

**276. "Creating good communities and good societies," *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol 29, Issue 1 (January 2000), pp. 188-195.**

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Utopias often serve as a screen on which to project our values. Erik Olin Wright, for instance, highlights the value of a world in which there is radical equality, although he says "I know of no institutional design that could implement this value without major negative effects" (personal communication, 8 August 1999). My attempt to outline a utopia differs in that it envisions a good society, but not one that is exempt from the basic sociological laws of gravity. It concerns itself with the fact that we are compelled by values and needs that cannot be made fully compatible with one another, and hence force us to make tough choices. Philosophers and ideologues often try to derive their utopias from one moral principle or overarching value-libertarians, for instance, from liberty, and social conservatives from social order. As I see it, a sociological treatment of utopia should include recognition that both of these values cannot be ignored and that while up to a point they can be reconciled, to some extent they are contradictory. So are community and individuality, and community and modernity.

Two fair warnings: Before I outline the design of a good society, I should note that this is not a review essay of the enormous existing literature on the subject. Instead, this article explores select relevant issues. By necessity, the discussion is both empirical and normative. Finally, I introduce several matters that I consider of sociological importance, rather than analyze in detail any particular one of them.

### Communities Defined

A key concept I draw upon in the following characterization of a good society is the term community. Given that it has been argued repeatedly that such a social entity cannot be defined, this matter must be addressed first. Several critics have argued that the concept of community is so ill-defined that it has no identifiable designation. Robert Booth Fowler, in *The Dance With Community* (1991), showed that the term is used in six different and rather incompatible ways. Colin Bell and Howard Newby wrote, "There has never been a theory of community, nor even a satisfactory definition of what community is" (1974: xiii). In another text, Bell and Newby (1973: 15) asked, "But what is community? . . . [I]t will be seen that over ninety definitions of community have been analyzed and that the one common element in them all was man!" Margaret Stacey argues that the solution to this problem is to avoid the term altogether (quoted in Bell and Newby 1973: 49).

As I see it, this "cannot be defined" is a tired gambit. We have difficulties in precisely defining even such a simple concept as a chair. Something to sit on? One can sit on a bench or bed. Something to sit on with four legs? Many chairs have three, or even just one, and so on. The same criticism has been leveled against rationality, democracy, and class, yet nobody seriously suggests we stop using these concepts.

The following definition seems to me quite workable:

Community is a combination of two elements: A) A web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one or chainlike individual relationships). B) A measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity-in short, to a particular culture. (Etzioni 1996: 127) The definition leaves open the amount of conflict that occurs within a given community, but does define it as a social entity that has the elements necessary (bonds and shared values) to contain conflict within sustainable boundaries. Moreover, the definition implies that communities need not be territorial. Indeed, many ethnic, professional, gay, and other communities are geographically dispersed; that is, the members of these communities reside

among people who are not members. (Often, these communities are centered around particular institutions, such as places of worship, hiring halls, bars, or social clubs.)

The observations that social entities that meet the above two defining criteria can be identified, and that they resemble those entities most people informally refer to as "communities," do not claim that such social units are good in the normative sense. The discussion next examines the normative standing of one element of communities, bonding; the standing of a common moral culture is explored later. However, to reiterate, no a priori assumption is made here that communities are necessarily socially desirable.

### The Value of Bonds, and Their Limits

The idea that people ought to be related to one another by bonds of affection rather than merely treat each other as instrumental means is established so widely that it barely needs discussing. From Kant to Marx, many consider the dominance of the instrumental orientation a major threat to human well-being. Others have drawn on empirical research to demonstrate that people are social creatures and require bonding with others for their mental and physical wellbeing. It would thus first seem that bonds are good per se.

Actually, this view reflects the fact that these matters are often discussed within a Western context, in which bonding is believed to have declined over the last centuries. More attention should be paid to the opposite condition, in which bonding is excessive. Here I refer not to oppressive hierarchies, power relations, or legal or moral codes, all of which are distinctly negative. I refer instead to communities in which bonds, even those among peers, are very restrictive, preventing proper development of self, cramping individuality, spontaneity, and creativity, a condition many associate with the Japanese society, at least until recently.

Novelists have been more effective than social psychologists in describing the loss of self-identity and autonomy of those slavishly in love; of women who lose their self-identity when defined merely as mothers and wives; of teenagers and gang members who are lost in their peer groups.

It follows that both frayed bonds and tightly knit ones are incompatible with basic human needs and societal well-being,<sup>(1)</sup> that social bonds are essential for human well-being but only if they remain rather slack. And it follows that one attribute of a good society is that its strong communal bonds are balanced by similarly powerful protections of self. Such a society is not communal, period, but-like two taut and tensed stays of a mast which keep it erect-firmly upholds both social ties and autonomy, at the foundation of social order and liberty. It further follows that societies may need to move in opposite directions-to approach the same good point of balance, some to shore up their weakened social bonds; others, to loosen them. (In Buberian terms, the movement needed is not from an I focused society to a We-focused society, as some have suggested, but from either an I- or a We dominated one to an I&We.)

### Exclusivity Limited by Laws

This discussion has already established that communities are not good per se; only communities that exhibit certain attributes-a balance between bonds and protection of the self-might qualify as good. I move next to specify further what makes a good community.

Given the realities of social life, all communities have built into them by their very nature a serious normative defect: they exclude. All communities draw distinctions between members and nonmembers, and most times treat nonmembers less well than members. (Exceptions include some religious orders and secular voluntary associations that sacrifice their members' well-being as they administer to the sick and poor.) Exclusivity arises

out of one of the two defining elements of community: bonding. There are severe limits to the number of people any one person can bond with. Moreover, bonding is much more achievable with people who are similar in social background and perspective than with those whose social attributes are different. Finally, turnover must be limited if bonds are to solidify.

The fact that communities exclude is normatively troubling to the point that several critics regard communities negatively on this ground alone, and prefer to limit social relations to those based on universal criteria, especially individual achievements. indeed, if we treat one and all as unique persons, we avoid communitybased exclusivity. (Consistent champions of this approach reject treating legal and illegal immigrants differently, or treating members of our national community differently from those of others.) However, a society that seeks to eliminate exclusivity completely will grossly neglect the profound human need for social bonds.

Given this background, utopian writing that is concerned with institutional design, of the kind practiced here, points to a society that allows communities to maintain some limitations on membership, but at the same time greatly restricts the criteria that communities may use to enforce such exclusivity. The criteria for exclusion cannot be race, ethnic origins, religion, sexual orientation, or a host of other criteria based on ascribed statuses. The bonds of good communities, it follows, are based on affinity whose nature remains to be defined.

### Conflict within Consensus

The very notion of society (and society as a community) is Durkheimian in that it presupposes one societal entity, and asks if the conditions that its continued integrity requires are met. Critics from Spencer to Margaret Thatcher have argued that the very concept of society is a fiction-that there are only aggregates of individuals. And left-leaning scholars, especially Lewis Coser, have maintained that the concept conceals that society is an arena of conflict, not one of unity. Indeed, social conservatives historically used to call for national unity, to urge people to refrain from fighting for what is due them in the name of preserving the organic whole.

Nevertheless, the concept of society as a community is viable, especially if one treats it not as a given but as a variable (that is, some societies are much more of a community than others, and their communal quality changes over time). Most important, there is nothing inherent in the concept of society or community to exclude conflict. The only assumption that these concepts entail is that these conflicts be contained by an overarching commitment to the bonds and values that define the whole. If this is not the case, we do not have one community or society. It might therefore be most productive to stop viewing consensus and conflict models as strictly alternatives and to see them as combinable. There is room for conflict within consensus, as long as such clashes do not break out of the containing bonds and culture. One may well wish to study the conditions under which conflicts are sustained within communal boundaries, as opposed to outside the community, but such an approach merely highlights further the value of the basic concept-community-rather than being found invalid or biased on the face of it.

A good society, it follows, is one that keeps conflicts within the bounds of the shared bonds and culture. However, there is nothing in the definition of community (and hence society) that requires that the said bonds themselves will not be changed, and quite thoroughly.

### Community and Inequality

Another normative issue that arises when one seeks to assess the value of communities, their goodness, is the relationship between the close social bonds communities entail and the allocation of all that there is to be allotted-a huge subject. So much has been written on this topic by ideologues, economists, and sociologists that it is hazardous to one's societal designing even to broach this subject. Hence, merely a few brief observations.

Most readily agree that equality among members as a general attribute is neither possible nor desirable. For instance, there are considerable limits on the extent to which beauty and musical talents can be equalized--nor is it immediately obvious that all these kinds of equalities would be good. Even achieving "mere" equality of economic assets, power, and social status--if by that one means every community member receives the same share, or even from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs--is both extremely elusive and not necessarily good (given, for instance, that it is believed to grossly undermine efficiency and productivity, which no community can completely ignore). Utopian writing of the kind practiced hence is concerned with greatly reduced inequality, rather than with equality as the end state.

As I see it, a good society can reduce inequality to a larger extent than the one provided by the Rawlsian rule of approving of increased inequality, as long as the have-nots benefit from the increased resources that result from the growing share of the haves--even if the haves' share increases much more than that of the have-nots. This formula (which American society seems to have approximated somewhat between 1997 and 2000) puts no upper limits on how much more the haves may gain, and on the growing disparity between them and the have-nots. Of course, while all kinds of statistics tell different stories, the following might illustrate the point: From 1990 to 1998 workers' salaries rose by 28 percent, and that of executives by 400 percent (NPR source). Such high and still rising levels of inequality threaten to split society into two separate camps: one highly affluent and gaining, the other a bit better off but falling ever further behind the first camp. Given that control of economic resources is correlated with political power, growing inequality must be expected to undermine not merely the societal bonds but also the democratic foundations of the polity. It follows that a good society would not only secure, as Stephen Nathanson (1998) put it, a "rich minimum" for all its members, but also labor to cap inequality by slowing down increases in the slices of the total resources gained by the higher strata.

In moving the discussion from the level of community to that of society, one notes that in many discussions society often is depicted as if it were an aggregate of individuals. Thus, typical discussions of American consumers, voters, even citizens evoke the image of millions of individual actors, acting on their own, and in accumulation affecting the direction of the economy, polity, and society. Actually, even in the most modernized societies many individually are members of communities. Indeed, it is best to think about societies as communities of communities, which also contain a fair number of unaffiliated individuals.

It follows that in seeking to characterize a good society, inequalities in allocation of resources among communities (not just among individuals) must also be taken into account. The issue can be highlighted quickly by an actual case. A school district in New York City, because of budget pressures, was about to fire a teacher considered a fine instructor by her school. Concerned parents raised funds that allowed the district to keep the teacher on its payroll. However, the chancellor of the citywide school system objected on the grounds that these parents were giving something "extra" to the children of their community rather than to all of the city's children. (Similarly, some state courts have ruled that all the school districts in a state must spend equal amounts on each child, rather than allowing affluent districts to spend more than poor ones.) However, the sociological rules of gravity again assert themselves. In thousands of school districts across the country, parents do extra things for "their" schools, and the court rulings calling for interdistrict equality have been largely ignored.

Therefore, however one may cherish equality, the quest for a good society must recognize that equality among communities has never existed, or been approximated, even during the heyday of the Soviet regime, Cuban socialism, or even among Kibbutzim. A good society, instead, applies to intercommunity allocation of assets the same rules already outlined for members of any one community. All communities should have a rich (and rising) minimum, and the allocations attained by any one community must be capped. (To achieve these desiderata of course entails creating mechanisms to transfer some wealth and power from the affluent communities to the others, not explored here.)

In short, a good society is one in which inequality within each community and among them is being significantly reduced. Equality Per se is not under consideration.

### Whose Values? Moral Dialogues and Their Limitations

The second element of community is much more difficult to evaluate and raises numerous taxing questions. A community, as defined here, is not merely a social entity whose members are bound by a web of crisscrossing affective bonds, but also one in which members share a set of core values—a moral culture. A good society is thus by definition one governed not merely by contracts, voluntary arrangements, and laws freely enacted, but also by a thick layer of mores that are in turn derived from values. This raises the questions: Where do these values emanate from? And are they justifiable? Are they good?

A common sociological answer is that values are handed down from generation to generation, via socialization, and in this sense are traditional. However, tradition is clearly not the only source of values. What are the major other sources of values, and how is one to determine the moral standing of values, whatever their source?

In addressing this question, it is important to distinguish between the initiation of values and their gaining a social role. New value formulations are often the work of one person, such as a rebelling clergy member (Martin Luther, for example), a public intellectual (Rachel Carson), or social philosopher (Martin Buber). However, for values to acquire social significance, they must be embraced by a considerable number of people. For members of a community to integrate new values into their moral culture these values must undergo a process I refer to as a moral dialogue (Etzioni 1996: Chapter 4).

Moral dialogue is a process by which people engage in deliberations that involve not merely facts, logic, reasoning, and rational exchanges, but also intensive discussions in which their normative commitments are engaged. To illustrate, over recent decades, American society has had moral dialogues on such matters as our obligations to the environment, to marriage partners, and to children. There have also been moral dialogues about proper race relations, relations between men and women, between heterosexual and homosexual people, as well as numerous others. Dialogues such as these are often complex and massive and seem disorderly. However, several of these did advance to a point that produced extensive (although never universal) changes in the values endorsed by members of the society. Thus, American society's values regarding many of the subjects listed above, from commitments to the environment to relationships among people of different social categories, have changed significantly over the last decades.

A good society relies greatly on such moral dialogues to determine the values that will constitute the shared cultures of its communities rather than merely base these on tradition. Moreover, to ensure broad and genuine adherence to values, a good society relies on the moral voice—the informal controls that members of communities exert on one another—rather than on law.

The law has often been viewed as the tool of society to ensure that millions of its members will live up to the prescriptions contained in the society's values. Indeed, one obvious sociological function of the law is to prescribe how people are expected to behave (from paying taxes to meeting obligations to caring for children) and to proscribe what people should refrain from doing (from smoking in defined public spaces to selling, buying, or consuming crack cocaine). Usually, laws also contain penalties to be meted out (and sometimes rewards to be accorded) for those who ignore (or live up to) these normative prescriptions.

When values are less and less heeded, it is often argued that the society requires more laws, more regulations, stronger sanctions, more law enforcement resources and powers, and more severe punishments for those who violate the laws. Indeed, in most Western societies one can observe over the last decades that as social order has deteriorated, there has been a constant demand for more and harsher punishments, more police, and more powers to the various public authorities. However, as the rising economic and social cost of this approach to value enforcement shows—and as indicated by the failing war against controlled substances, and the fact that while crime has declined in the United States recently it is still at much higher levels than it was a generation ago—the high reliance on law enforcement for fortifying values does not make for a good society.

In contrast, for a society to be good, much of the social conduct must be "regulated" by reliance on the moral voice rather than on the law, and the scope of the law itself must be limited largely to that which is supported by the moral voice. This is the case because the moral voice can be made much more compatible with a high level of respect for self, with autonomy and hence with a good society. (Here again, the good society is defined as one that triangulates two values, social order and autonomy, rather than maximizing one [Etzioni 1996: Chapters 1, 2].)

The main point is that if people ignore the law, their wages are garnished, mortgages are foreclosed, and their homes sold out from under them; they are jailed or even executed. (The notion advanced by some philosophers that the actor always has a choice, even if s/he has to choose to die, is belied by those who are forced to change course by being restrained, jailed, or forcibly evicted from protest sites, such as the Greenpeace protesters who were removed from nuclear testing sites by French authorities. Their choices are curtailed, if not preempted.) In contrast, when one disregards the moral voice one can proceed, although some social costs may be attached. That is, the person's basic autonomy is maintained. Therefore, law in a good society is first and foremost the continuation of morality by other means.

The limited ability to introduce social changes through law that is not backed up by values truly accepted by the members of the community, and the severe distorting effects that result if this is tried, is highlighted by the failure of many prison authorities to prevent inmates from dealing drugs in jails. If authorities cannot enforce a law here, when they have perpetrators locked up 24 hours a day, seven days a week, under constant and close supervision, with next to no autonomy, how can one expect to enforce a law this way in at-large society?

Often, when one points to the merits of greater reliance on the moral voice and less on law enforcement (an approach that assumes that one seeks mainly to sustain values that are supported by the moral dialogues of the communities), one is asked which public policies would serve this purpose? What public policies, regulations, and administrative acts should be introduced?

The answer that is compatible with the vision of a good society spelled out here is that the best way to change the direction of a society is to have "megalogues," about the substance of members' values and the intensity of their commitments to values they affirm. By megalogue I mean society-wide dialogues, that link many community dialogues into one, often nationwide, given and take. While at first it may seem impossible to have a society-wide dialogue, the fact is that such megalogues occur almost incessantly about one topic or another, often triggered by some dramatic event or deliberately staged drama. Oil spills triggered megalogues about the environment; the Thomas-Hill hearings about sexual harassment; and the impeachment hearings about what constitutes offenses that could justify driving an elected official out of office.

It is true that megalogues are fuzzy in the sense that one cannot determine a priori with any precision when the process will be completed, which values will prevail, or which new public policies will be endorsed. In effect, one can predict only that the process often will be disjointed, emotive, repetitive, and meandering. But these are all earmarks of processes that truly engage a mass of people in examining, redefining, and redirecting their values and moral commitments—earmarks of moral dialogues, essential for truly endorsed social change.

All this is not to deny that laws and public policies have a place in societal change, including moral regeneration, but rather to stress that they are not the main factor. Most important, for a good society to evolve, the laws and public policies themselves must reflect the change in values rather than significantly diverge from them. This is significant because the more a society relies on members' convictions that the societal demands on them are just, and the more they conduct themselves voluntarily in line with these values because they themselves subscribe to them, the better the society. To put it more sharply, the good society is not first and foremost one of law-and-order, but one based on shared moral values that the members affirm.

A main criticism of the position advanced here is that the outcomes of megalogues reflect not the true preferences of the members of the society but those fostered by the media and those that control it-the power structure of the society-given that the media are essential tools of megalogues. This is a subject that cannot be treated properly as an aside in an essay of this scope. Briefly, to the extent the power structure of a society prevents authentic megalogues from encompassing most members of the society, it cannot be a good society. One step toward a good society would be for large segments of the media to be owned by the public, somewhat the way the BBC and NPR are. Social restructuring and public education would have to ensure that people have the basic economic, social, and intellectual conditions that enable them to participate in the megalogues: for instance, to the extent that these take place on the Internet that all would have access to it, and are not burdened by economic concerns to the point they cannot find the time and energy to participate. At the same time, while all media-even small-town gossip-have some distorting effects, the magnitude of such distortion seems to have been vastly exaggerated. The Soviet experience shows that even when a state has near total control of the media as well as the educational systems, it still cannot control public opinion. And the results of American megalogues are often not in line with what one would assume those who own or control the media would prefer. Most important, to return one more time to sociological realism rather than utopian writing: The media can be much improved but not circumvented if society-wide megalogues are to take place. Their pivotal role has already been established.

## Good and Errant Values

To reiterate: While sharing values is a defining attribute of communities, it is not assumed here that all communities (or community per se) are good. An essential part of their evaluation entails determining not merely whether they share values, but the moral standing of the values they do share.

Some have argued that if shared values arise out of moral dialogues, whether limited to communities or extended to society-wide megalogues, the resulting consensus legitimates the outcome. Others (especially Jurgen Habermas) have posited that if certain procedures are followed-a sort of Roberts Rules of Ethics-the results will be morally sound. However, a simple mental experiment raises rather troubling questions about consensus (and other procedurebased) criteria: If the members of a given community agree, all of them, unanimously, to lynch strangers who stray onto their turf, bum books, or treat women as second-class citizens, obviously this consensus will not make these agreements morally good ones. That is, we are drawing on external and substantive criteria to evaluate the values communities come to share as a result of dialogues as well as judge the moral standing of values handed down from previous generations.

At first glance, a sociologist might find the wording of the previous sentence strange, given that many sociologists use the term values in a value-neutral manner, referring to democratic as well as Nazi values, to humanitarian and Afrikaner values by the same term. However, if one is to engage openly in normative assessments, as any discussion of the good society requires, one cannot avoid evaluating the comparative moral standing of various values.

Ethicists have developed some criteria to determine which values are morally superior to others; for instance those that are symmetrical (applying to ego the same way they apply to alter) are deemed superior to those that are not. But the quest for the values defining the good society may well not be satisfied by such formal criteria. Several attempts have been made to find the elusive criteria. Some recently have turned to biology; we are all said to be hardwired one way or the other to abide by some values, e.g., sympathy. Even if this were true, one wonders whether such wiring serves merely to constrain what a community can do, or also provides opportunities on which it can build. Others have tried to base their ethical systems on those values all societies share, that every human society endorses (see Schwartz 1990, 1994). While there are disagreements over how encompassing this list is, it seems rather meager. Thus, many societies consider killing a nonmember quite legitimate. And according to one study, the scope of such worldwide consensus does not reach beyond mores such as that in revenge killing, slaying more than eight people is not acceptable (Howard 1995). Still others have developed a calculus of harm according to which acts that cause less harm than others are deemed moral—a criterion that is extremely situational. Moreover, it hides the implicit value judgments evident in decisions such as how far into the future consequences are taken into account, as well as the weights one assigns to various affected groups.

A possible source for overarching criteria are those values that, to use the language of the founding fathers of the republic, are "self-evident." (In ethics, one refers to deontology, a system based on the values that convey compelling moral causes to US.) A case in point is the observation that when one considers whether truth telling is morally superior to lying (under most conditions, excluding such limiting conditions as, say, if one were hiding Jews and a Nazi asked of their whereabouts). One response is that truth telling is on the face of it morally superior. Analysis—for instance, along the Kantian line that if one person lies soon others will follow, and then the liar will suffer (which, sociologically, is far from obvious)—follows and might cement or undermine the initial judgment. But its original and basic source is the fact that certain moral truths speak to us in compelling terms.

Ultimately, the quest for the values of the good society may require combining all these sources: local consensus, worldwide parallelism, formal and procedural criteria, as well as the sense that certain values are self-evident. One may follow still different considerations, but without some such combination of ethics and sociology a good society cannot be characterized.

I use throughout this paper terms such as ethical and moral, without indicating that the values or attributes that are so characterized refer to a particular culture or society, as if these were universally valid. A commentator on a previous draft of this essay asked me, fairly, to clarify whether these are not merely "Western" concepts. As I see it, there are some nontrivial, indeed important, universal values, which are self-evident to all people once they are exposed to free dialogue liberating them from the false consciousness their culture may have fostered. Dignity of the person and the value of affective particularistic social bonds are two cases in point. I cannot provide within the confines of this essay the empirical evidence, such as it is (see Lehman, forthcoming; Schwartz 1990, 1994; Etzioni 1996: Chapter 8) nor other reasons to support my deontological universalist position. At the same time, there are in addition important cultural differences in the values a particular society upholds, reflecting a tradition restructured via megalogues as well as dissemination from other cultures. However, I do not draw on such values in this essay.

Relativism is the curse of a good society, because when driven to its logical conclusion it in effect says that if you believe in concentration camps, gulags, ethnic cleansing, sex slaves, homophobia, sexism, racism, or whatever—that is your good society; I have my own definition of mine. To be able to conduct a moral discourse, which the very concept of a good society entails, we require a foundation that is postrelativistic, as even diehard relativists increasingly recognize. In effect, when we learn about the behavior of other communities, and they of ours, we do not refrain from passing moral judgment. The only difference is that if we refuse to



recognize cross-cultural criteria, such judgments are either arbitrary or unaccounted for. I urge that we make such judgments and submit to them, but openly recognize their foundations, and where they are obscure, work to uncover them through cross-cultural megalogues. In effect, they have already been initiated on issues such as the treatment of ethnic and racial minorities, women and children, the environment, and numerous other issues from land mines to whales.

Sociologists can do much to enrich and advance these megalogues, as long as they overcome obsolescent views of cultural relativism or scientific objectivism.

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## Notes

1. These include some needs that are biologically anchored, such as need for caloric intake, and some that are socially but universally implicated such as need for affection. For additional discussion, see Etzioni 1968.

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