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**Revisiting the Radical  
Communitarian Defense of  
Liberty**

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## Revisiting the Radical Communitarian Defense of Liberty

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### Abstract

The idea of communitarian liberty is a paradox. It is a paradox because communitarianism was, as a political philosophy, traditionally interpreted to be incompatible with liberty. Communitarianism emphasizes the moral supremacy of the cultural or political community. The community is (not liberty) morally expected to be salvaged in all circumstances. In the case of a moral conflict between the community and liberty, the community ought to be respected. This is the crux of radical communitarian primacy thesis attributed to Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. It has been suggested that most radical communitarians deny the relevance of rights to various forms of liberties in a community regulated by love and mutual friendships. Is radical or utopian communitarianism compatible with liberty? Today, there is a radical shift in the communitarian methodology due to the moral need to reconcile theory and practice. The shift is couched in the moderate communitarian theory.

Moderate communitarians like Amitai Etzioni, Kwame Gyekye, Robert Bellah and others balance rights and responsibilities. Most members of *Responsive Community* reject radical communitarian non-recognition of liberties. Moderate communitarianism is about the moral compatibility of liberal and communitarian values.

Contrary to the general view in communitarian scholarship, this article will argue that radical communitarianism is, like moderate communitarianism, compatible with liberty. We wish to argue that it is possible, under certain condition, for a radical communitarian to prefer liberty to community. We argue that the radical communitarian suggested commitment to the value of love and mutual friendship in a sense imply the acceptance of the primacy of liberty. Second, it is argued that a typical radical communitarian community could accept liberty as the common good. The method of philosophical analysis of key issues and concepts is adopted. The conclusion is that radical or utopian communitarianism is also compatible with liberty like the new communitarian theory formulated by *Responsive Community*.

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## Introduction

Is radical communitarianism compatible with liberty? Under what conditions will a radical communitarian prefer liberty to community? Today, the traditional gap between communitarianism and liberalism is fast disappearing. In the seventies and early eighties, it was almost a contradiction to describe someone as a liberal communitarian or a communitarian liberal. However, the situation has changed. According to Philip Selznick it is now possible to describe a person as either a communitarian liberal or a liberal communitarian<sup>1</sup>. Communitarians and liberals now embrace reconciliatory approaches to issues which hitherto divided them. This article is not about the old liberal-communitarian debate. Rather it focuses communitarianism as a political philosophy. In this article, we argue that contrary to the general views among radical and moderate communitarians, radical communitarianism is, like moderate communitarianism, compatible with liberty. It is possible for members of a typical radical communitarian community to, under certain conditions, prefer liberty to community. This thesis is the latest twist in the moderate communitarian interpretation of radical communitarianism demonstrated in the work of moderate communitarians like Amitai Etzioni, Robert Bellah, Philip Selznick, Kwame Gyekye and their colleagues. Before the argument in support of the thesis is presented, it is necessary to do a brief consideration of communitarianism as a political philosophy in order to situate the subsequent arguments in the proper context. This paper has three main sections. In the first section, the radical communitarian minimum claim is examined. The second section juxtaposes radical communitarianism to moderate communitarianism. We argue that both radical and moderate communitarianism affirm the moral supremacy of the community. In the third section, specific arguments in support of the compatibility of radical communitarianism with liberty are presented.

## The Radical Communitarian Minimum Claims

Radical communitarianism emphasizes the moral supremacy of the community. The community should be salvaged in all circumstances. In the case of a moral conflict between the community and liberty, the community ought to be respected. The higher moral value placed on the community is attributed to Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned above, radical communitarianism emphasizes the irrelevance of rights within the structure of an intimate and harmonious community regulated

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<sup>1</sup> Selznick, P. (1998). 'Foundations of Communitarian Liberalism' In: A. Etzioni (ed.), *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, 3-13. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>2</sup> Etzioni, A. (1998). *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, 3-13. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

by shared values, love and mutual friendships.<sup>1</sup> Ordinarily, love (not liberty) is the foundation of family relationships. Similarly, a typical human community regulated by love and mutual understanding will make our reference to liberty in social interaction unnecessary. Michael Sandel's communitarianism rejects the over celebration of rights in John Rawls *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>2</sup> For Sandel, though the liberal priority thesis "has a deep and powerful philosophical appeal", it fails because the 'liberal vision about the moral status of rights is not self-sufficient but parasitic on the notion of community it officially rejects'.<sup>3</sup>

The rivalry between the politics of right and the politics of common good is central to Charles Taylor's communitarian views. Taylor, like Sandel, rejects the liberal atomistic conception of the individual. The individual is a political animal – a being whose survival is tied to his or her interaction and cooperation with other community members.<sup>4</sup> Community membership enables rights to flourish. The community makes human rights possible just as the foundation of a building guarantees its durability. The community is central to various forms of liberty just as petrol or gas cause the mobility of a car.<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre's methodology (socio-historical contextualism) emphasizes the moral supremacy of the cultural community. In his view, all we possess "are fragments of conceptual scheme".<sup>6</sup> The cultural community (not the individual) is the arbiter of values.

The radical communitarianism imputed to Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre implies the absolute endorsement of the moral supremacy of the community.<sup>7</sup> In the case of a moral clash between the community and rights to liberty, the former ought to be preferred because the community is morally superior to the individual. The point about the moral supremacy of the community is the dominant view in communitarian scholarship, which suggests that a radical communitarian would always prefer the community to various forms of liberties. However, unbeknown to moderate communitarians, the radical communitarian point about love and mutual understanding is a subtle admission of the centrality of liberty to social interaction. Therefore, we believe that the moderate communitarian interpretation of radical communitarianism could be misleading. The moderate communitarian view that radical or unrestricted communitarians over-celebrate the community is

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<sup>1</sup>Sandel, M. (1983). *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge university Press. Also see Tomasi, J. (1991). 'Individual Rights and Community Virtues' *Ethics* 101(3): 521-536.

<sup>2</sup>Note in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls is of the view that 'the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests .....each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of the society as whole cannot override. See John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Pp3-4

<sup>3</sup>Sandel, M. (1992). 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self' In: S. Avineri & A. De – Shalit (ed.), *Communitarianism and Individualism* 12-28.Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup>Taylor, C. (1992). 'Atomism' In: S. Avineri & A. De – Shalit (ed.), *Communitarianism and Individualism* 29-50 Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue* London: Docketworth.

<sup>7</sup>Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and Modernity* New York: Oxford University Press.

exaggerated because the theory is compatible with liberty. In the next section we briefly examine the moderate communitarian minimum claim.

### **Moderate Communitarianism**

As suggested above, the communitarian theory has witnessed a major shift in methodology and substantive issues, due to the moral need to reconcile theory and practice. Moderate communitarians appreciate the need to recognize the moral importance of the community and right to liberties. Second, moderate communitarians are of the view that the recognition of rights to various forms of liberty and the sanctity of the community is salutary because the over celebration of the community is risky. A totalitarian community exposes the individual to various forms of oppressions, authoritarianism and ‘may unduly penetrate the individual.’<sup>1</sup>

The moderate communitarian theory is a reconstruction of rights and responsibilities with a view to accommodating the two values in the community. The project of reconciliation represents a new direction of scholarship in communitarian-liberal debates and a bold departure from the radical communitarian approaches. Etzioni clearly states the major concern of moderate communitarianism on behalf of his members:

While the old communitarians tended to stress the significance of social forces, of community, of social bonds.....the new communitarians have been concerned from the onset with the balance between social forces and the person, between community and autonomy, between the common good and liberty, between individual rights and social responsibilities. px

Philip Selznick emphasizes the need to “combine a spirit of liberation and a quest for social justice, with responsible participation in effective communities.”<sup>2</sup> Moderate communitarianism ‘is a call for a deep reconstruction of liberal theories and policies’.<sup>3</sup> The moderate communitarian reconstruction occurs in the following ways. Though a HIV patient has a right to engage in sexual activities, he or she does not have a right to spread the virus in the community by engaging in unprotected sex. The same HIV patient has, like other members of the community, a right to privacy but has no right not to declare his or her HIV status. Failure to do so might endanger the community at large.

Furthermore, someone’s right to build a house on a piece of land legitimately acquired does not, at the same time, include a right to block public drainage

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<sup>1</sup>Etzioni, A. (1998). *The Essential Communitarian Reader*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

<sup>2</sup>Selznick, P. (1998). ‘Foundations of Communitarian Liberalism’ In: A. Etzioni (ed.) *The Essential Communitarian Reader*. 3-13. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p.3



system. While a land owner has a right of ownership over his or her landed property, the right ought to be exercised with a full sense of responsibility. For instance, the rightful owner of a food processing company has a right over the company he or she does not have a right to hoard the processed food, thereby creating artificial scarcity in the community. The hoarding might have unfavourable consequences on the entire community. A right to association excludes a right to form or join a secret cult whose activities are inimical to the progress and stability of the whole community. A right to freedom of expression is limited by the law of libel.

As suggested above, moderate communitarians exaggerate radical communitarian moral preference for the community. However, it is noteworthy to say that the radical communitarianism of Sandel, Taylor and MacIntyre (if it is indeed radical) is never in support of a totalitarian community. Sandel's argument in support of limiting the liberal rights to liberty does not imply a total rejection to liberty. If a taxi driver is told to limit his or her speed, it does not mean that the driver should apply the brake and halt the tax. If a physician tells a diabetic patient to limit his or her food consumption, it does not mean that the patient should completely stop eating.

Radical communitarians, like moderate communitarians, will permit the right of a HIV patient to engage in sexual activities with the same moderate communitarian proviso stated above. Radical communitarians neither deny the individual the right to build a house on a piece of land legitimately acquired nor deny the individual either the right to association or the right to freedom of expression. Radical communitarianism is compatible with the right to freedom of movement limited by trespass. The so called radical communitarianism of Sandel, Charles Taylor is compatible with rights to various forms of liberties. Michael Sandel, like moderate communitarians, only advocates the limits of rights not the total rejection of rights.<sup>1</sup>

For me, the so-called gap between radical and moderate communitarianism is a fiction. The two formulations of communitarianism are about the moral supremacy of the community over the individual. For Etzioni, in agreement with Sandel, the rights of individuals receive their guarantee in the communitarian community.<sup>2</sup> Moderate communitarians are of the view that "strong individual rights presume respect for strong obligations to the common good.... no society can flourish without some shared formulation of the common good."<sup>3</sup> Moderate communitarianism "gives great weight to the social frameworks within which all ideals find their limits as well as their opportunities..... seeks a new blend, one that treasures liberal values and institutions but also takes seriously the promise of community and the perils of ignoring the need for community."<sup>4</sup> Democratic communitarianism (a form of

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<sup>1</sup>Sandel, M. (1983). *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Etzioni, A. (1998). *The Essential Communitarian Reader*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

<sup>3</sup>Etzioni, A. (2004). *The Common Good*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>4</sup>Selznick, P. (1998). 'Foundations of Communitarian Liberalism' In: A. Etzioni (ed.) *The Essential Communitarian Reader*. 3-13. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

moderate communitarianism) “is based on the value of the sacredness of the individual”, and, at the same time, “realized only in and through communities”.<sup>1</sup>

A healthy community guarantees healthy individuals. Kwame Gyekye’s recognition of rights (within the framework of his version of moderate communitarianism) is for the sake of the community because the “visionary power of the individual could help the community to locate the appropriate root to development”.<sup>2</sup> According to Gyekye, “rights are not to be asserted or insisted on with belligerency, for communal values such as generosity, compassion, reciprocities and mutual sympathies are far more important than rights..... moderate communitarianism cannot be expected to be obsessed with rights”.<sup>3</sup> The communitarian society, perhaps like any other type of human society, deeply (uncompromisingly) cherishes the social value of peace, harmony, stability, solidarity and mutual reciprocities and sympathies.<sup>4</sup> All these show that moderate and radical communitarianism accept the traditional communitarian moral supremacy of the community over liberty. In the next section the possible radical communitarian argument in support of the moral supremacy of liberty is argued.

### **The Radical Communitarian Liberty**

Moderate communitarianism is appealing. Unfortunately, it does not take care of most of our moral worries. Though under certain conditions it might be possible to successfully reconcile rights and responsibilities, there is little hope that this will always be achieved in all cases. The individual right to privacy may clash with the overall interests of the community. The right of a HIV patient to privacy (who refuses to disclose his or her HIV status) may affect the whole community if he or she engages in unprotected sexual activities. In this case, both moderate and radical communitarians would support the community to take appropriate action to prevent the spread of the virus in the community.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, strict obedience to traffic light serves the over all interest of the entire community. There is bound to be chaos on the road if motorists refuse to obey traffic lights or road signs. Radical as well as moderate communitarians will support the community in its efforts to sanction recalcitrant motorists. However, though communitarianism (radical or moderate) emphasizes the moral supremacy of the community, the theory is compatible with liberty. While communitarians (radical and moderate) will support the moral need on the part of motorists to obey traffic light and signs they will also respect occasional disobedience of some traffic regulations. An ambulance driver on

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<sup>1</sup>Bellah, R.N. (1998). ‘Community Properly Understood: A Defense of Democratic Communitarianism’ In: A. Etzioni (ed.) *The Essential Communitarian Reader*. 15-19. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

<sup>2</sup>Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and Modernity*, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p.65

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.p.65

<sup>5</sup>Gyekye, K. op.cit.

an emergency assignment could justify his or her disobedience of the traffic light in order to save the life of a patient. Under this situation, the patient's right to life is morally more superior to the obligation to obey the community erected traffic light. Furthermore, though radical communitarians support the overall community harmony and peace, they do not need to regard general community peace as the ultimate value in all cases.

Radical communitarianism could be argued to be compatible with freedom of religion. Most multi-religious communities respect rights to religious choices. As a matter of fact, it serves the interest of such a multi-religious community to allow its citizens to freely make their religious choices. The unrestricted or what Etzioni describes as "old communitarians" stresses "the significance of social forces, of community, of social bonds and of social harmony".<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, respect for liberty is one of the means to guarantee the basic communitarian social bonds and harmony. A multi-religious community that allows each citizen to freely make his or her religious choice is likely to be at peace than a community that attempts to impose a particular religion on others. In fact a radical communitarian community could, collectively, embrace liberty as a community value.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the radical communitarian values of love and mutual friendships imply, in a sense, the primacy of liberty. A community regulated by love implicitly endorses the moral supremacy of liberty. Love is basically about making free choices. A radical communitarian community regulated by love and mutual friendship will grant members the right to choose their friends and love ones since friendship is voluntary. A community which compels members to choose their friends will sacrifice mutual understanding. The demand for the free choice of whom to love is compatible with radical communitarianism. In practice, it is impossible for every member of a community to demonstrate the same degree of love to one another. Members of a typical radical communitarian community are not expected to keep the same friends, marry the same husbands or wives. If this is accepted, it follows that even a radical communitarian community will allow members the freedom to choose their lovers. It also follows that in such a radical communitarian community the freedom to choose will be a fundamental value while love will be a derived value from the liberty to choose.

Finally, if members of a radical communitarian community are brought together by love then granting the same members the right to choose their lovers is one of the means to extend the same love to them. The respect for someone's rights to choose his or her friends might turn out to be one of the ways to demonstrate our love towards him or her.

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<sup>1</sup>Etzioni, A. op.cit

<sup>2</sup>Kymlicka, W. (1990). *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

## Conclusion

This article examines the moderate communitarian interpretations of radical communitarianism. Two key points are argued: (i) that though both radical and moderate communitarianism are separate models of communitarianism, the two share the general communitarian primacy thesis. The communitarian primacy thesis is about the moral supremacy of the community. The community ought to be salvaged in all situations and (ii) that contrary to general moderate communitarian interpretation of radical communitarianism by moderate communitarians, the former is compatible with liberty.

Furthermore, it is also argued that a community regulated by love and mutual understanding among members will embrace the individual freedom of choice. The recognition of the importance of mutual friendship in a typical radical communitarian community implies the recognition of the moral supremacy of liberty. A typical radical communitarian community regulated by love and mutual understanding will permit each member to make a voluntary choice of whom to love.

Finally, on the basis of the points just mentioned, this article concludes that radical communitarianism is not antithetical to liberty as suggested by most moderate communitarians.

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