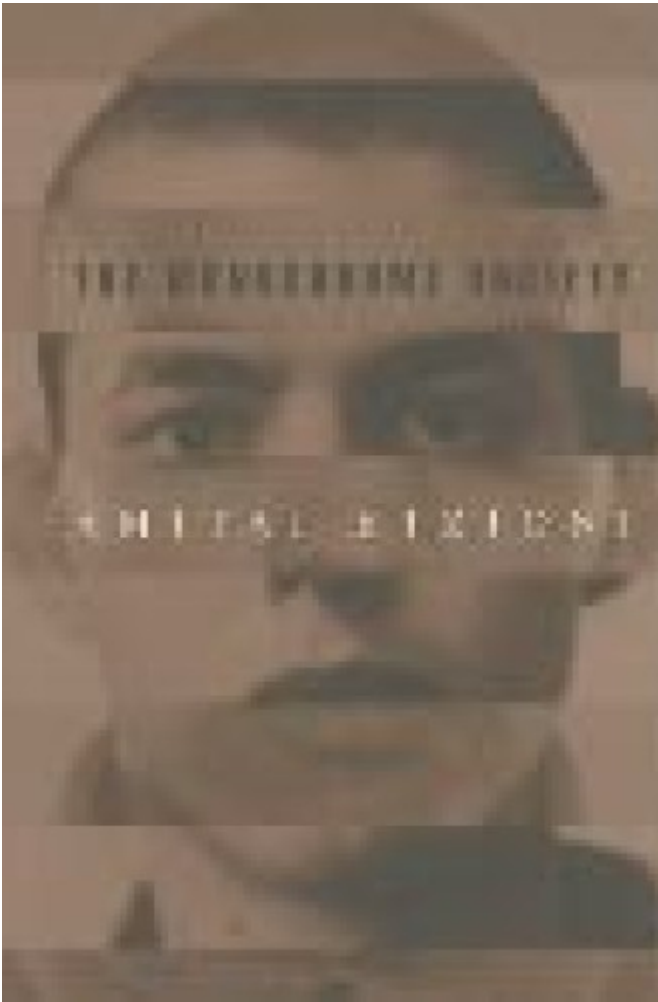


In community

By [Bernard V. Brady](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

In Review



The Monochrome Society

Amitai Etzioni

Princeton University Press

Have you ever felt a bit empty, a bit unsatisfied, after hearing politicians (even those you support) explain their vision of a good society? Are you tired of drinking that

favorite political brew, Utopia Lite? Do you ever ponder our dominant social ills—the pervasive poverty, the violence that marks lives and dominates entertainment, the family breakdown and high divorce rate so casually accepted these days? Have you ever thought that to reverse social disintegration we must go beyond the dominant political ideologies of our day? If you have, maybe you are not a liberal, a progressive or a new Democrat, not a social conservative or a neoconservative or even a regular conservative. Maybe you are a communitarian.

Communitarians believe that the main reason society is in such a mess is that people are excessively focused on self-interest. Exaggerated self-interest, self-indulgence and a general sense of permissiveness invites both individuals and corporations to function with little or no regard for the social good. Communitarians believe that society ought to be based on a commonly held moral order and that the responsibilities of individuals and businesses to that moral order are as important as their rights.

In America, even “conservatives” are fundamentally supporters of liberalism—liberalism being defined as the political position that defends individual freedom and autonomy; it maintains that humans have certain basic inalienable rights and that those rights make up the fundamental claims of public morality. Liberals, moreover, have confidence in human reason. They believe that people from diverse backgrounds can come together and rationally—that is, without passion or violence—discuss and resolve issues. Liberal liberals and conservative liberals differ on some issues, the most fundamental of which is the degree to which freedom and autonomy may justifiably be limited. They disagree also on the appropriate meaning and scope of freedom.

Liberal liberals tend to grant greater freedom in the area of personal and lifestyle choices and to be more willing to restrict freedom in some economic areas. For example, liberals tend to be accepting of homosexuality yet want to limit Smith and Wesson’s freedom to sell handguns. Conservative liberals are more willing to place limitations on personal freedoms and to be proponents of unrestricted economic freedoms. Thus they tend to be less accepting both of homosexuality and of handgun control.

Liberals, both conservative and liberal, shy away from defending a substantive notion of the social good. Liberal liberals tend to be neutral on personal choice and become worried when groups or individuals become too strong or dogmatic. It is up

to individuals to decide the good for themselves. Yet liberal liberals are more open to allowing the state to limit the freedom of businesses whose behavior is deemed harmful to the public good. Hence their concern with environmental regulations. Conservative liberals tend to refer to the market when the issue is products and pollution, but to be more open to state restrictions on personal lifestyle choices. Conservative liberals, for example, hold that it is good for society to limit or outlaw abortion and pornography and to make divorce laws more restrictive.

Communitarians believe that both kinds of liberals have a mistaken view of what it means to be a person. Persons are social beings, formed within relationships and with no identity apart from relationships. Communitarians use such phrases as “the socially embedded self” or “the dialogical self” or “persons-in-community” to describe people’s essential nature. They hold that society can and must seek a shared definition of the good, and that the well-being of society must determine morality and social policy. The public good, to be truly a public good, must be discussed openly and publicly.

Communitarianism is not simply a philosophy. It is a movement with a journal, *The Responsive Community*, and a Web site. The most consistent and vibrant voice in the communitarian movement is that of Amitai Etzioni. The author of 20 books and numerous articles, Etzioni is professor of sociology at George Washington University. He outlined the basics of communitarianism in his 1993 book *The Spirit of Community*.

The Monochrome Society, a collection of 13 essays, is second-level communitarian thought in that it does not so much explain communitarianism as develop its philosophy and practical implications. The title is a fitting image for Etzioni’s view of American society. “Monochrome” refers to an artwork done in different shades of one color. In its common dreams and beliefs, Etzioni argues, American society is one color. Uniformity rather than radical diversity is the norm. In pluralistic America there is still consensus on fundamental moral ideas, such as democracy, tolerance, personal responsibility and the importance of work. Unlike traditional societies, we are bound together by ideas, not biology.

But pointing to moral consensus is not Etzioni’s primary objective. He identifies several practical implications, such as changing the way we punish wrongdoers—we should switch from jailing them to shaming them, he suggests. We should giving stakeholders, not just stockholders, a share in corporate governance, and we should

do more to protect children from exploitation.

His view on “shaming” obviously makes liberal liberals a bit nervous. Etzioni’s point is that the criminal justice system is ineffective: so many millions of people in jail for nonviolent crime, so little rehabilitation, so high a cost (a year in jail costs as much as a year in a private college). Are we doing the right thing? Perhaps people convicted multiple times for driving while intoxicated ought to drive cars with glow-in-the-dark bumper stickers identifying them as such. The social stigma would be more significant and effective than a jail sentence.

At the same time, Etzioni’s views on corporate governance likely make conservative liberals nervous. He argues that corporations are the property of all who invest in them: shareholders, but also employees (particularly those who have worked for many years); the community in which the corporation exists (particularly as it has created favorable conditions for the corporation to function); and, to a lesser extent, creditors and clients. All these groups ought to have some sort of proportional representation in governance.

His third practical implication challenges libertarians who treat children like mini-adults (he also challenges hard-core conservatives who treat adults like children) and defends their full First Amendment rights. Children are developmental creatures, Etzioni notes, slowly growing into people able to make their own moral judgments. Filters ought to be placed on public library computers, and parents should have access to a child’s lending record at public libraries.

Etzioni focuses on the end, the goal: the good society. “A good society fosters a set of core virtues that defines that which it considers good. The good society is not a neutral one that leaves it up to its members to decide on their own whether or not they wish to pollute the environment, abandon their children, abuse their spouses, drink and drive, and so on.” The good society integrates social order and individual autonomy rather than maximizing one at the expense of the other. It relies less on state coercion than on its own moral voice.

For society to be good, says Etzioni, “social conduct ought to be ‘regulated’ by reliance on the moral voice rather than by law, and the scope of the law must be limited largely to that which is supported by moral voice.” Webs of relationships, shared commitment to values and identity, and moral dialogue to determine values—these are fundamental characteristics of the good society. These values,

however, are limited. Etzioni sets himself against both communities that reject pluralism and those that tolerate everything and take pride in defending the “right to do wrong.”

The notion of civil society is much discussed these days, Etzioni notes. Defenders of civil society promote “the rich array of voluntary associations that countervails the state and provides the citizens with the skills and practices that democratic government requires.” This includes clubs, social groups, church groups and the like. The important thing, however, is not simply involvement, but how such involvement advances some conception of the good. Not all voluntary organizations are equal.

Communitarianism is a stimulating movement, but in the end it is unsatisfying. I agree that stronger communities, a stronger moral voice in communities and a more fully developed sense of responsibility among persons and businesses would forge a better society. I also agree that we are fundamentally social beings. But I am not convinced that the most adequate description of our social ills is that we are too individualistic. I also doubt that better community is the unequivocal remedy for our social woes. It is not enough to say that diverse American communities share some common values, for these communities too often have separate and unequal means to access and to live those values. It seems that no part of the country is without its racial tensions and other fractures in community.

The lingering problem seems to be not only that some of our communities are weak, but that we also have fault lines between communities. Around the globe communities are clashing. People of different races, nationalities and ethnic and religious identities have a very difficult time living together. When Etzioni notes that a major defect of communities is that by nature they exclude, he is only half-correct. Not only do they exclude, but they tend to define themselves against other communities. The perception that “we are not like them” or “they are not like us” seems to be the glue holding together some communities. Etzioni argues that “if we treat one and all as unique persons, we avoid community-based exclusivity.” I think it is more complicated than that, and I think “unique” is too weak a word.

A strong city may be based on strong neighborhoods, but if members of one strong neighborhood are afraid to drive in or walk through another strong neighborhood, what kind of city do we have? Communitarians tend to be suspicious of moral claims that transcend communities. Etzioni, for example, offers a few meager pages rejecting the idea that human rights are an instrument of Western oppression. It

seems, however, that the only way to unite “neighborhoods,” whether within a city or within the world, is to seek some agreement on transcendent (at least on a sociological level) values.

In the end I want to have it both ways, and communitarianism only helps me to think about society one way. I want a stronger sense of community and general responsibility, yet I think that communities can exhibit the same vices as persons. Communities can be and often are driven by excessive “self-interest, self-indulgence, permissiveness and a sense of entitlement” in ways that are threatening to the well-being of other communities. Intracommunitarianism must become a necessary element of communitarianism if the movement is to offer an adequate account of the moral order.