

# A Liberal Wolf in Communal Clothing

*Bradley C.S. Watson*

**The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism**, by Bruce Frohnen, *Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996. viii + 271 pp.*

**Community and Tradition: Conservative Perspectives on the American Experience**, edited by George W. Carey and Bruce Frohnen, *Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. vii + 206 pp.*

COMMUNITARIANISM AT ONE LEVEL is a contemporary school of thought that takes to task liberalism as a political theory. As such, one might expect communitarianism to be in fundamental sympathy with conservative critiques of liberalism. But such is not necessarily the case. The communitarians constitute an eclectic group, including among their number Harvard government professor Michael Sandel, Maryland political theorist William Galston, McGill philosopher Charles Taylor, George Washington sociologist Amitai Etzioni, and Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah. All share the view that individuals are constituted by a complex

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BRADLEY C. S. WATSON teaches political science at Norwich University in Vermont. His book *Civil Rights and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy* is forthcoming from Lexington Books.

set of communal attachments and dispositions and that any attempt to describe human beings as outgrowths of an abstract, individualist “state of nature” are fundamentally misleading and doomed to failure.

Communitarianism as practical social philosophy, as distinct from academic theory, has, over the past ten to fifteen years, been reinvigorated as a result of the perception that America in particular is a nation whose individualism has gotten out of control. Everything from high illegitimacy rates to poverty to criminal conduct tends to be ascribed by “political” communitarians to individuals’ lack of grounding in community norms and aspirations. This lack of grounding is furthered by the liberal state’s official neutrality on questions of the moral good. In the absence of non-neutral norms, people—especially youths—are left with nothing but nihilistic value-positing, defended by nothing more than tabloid television’s seemingly ubiquitous, if implicit, question: Who is to say what is right and wrong? These unconstrained individuals therefore do not have benefit of their community’s salutary proscriptions, or their forefathers’ practical wisdom. Their alienation from anything other than the politics of the self leaves them vacuously unencumbered—free in a world where freedom is just another word

for nothing left to lose.

Communitarianism comes to sight as a movement that sees, far more clearly than liberalism, that the private sphere and private goods are rooted in, and in turn have an effect on, public goods. President Clinton, as a “new” Democrat, has effectively enlisted the intellectual backing of the communitarian theorists in his efforts to distance himself and his party from the more extravagantly individualist claims of the old left. However, communitarianism is but a liberal wolf in communal clothing. This is a central claim of Bruce Frohnen, a political scientist who is currently a speechwriter for U.S. Senator Spencer Abraham. In *The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism*, Frohnen argues that the new communitarians eschew the authority of what they see as oppressive tradition, natural law, or traditional religion. For these, they seek to substitute a desiccated, politically nationalizing civil religion, communal loyalty to which will help ensure that their particular vision of the future comes to pass.

Although the precise contours and extent of civil religion are not always fleshed out (by Frohnen, or by the communitarians themselves), it is clear that traditional religion is an instrumental good only, useful to the extent it teaches the intertwined liberal social goods of tolerance, equality, authenticity, and participation in community life. Communitarian virtues are not the Aristotelian ones—courage, moderation, prudence, justice, and so forth—but liberal ones. Indeed, in Frohnen’s interpretation of Bellah, the promotion of individual virtue is at once atomizing and hegemonic, destructive therefore of both liberal community and authenticity.

Communitarians seek to foster public spirit and thereby tame the self-interest that liberalism unshackles, but it is a public spirit that, paradoxically, is directed toward furthering the unfettered

flowering of the individual’s capacities. Genuine individual flourishing—or authenticity, as it is sometimes termed—is always threatened by inequality, for maximum authenticity for the maximum number requires equalized conditions in which individual choice can take place. And attachment to *local* institutions and practices often stands in the way of large-scale equalization, as recognized by communitarian theorists like Bellah, and practitioners like Mario Cuomo. Frohnen argues that communitarians are consummately Machiavellian insofar as they are revolted by man’s self-regarding nature when it is not in service of the common good, and insofar as they would use religious symbols, unsupported by theological truth, to convince the masses to do, on a national scale, what is required of them. Federally encouraged, sponsored, or mandated value re-education thus becomes a desideratum of the new community.

In support of civil religion, communitarians take advantage of the power of rhetoric. Frohnen deals with this question of rhetoric in perhaps the best of many good chapters. Garry Wills, according to Frohnen, ridicules the idea that there might be eternal truths propagated in and by the American founding, but nevertheless views the founding, and its key documents such as the Declaration of Independence, as the source of useful myths. As a locus of affection, the founding period, if put to proper rhetorical use (as it was by Lincoln), can further Americans’ progressively developing, if sometimes protean, egalitarianism. As Lincoln used the founding for his particular purposes, so we may use Lincoln for ours.

In the end, Frohnen does not present a comprehensive alternative to the bureaucratic communitarianism he pillories, although he does adumbrate the necessity for a genuine moral vision to bind us a nation. It is a moral vision that

must be grounded in something more than mere rhetoric and salutary, albeit human, all-too-human, myths. Anyone—scholar or lay reader—seeking a well-grounded introduction to the vexed topic of communitarianism could do worse than begin with this volume.

Frohnen and the distinguished Georgetown government professor George W. Carey have edited a collection of articles and essays on the relationship of conservative thought to community, entitled *Community and Tradition: Conservative Perspectives on the American Experience*. With contributions from Southwest Texas State political scientist Kenneth L. Grasso, Colgate political scientist Barry Alan Shain, Tulane historian Wilfred McClay, University of Buckingham politics professor Norman Barry, Oglethorpe University sociologist Brad Lowell Stone, and Berry College political scientist Peter Augustine Lawler, along with Frohnen and Carey themselves, this work is a cut far above the typical academic anthology. It can be read as a single book, and anyone choosing to do so will be richly rewarded. The editors introduce the book by pointing to the decline in community in America as a result of centralized institutions treating citizens as atoms in an undifferentiated mass society. Rights talk increasingly comes to dominate the American polity. Culture, *i.e.*, the cultivation of citizens within real communities, is truncated as it is forced to prostrate itself on the Supreme Court's Procrustean bed.

The editors argue that national community is increasingly promulgated as civil religion, and it is this reflection that decisively links this work to the previous one. Grasso picks up on this theme by arguing that most contemporary "communitarians" are really centralists who show little but contempt for the pluralism of the market or the local ties that bind. Following Robert Nisbet, he traces this tendency through the growth

of the nation-state and the doctrines of philosophers such as Rousseau. His argument is echoed by Stone, who calls for a return to the older communitarianism of Montesquieu, the Scottish moralists, and Burke.

Co-editor Carey reminds us that the Constitution was intended to create a constitutional space in which local communities could flourish. The Constitution did not itself provide a national moral framework, but rather the institutional protection needed for local politics and culture to nourish human virtue. In other words, the Constitution, in the minds of the founders, did not seek to impose revolutionary change on the pre-existing polity, which, in all the colonies, was strongly oriented toward church, family, and local self-government. However, the shift from passive to active government, commencing with the New Deal, has essentially scotched the Founders' intentions and served to atrophy the very institutions necessary for free government to survive. Community now tends to be thought of in terms of national community, the realization of which is often seen to be impeded by the nuisance of more local (but, in Carey's view, truer and more salubrious) communities. Added to this, of course, is the use of commercial power and federal funding to nationalize ever greater segments of American life and activity; and the drive to centralize has of course taken place with the acquiescence, or active participation, of the Supreme Court.

A particularly mellifluous chapter, "Mr. Emerson's Tombstone," was penned by McClay (the essay has also appeared, in modified form, in the journal *First Things*). In it, McClay reminds us that even such free nineteenth-century spirits as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are tidily buried in ancestral family plots in Concord, Massachusetts. In death, the truth of their lives comes out: "Their self-made identities were

deeply rooted in conditions and relationships they did not choose and could not change.” His larger point is that America never was a purely liberal regime in which individual supremacy was a dominant ordering concept, although it is in danger of so becoming if it continues its national drive “to attempt to constitute community without a transcendent point of reference, and without reliance on the impersonal authority of a foundational text.”

Barry deals with a godfather of communitarianism, Charles Taylor. He argues clearly that Taylor’s economic and social liberalism cannot be squared with his philosophical critique of atomistic individualism. For Taylor, our understanding of the good is always structured by our relationships with our fellows. This leads Taylor to advocate a form of multiculturalism that is a positive affirmation of some, but not all, of certain cultures’ characteristics. He is engaged in the quixotic quest for a non-relative, but at the same time non-metaphysical, horizon from which cultures can be judged, and the best aspects of them preserved. As Barry points up the contradictions of Taylor’s work, so Lawler, in a wonderfully nuanced essay, points us to the tensions in William Galston’s. The true self, according to Lawler’s reading of Galston, is divided against itself, one part Socratic skeptic of social norms, one part loving devotee of its social order. To the extent liberalism undermines the particular in favor of the universal, it disfigures the human good as it pursues its conception of the beautiful. Liberalism is partially good, but must be mitigated by illiberalism. So why then, asks Lawler, is Galston not a conservative, when it is only conservatism that can temper liberalism’s excesses and make it more compatible with the human soul?

Shain attempts, with limited success, to argue that the American founding is reducible to an effort to protect local,

self-governing, Protestant communalism. This religious-organic understanding of the American experiment consciously downplays the strong influence of natural rights thinking on the Founders—thinking which was forcefully expressed by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. While it would be a grave error to overlook the role of Christian faith and intense localism on American political theory and practice, it is equally an error to attempt to understand America as if the self-evident truths of the Declaration are only peripherally related to American conceptions of community. It is characteristic of Shain’s understanding of America that, in dealing with the nineteenth century, he urges the reader to consider the words of Senator Stephen Douglas, without once mentioning Abraham Lincoln. It is as if America’s highest principles and greatest statesmen are somehow epiphenomenal, obscuring the low but solid “reality” that actually gives shape to the American experience.

Shain’s contribution raises critical questions that are left unanswered by this volume. What are the limits of community—not geographically, but morally and politically? To what extent are the extended sphere, the filtering effect of representation (or other institutional considerations discussed by Publius in *The Federalist*), or enforceable doctrines of natural rights, necessary corrections to the corruptions, great and petty, that are often associated with the local? How can we formulate a doctrine of community that takes sufficient cognizance of natural right? Conservatives and liberals who would speak in the name of community will sooner or later find themselves compelled to direct their attention to these questions.

## The Order of Time

CARYL JOHNSTON

**A Thread of Years**, by John Lukacs,  
*New Haven: Yale University Press,*  
1998. 489 pp.

LIKE A FINE, MELLOW WINE, John Lukacs's latest book breathes out a quality rare in the modern intellectual marketplace, a kind of quiet moral reflectiveness. Covering the years 1901-1969—the first two-thirds of this tempestuous century—Lukacs offers his “vignettes” of these years of history as a challenge. Novelty has been held out often enough—of what is loud, fast, new, shocking, in modernity and the bohemia of art, technology or politics. Lukacs does not proclaim a new bohemia. He rather dislikes all that hubbub. And though he offers this book as possibly a new form of history-writing, he is not too eager to establish himself as a pioneer or maker of a new form. Rather, his challenge is for us to incarnate our thinking, and to realize, with inner attention and without “existential...dissimulation” (one of his many arresting phrases) what kind of people we are, what kind of age this is. It is to establish, somewhere in all the hubbub of modern life, a place for retrospection, a valid domain for reflection.

He does not mingle fiction with fact very much as popular “novelized histories” often do. Rather, he raises fiction, if not to fact, then to thought and event. He describes fictional people in real time. It is time, or rather, the years themselves, as protagonist. Each year has a charac-

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CARYL JOHNSTON is an assistant in archives at the Birmingham Public Library in Birmingham, Alabama.

ter, a mood, a certain quality of thought and feeling. Perhaps time as a Living Being in this sense echoes distantly something of the Platonic World-Soul. But there is more to it than that. This Living Being which is history comprises a large part of the self-knowledge of modern man. For, as Lukacs often reminds us, the Socratic “Know thyself” must become, for us, “Know thy history,” both of the personal and the larger history of our times.

In counterpoint to the mood of quiet reflectiveness that permeates the narration of the vignettes and character sketches, there is an active element. Each vignette is followed by a passage of questioning or challenge by an imaginary interlocutor—a dialogue that the author explains is possibly a conversation between his European and American selves. (Lukacs was born in Hungary in 1924 and came to the United States in 1946.) In these passages there often recur insights that Lukacs argued previously in his *Historical Consciousness* (1968)—insights that Lukacs now, in his nineteenth book, presents impressionistically and ruminatively.

For instance, the German historian Leopold von Ranke once declared that the historian's task was to reveal history “*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*”—“as it truly happened.” The phrase defined the German historical school. But in arguing about what really happened, we also take account of what people think happens. For, as his imaginary interlocutor tells Lukacs, in the vignette “1923”—“I know your conviction, that history must describe what people think and believe, including what they don't think and no longer believe.” Lukacs is concerned with the intrusion of mind into events, that “what happens is inseparable from what people think happens,” though he adds, “not forever, and the two things are not identical.”

Where Ranke emphasized the incarnated *fact*, Lukacs is interested in the