherit many things from their parents, but the extent to which they make a different life, if only by making a different living, means that the inheritance of community, that is, the passing on of beliefs and customary

ways, is uncertain at best. Whether or not children are thereby robbed of narrative capacity, they seem likely to tell different stories than their parents told.

3. *Marital mobility.* Rates of separation, divorce, and remarriage are higher today than they have ever been in our own society and probably higher than they have ever been in any other (except perhaps among Roman aristocrats, although I know of no statistics from that time, only anecdotes). The first two mobilities, geographic and social, also disrupt family life, so that siblings, for example, often live at great distances from one another, and later as uncles and aunts, they are far removed from nephews and nieces. But what we call "broken homes" are the product of marital breaks, of husbands or wives moving out — and then, commonly, moving on to new partners. Insofar as home is the first community and the first school of ethnic identity and religious conviction, this kind of breakage must have countercommunitarian consequences. It means that children often do not hear continuous or identical stories from the adults with whom they live. (Did the greater number of children ever hear such stories? The death of one spouse and the remarriage of the other may once have been as common as divorce and remarriage are today. But, then, other sorts of mobility have to be considered: Both men and women are more likely today to marry across class, ethnic, and religious lines; remarriage will therefore often produce extraordinarily complex and socially diverse families — which probably are without historical precedent.)
4. *Political mobility.* Loyalty to leaders, movements, parties, clubs, and urban machines seems to decline rapidly as place and social standing and family membership become less central in the shaping of personal identity. Liberal citizens stand outside all political organizations and then choose the one that best serves their ideals or interests. They are, ideally, independent voters, that is, people who move around; they choose for themselves rather than voting as their parents did, and they choose freshly each time rather than repeating themselves. As their numbers increase, they make for a volatile electorate and hence for institutional instability, particularly at the local level where political organization once served to reinforce communal ties.

The effects of the Four Mobilities are intensified in a variety of ways by other social developments which we are likely to talk about in the common metaphor of movement: the advance of knowledge, technological progress, and so on. But I am concerned here only with the actual movement of individuals. Liberalism is, most simply, the theoretical endorsement and justification of this movement.<sup>9</sup> In the liberal view, then, the Four Mobilities represent the enactment of liberty, and the pursuit of (private or personal) happiness. And it has to be said that, conceived in this way, liberalism is a genuinely popular creed. Any effort to curtail mobility in the four areas described here would require a massive and harsh application of state power. Nevertheless, this popularity has an underside of sadness and discontent that are intermittently articulated, and communitarianism is, most simply, the intermittent articulation of these feelings. It reflects a sense of loss, and the loss is real. People do not always leave their old neighborhoods or hometowns willingly or happily. Moving may be a personal adventure in our standard cultural mythologies, but it is as often a family trauma in real life.



The same thing is true of social mobility, which carries people down as well as up and requires adjustments that are never easy to manage. Marital breaks may sometimes give rise to new and stronger unions, but they also pile up what we might think of as family fragments: single-parent households, separated and lonely men and women, and abandoned children. And independence in politics is often a not-so-splendid isolation: Individuals with opinions are cut loose from groups with programs. The result is a decline in “the sense of efficacy,” with accompanying effects on commitment and morale.

All in all, we liberals probably know one another less well, and with less assurance, than people once did, although we may see more aspects of the other than they saw, and recognize in him or her a wider range of possibilities (including the possibility of moving on). We are more often alone than people once were, being without neighbors we can count on, relatives who live nearby or with whom we are close, or comrades at work or in the movement. This is the truth of the first communitarian argument. We must now fix the limits of this truth by seeking what is true in the second argument.

In its easiest version, the second argument — that we are really, at bottom, creatures of community — is certainly true but of uncertain significance. The ties of place, class or status, family, and even politics survive the Four Mobilities to a remarkable extent. To take just one example, from the last of the Four: It remains true, even today in this most liberal and mobile of societies, that the best predictor of how people will vote is our knowledge of how their parents voted.<sup>10</sup> All those dutifully imitative young Republicans and Democrats testify to the failure of liberalism to make independence or waywardness of mind the distinctive mark of its adherents. The predictive value of parental behavior holds even for independent voters: They are simply the heirs of independence. But we do not know to what extent inheritances of this sort are a dwindling communal resource; it may be that each generation passes on less than it received. The full liberalization of the social order, the production and reproduction of self-inventing individuals, may take a long time, much longer, indeed, than liberals themselves expected. There is not much comfort here for communitarian critics, however; while they can recognize and value the survival of older ways of life, they cannot count on, and they must have anxieties about, the vitality of those ways.

But there is another approach to the truth of the second critical argument. Whatever the extent of the Four Mobilities, they do not seem to move us so far apart that we can no longer talk with one another. We often disagree, of course, but we disagree in mutually comprehensible ways. I should think it fairly obvious that the philosophical controversies that MacIntyre laments

are not in fact a mark of social incoherence. Where there are philosophers, there will be controversies, just as where there are knights, there will be tournaments. But these are highly ritualized activities, which bear witness to the connection, not the disconnection, of their protagonists. Even political conflict in liberal societies rarely takes forms so extreme as to set its protagonists beyond negotiation and compromise, procedural justice, and the very possibility of speech. The American civil rights struggle is a nice example of a conflict for which our moral/political language was and is entirely adequate. The fact that the struggle has had only partial success does not reflect linguistic inadequacy but rather political failures and defeats.

Martin Luther King's speeches evoked a palpable tradition, a set of common values such that public disagreement could focus only on how (or how quickly) they might best be realized.<sup>11</sup> But this is not, so to speak, a traditionalist tradition, a *Gemeinschaft* tradition, a survival of the preliberal past. It is a liberal tradition modified, no doubt, by survivals of different sorts. The modifications are most obviously Protestant and republican in character, though by no means exclusively so: The years of mass immigration have brought a great variety of ethnic and religious memories to bear on American politics. What all of them bear on, however, is liberalism. The language of individual rights—voluntary association, pluralism, toleration, separation, privacy, free speech, the career open to talents, and so on—is simply inescapable. Who among us seriously attempts to escape? If we really are situated selves, as the second communitarian critique holds, then our situation is largely captured by that vocabulary. This is the truth of the second critique. Does it make any sense then to argue that liberalism prevents us from understanding or maintaining the ties that bind us together?

It makes some sense, because liberalism is a strange doctrine, which seems continually to undercut itself, to disdain its own traditions, and to produce in each generation renewed hopes for a more absolute freedom from history and society alike. Much of liberal political theory, from Locke to Rawls, is an effort to fix and stabilize the doctrine in order to end the endlessness of liberal liberation. But beyond every current version of liberalism, there is always a super liberalism, which, as Roberto Unger says of his own doctrine, “pushes the liberal premises about state and society, about freedom from dependence and governance of social relations by the will, to the point at which they merge into a large ambition: the building of a social world less alien to a self that can always violate the generative rules of its own mental or social constructs.”<sup>12</sup> Although Unger was once identified as a communitarian, this ambition—large indeed!—seems designed to prevent not only any stabilization of liberal doctrine but also any recovery or creation of

community. For there is no imaginable community that would not be alien to the eternally transgressive self. If the ties that bind us together do not *bind* us, there can be no such thing as a community. If it is anything at all, communitarianism is antithetical to transgression. And the transgressive self is antithetical even to the liberal community which is its creator and sponsor.<sup>13</sup>

Liberalism is a self-subverting doctrine; for that reason, it really does require periodic communitarian correction. But it is not a particularly helpful form of correction to suggest that liberalism is literally incoherent or that it can be replaced by some preliberal or antiliberal community waiting somehow just beneath the surface or just beyond the horizon. Nothing is waiting; American communitarians have to recognize that there is no one out there but separated, rights-bearing, voluntarily associating, freely speaking, liberal selves. It would be a good thing, though, if we could teach those selves to know themselves as social beings, the historical products of, and in part the embodiments of, liberal values. For the communitarian correction of liberalism cannot be anything other than a selective reinforcement of those same values or, to appropriate the well-known phrase of Michael Oakeshott, a pursuit of the intimations of community within them.

## V

The place to begin the pursuit is with the liberal idea of voluntary association, which is not well-understood, it seems to me, either among liberals or among their communitarian critics. In both its theory and its practice, liberalism expresses strong associative tendencies alongside its dissociative tendencies: Its protagonists form groups as well as split off from the groups they form; they join up and resign, marry and divorce. Nevertheless, it is a mistake, and a characterically liberal mistake, to think that the existing patterns of association are entirely or even largely voluntary and contractual, that is, the product of will alone. In a liberal society, as in every other society, people are born into very important sorts of groups, born with identities, male or female, for example, working class, Catholic or Jewish, black, democrat, and so on. Many of their subsequent associations (like their subsequent careers) merely express these underlying identities, which, again, are not so much chosen as enacted.<sup>14</sup> Liberalism is distinguished less by the freedom to form groups on the basis of these identities than the freedom to leave the groups and sometimes even the identities behind. Association is always at risk in a liberal society. The boundaries of the group are not policed; people come and go, or they just fade into the distance without ever quite

acknowledging that they have left. That is why liberalism is plagued by free-rider problems—by people who continue to enjoy the benefits of membership and identity while no longer participating in the activities that produce those benefits.<sup>15</sup> Communitarianism, by contrast, is the dream of a perfect free-riderlessness.

At its best, the liberal society is the social union of social unions that John Rawls described: a pluralism of groups bonded by shared ideas of toleration and democracy.<sup>16</sup> But if all the groups are precarious, continually on the brink of dissolution or abandonment, then the larger union must also be weak and vulnerable. Or, alternatively, its leaders and officials will be driven to compensate for the failures of association elsewhere by strengthening their own union, that is, the central state, beyond the limits that liberalism has established. These limits are best expressed in terms of individual rights and civil liberties, but they also include a prescription for state neutrality. The good life is pursued by individuals, sponsored by groups; the state presides over the pursuit and the sponsorship but does not participate in either. Presiding is singular in character; pursuing and sponsoring are plural. Hence it is a critical question for liberal theory and practice whether the associative passions and energies of ordinary people are likely over the long haul to survive the Four Mobilities and prove themselves sufficient to the requirements of pluralism. There is at least some evidence that they will not prove sufficient—without a little help. But, to repeat an old question, whence cometh our help? A few of the existing social unions live in the expectation of divine assistance. For the rest, we can only help one another, and the agency through which help of that sort comes most expeditiously is the state. But what kind of a state is it that fosters associative activities? What kind of a social union is it that includes without incorporating a great and discordant variety of social unions?

Obviously, it is a liberal state and social union; any other kind is too dangerous for communities and individuals alike. It would be an odd enterprise to argue in the name of communitarianism for an alternative state, for that would be to argue against our own political traditions and to repudiate whatever community we already have. But the communitarian correction does require a liberal state of a certain sort, conceptually though not historically unusual: a state that is, at least over some part of the terrain of sovereignty, deliberately nonneutral. The standard liberal argument for neutrality is an induction from social fragmentation. Since dissociated individuals will never agree on the good life, the state must allow them to live as they think best, subject only to John Stuart Mill's harm principle, without endorsing or sponsoring any particular understanding of what "best" means.

But there is a problem here: The more dissociated individuals are, the stronger the state is likely to be, since it will be the only or the most important social union. And then membership in the state, the only good that is shared by all individuals, may well come to seem the good that is “best.”

This is only to repeat the first communitarian critique, and it invites a response like the second critique: that the state is not in fact the only or even, for ordinary people in their everyday lives, the most important social union. All sorts of other groups continue to exist and to give shape and purpose to the lives of their members, despite the triumph of individual rights, the Four Mobilities in which that triumph is manifest, and the free-riding that it makes possible. But these groups are continually at risk. And so the state, if it is to remain a liberal state, must endorse and sponsor some of them, namely, those that seem most likely to provide shapes and purposes congenial to the shared values of a liberal society.<sup>17</sup> No doubt, there are problems here too, and I do not mean to deny their difficulty. But I see no way to avoid some such formulation — and not only for theoretical reasons. The actual history of the best liberal states, as of the best social democratic states (and these tend increasingly to be the same states), suggest that they behave in exactly this way, although often very inadequately.

Let me give three relatively familiar examples of state behavior of this kind. First, the Wagner Act of the 1930s: This was not a standard liberal law, hindering the hindrances to union organization, for it actively fostered union organization, and it did so precisely by solving the free-rider problem. By requiring collective bargaining whenever there was majority support (but not necessarily unanimous support) for the union, and then by allowing union shops, the Wagner Act sponsored the creation of strong unions capable, at least to some degree, of determining the shape of industrial relations.<sup>18</sup> Of course, there could not be strong unions without working class solidarity; unionization is parasitic on underlying communities of feeling and belief. But those underlying communities were already being eroded by the Four Mobilities when the Wagner Act was passed, and so the Act served to counter the dissociative tendencies of liberal society. It was nevertheless a liberal law, for the unions that it helped create enhanced the lives of individual workers and were subject to dissolution and abandonment in accordance with liberal principles should they ever cease to do that.

The second example is the use of tax exemptions and matching grants of tax money to enable different religious groups to run extensive systems of day-care centers, nursing homes, hospitals, and so on — welfare societies inside the welfare state. I do not pretend that these private and pluralist societies compensate for the shoddiness of the American welfare state. But

they do improve the delivery of services by making it a more immediate function of communal solidarity. The state's role here, beside establishing minimal standards, is to abate, since in this case it cannot entirely solve the free-rider problem. If some number of men and women end up in a Catholic nursing home, even though they never contributed to a Catholic charity, they will at least have paid their taxes. But why not nationalize the entire welfare system and end free-ridership? The liberal response is that the social union of social unions must always operate at two levels: A welfare system run entirely by private, nonprofit associations would be dangerously inadequate and inequitable in its coverage; and a totally nationalized system would deny expression to local and particularist solidarities.<sup>19</sup>

The third example is the passage of plant-closing laws designed to afford some protection to local communities of work and residence. Inhabitants are insulated, although only for a time, against market pressure to move out of their old neighborhoods and search for work elsewhere. Although the market "needs" a highly mobile work force, the state takes other needs into account, not only in a welfarist way (through unemployment insurance and job retraining programs) but also in a communitarian way. But the state is not similarly committed to the preservation of every neighborhood community. It is entirely neutral toward communities of ethnicity and residence, offering no protection against strangers who want to move in. Here, geographic mobility remains a positive value, one of the rights of citizens.

Unions, religious organizations, and neighborhoods each draw on feelings and beliefs that, in principle if not always in history, predate the emergence of the liberal state. How strong these feelings and beliefs are, and what their survival value is, I cannot say. Have the unions established such a grip on the imaginations of their members as to make for good stories? There are some good stories, first told, then retold, and sometimes even re-enacted. But the narrative line does not seem sufficiently compelling to younger workers to sustain anything like the old working class solidarity. Nor is it sufficient for a religious organization to provide life cycle services for its members if they are no longer interested in its religious services. Nor are neighborhoods proof for long against market pressure. Still, communal feeling and belief seem considerably more stable than we once thought they would be, and the proliferation of secondary associations in liberal society is remarkable — even if many of them have short lives and transient memberships. One has a sense of people working together and trying to cope, and not, as the first communitarian critique suggests, just getting by on their own, by themselves, one by one.

## VI.

A good liberal (or social democratic) state enhances the possibilities for cooperative coping. John Dewey provided a useful account of such a state in *The Public and Its Problems*. Published in 1927, the book is a commentary on and a partial endorsement of an earlier round of communitarian criticism. Dewey shared with the critics of his time, who called themselves “pluralists,” an uneasiness with the sovereign state, but he was not quite as uneasy as most of them were. He also shared an admiration for what he called “primary groupings” within the state, but he was more inclined than the pluralists were to qualify his admiration. Primary groupings, he wrote, are “good, bad, and indifferent,” and they cannot by their mere existence fix the limits of state activity. The state is not “only an umpire to avert and remedy trespasses of one group upon another.” It has a larger function: “It renders the desirable association solidier and more coherent. It places a discount upon injurious groupings and renders their tenure of life precarious [and] it gives the individual members of valued associations greater liberty and security; it relieves them of hampering conditions. It enables individual members to count with reasonable certainty upon what others will do.”<sup>20</sup> These may seem like tasks too extensive for a *liberal* state, but they are constrained by the constitutional establishment of individual rights — which are themselves (on the pragmatic understanding) not so much recognitions of what individuals by nature are or have as expressions of hope about what they will be and do. Unless individuals act together in certain ways, state action of the sort that Dewey recommended cannot get started. When we recognize the “right of the citizens peacefully to assemble,” for example, we are hoping for assemblies of citizens. If we then discriminate among such assemblies, we do so on limited grounds, fostering only those that really do express communities of feeling and belief and do not violate liberal principles of association.

It is often argued these days that the nonneutral state, whose activities I have made some attempt to justify, is best understood in republican terms. A revival of neoclassical republicanism provides much of the substance of contemporary communitarian politics. The revival, I have to say, is largely academic; unlike other versions of communitarianism in Dewey’s time and ours, it has no external reference. There really are unions, churches, and neighborhoods in American society, but there are virtually no examples of republican association and no movement or party aimed at promoting such association. Dewey would probably not recognize his “public,” nor Rawls his “social union,” as versions of republicanism, if only because in both these

cases, energy and commitment have been drained from the singular and narrowly political association to the more various associations of civil society. Republicanism by contrast is an integrated and unitary doctrine in which energy and commitment are focused primarily on the political realm. It is a doctrine adapted (in both its classical and neoclassical forms) to the needs of small, homogeneous communities, where civil society is radically undifferentiated. Perhaps the doctrine can be extended to account for a “republic of republics,” a decentralized and participatory revision of liberal democracy. A considerable strengthening of local governments would then be required in the hope of encouraging the development and display of civic virtue in a pluralist variety of social settings. This indeed is a pursuit of the intimations of community *within* liberalism, for it has more to do with John Stuart Mill than with Rousseau. Now we are to imagine the nonneutral state empowering cities, towns, and boroughs; fostering neighborhood committees and review boards; and always on the look-out for bands of citizens ready to take responsibility for local affairs.<sup>21</sup>

None of this is any guarantee against the erosion of the underlying communities or the death of local loyalties. It is a matter of principle that communities must always be at risk. And the great paradox of a liberal society is that one cannot set oneself against this principle without also setting oneself against the traditional practices and shared understandings of the society. Here, respect for tradition requires the precariousness of traditionalism. If the first communitarian critique were true in its entirety, if there were no communities and no traditions, then we could just proceed to invent new ones. Insofar as the second critique is even partly true, and the work of communal invention is well begun and continually in progress, we must rest content with the kinds of corrections and enhancements—they would be, in fact, more radical than these terms suggest—that Dewey described.

## VII.

I have avoided until now what is often taken to be the central issue between liberals and their communitarian critics—the constitution of the self.<sup>22</sup> Liberalism, it is commonly said, is founded on the idea of a presocial self, a solitary and sometimes heroic individual confronting society, who is fully formed before the confrontation begins. Communitarian critics then argue, first, that instability and dissociation are the actual and disheartening achievement of individuals of this sort and, second, that there really cannot be individuals of this sort. The critics are commonly said in turn to believe



in a radically socialized self that can never “confront” society because it is, from the beginning, entangled in society, itself the embodiment of social values. The disagreement seems sharp enough, but in fact, in practice, it is not sharp at all—for neither of these views can be sustained for long by anyone who goes beyond staking out a position and tries to elaborate an argument.<sup>23</sup> Nor does liberal or communitarian theory require views of this sort. Contemporary liberals are not committed to a presocial self, but only to a self capable of reflecting critically on the values that have governed its socialization; and communitarian critics, who are doing exactly that, can hardly go on to claim that socialization is everything. The philosophical and psychological issues here go very deep, but so far as politics is concerned, there is little to be won on this battlefield; concessions from the other side come too easily to count as victories.

The central issue for political theory is not the constitution of the self but the connection of constituted selves, the pattern of social relations. Liberalism is best understood as a theory of relationship, which has voluntary association at its center and which understands voluntariness as the right of rupture or withdrawal. What makes a marriage voluntary is the permanent possibility of divorce. What makes any identity or affiliation voluntary is the easy availability of alternative identities and affiliations. But the easier this easiness is, the less stable all our relationships are likely to become. The Four Mobilities take hold and society seems to be in perpetual motion, so that the actual subject of liberal practice, it might be said, is not a presocial but a postsocial self, free at last from all but the most temporary and limited alliances. Now, the liberal self reflects the fragmentation of liberal society: It is radically underdetermined and divided, forced to invent itself anew for every public occasion. Some liberals celebrate this freedom and self-invention; all communitarians lament its arrival, even while insisting that it is not a possible human condition.

I have argued that insofar as liberalism tends toward instability and dissociation, it requires periodic communitarian correction. Rawls’s “social union of social unions” reflects and builds on an earlier correction of this kind, the work of American writers like Dewey, Randolph Bourne, and Horace Kallen. Rawls has given us a generalized version of Kallen’s argument that America, after the great immigration, was and should remain a “nation of nationalities.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, however, the erosion of nationality seems to be a feature of liberal social life, despite intermittent ethnic revivals like that of the late 1960s and 1970s. We can generalize from this to the more or less steady attenuation of all the underlying bonds that make social unions possible. There is no strong or permanent remedy for communal attenuation

short of an antiliberal curtailment of the Four Mobilities and the rights of rupture and divorce on which they rest. Communitarians sometimes dream of such a curtailment, but they rarely advocate it. The only community that most of them actually know, after all, is just this liberal union of unions, always precarious and always at risk. They cannot triumph over this liberalism; they can only, sometimes, reinforce its internal associative capacities. The reinforcement is only temporary, because the capacity for dissociation is also strongly internalized and highly valued. That is why communitarianism criticism is doomed—it probably is not a terrible fate—to eternal recurrence.

### NOTES

1. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Early Writings*, ed. by T. B. Bottomore (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), p. 26.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

3. Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, Part I, ch. 9, para. 21. I have noticed that the two favorite writers of communitarian critics of this first kind are Hobbes and Sartre. Is it possible that the essence of liberalism is best revealed by these two, who were not, in the usual sense of the term, liberals at all?

4. See Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

5. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chs. 2, 17.

6. This is Richard Rorty's summary of Sandel's argument: "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *The Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom*, ed. by Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 273; see Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

7. Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, ed. by Howard Warrender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), Part I, ch. 1.

8. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 21, 290; see Rorty's comment, "Priority," p. 275, n. 12.

9. And also its practical working out, in the career open to talents, the right of free movement, legal divorce, and so on.

10. See A. Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960), pp. 147-148.

11. See the evocation of King in *Habits of the Heart*, pp. 249, 252.

12. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 41.

13. Cf. Buff-Coat (Robert Everard) in the Putney debates: "Whatsoever obligations I should be bound unto, if afterwards God should reveal himself, I would break it speedily, if it were an hundred a day." In *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. by A.S.P. Woodhouse (London: J. M. Dent, 1938), p. 34. Is Buff-Coat the first superliberal or Unger a latterday Puritan saint?

14. I do not intend a determinist argument here. We mostly move around within inherited worlds because we find such worlds comfortable and even life-enhancing; but we also move out

when we find them cramped—and liberalism makes the escape much easier than it was in preliberal societies.

15. I describe how free-ridership works in ethnic groups in “Pluralism: A Political Perspective,” in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. by Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 781-787

16. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 527ff.

17. See the argument for a modest “perfectionism” (rather than neutrality) in Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chs. 5 and 6.

18. Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), ch. 7.

19. See my essay on “Socializing the Welfare State” in *Democracy and the Welfare State*, ed. by Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 13-26.

20. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1985), pp. 71-72.

21. This kind of pluralist republicanism is also likely to advance the prospects of what I called “complex equality” in *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). I cannot pursue this question here, but it is worth noting that both liberalism and communitarianism can take egalitarian and non- or antiegalitarian forms. Similarly, the communitarian correction of liberalism can strengthen the old inequalities of traditionalist ways of life or it can counteract the new inequalities of the liberal market and the bureaucratic state. The “republic of republics” is likely, though by no means certain, to have effects of the second sort.

22. The issue is starkly posed in Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*; much of the recent discussion is a commentary on or argument with Sandel’s book.

23. See Will Kymlicka, “Liberalism and Communitarianism,” in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (June, 1988), pp. 181-204.

24. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1924).

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