

# **COMMUNITARIANISM**

The Issue of Relativism

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There are two standard critiques against communitarian theories: (i) that these theories always entail authoritarian connotations, with their emphasis on the importance of communal values and order undermining individual freedoms; and (ii) that their focus on the context-bound nature of communal values results in the relativistic idea that, since every community has its own values, there is no supra-communal or extra-communal way of assessing conflicting views of the good life.

### **The Golden-Rule Perspective**

Communitarianism, as expounded by Etzioni, attempts to overcome both the authoritarian and the relativistic critique. He responds to both with his notion of the “golden rule” – with the idea when advocating or promoting “community” in the modern world, one should strive to achieve a balance between order and individual autonomy. It is the imbalance between these two cardinal virtues that creates difficulties: overemphasis on order at the expense of autonomy leads to authoritarianism, overemphasis on autonomy at the expense of order leads to anarchy.

If the golden rule is applied, there can be no authoritarianism due to communal order taking repressive forms, undermining autonomy, and therefore breaking the order-autonomy balance. More specifically, Etzioni is in favor of a voluntary social and moral order which, without being contractarian, is based on an ongoing dialogue leading to communal consensus. If *intra*-communal dialogue avoids authoritarianism, relativism for Etzioni can be dealt with by the notion of *inter*-communal dialogue: respect for the values and ways of life of other communities, and the promotion of open-ended dialogue between them will undermine communal isolation, and so encourage procedural and even substantive mechanisms of inter-communal integration. Such integrative mechanisms combat the post-modern relativistic idea that there is no common framework, no common moral vocabulary by means of which one can compare and assess the ways of life of different communities or civilizations.

In addition to the above, Etzioni argues that the values of specific communities should be compatible with the values or moral order of the “community-of communities”, of the superordinate social entity (e.g. the nation-state, global system) within which communities are embedded. However, as he points out, this does not solve the problem of relativism but simply shifts it upward from the community level to that of the “community-of- communities”. Concerning this difficulty, he argues that the values of the community-of-communities should, in the last analysis, be compatible with the golden rule, with the twin cardinal virtues of moral order and bounded autonomy:

“As I see it, moral order and autonomy crown the communitarian normative account. They provide the final, substantive normative criterion this account requires.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Etzioni, this compatibility is the result of the values of moral order and bounded autonomy being “morally compelling” and therefore self-evident. No utilitarian, consequentialist reasoning is required for the legitimation. They are accepted by people of good will as a matter of course – in as unmediated a manner as religious revelation is accepted by believers. In other words, the balance between the basic virtues

of moral order and bounded autonomy is as manifest and morally compelling as is the value of health for the medical sciences.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the golden rule is universal and applies to all communities – while at the same time, provided they do not offend against it, it allows for the myriad particularistic judgements of specific communities.

I think that Etzioni's attempt to avoid the absolutism of any single value by stressing that the crucially important balance between moral order and individual autonomy will lead to a mutual reinforcement of social virtues and individual rights, as well as his dialogic approach to intra-communal communication, does indeed provide an adequate normative framework for refuting those critics who stress the authoritarian character of all communitarian theories. Where he seems to me to be rather less successful is in tackling the critique of relativism.

### **On the Self-Evidence of the Golden Rule**

My difficulty with Etzioni's solution to the matter of relativism is that the virtue of a balance between order and autonomy is not as utterly self-evident and morally compelling as he implies. To take an extreme example: in highly segmental, non-differentiated communities with low or non-existent individuation, the idea of bounded autonomy (entailing negative and positive liberties as well as the notion of self-expression) is neither self-evident nor morally compelling. The idea of the right to self-expression, or the idea of the individual having rights of his/her own, develop only in conditions of what J. Beck has termed individualization.<sup>3</sup>

Even if we ignore such extreme examples and restrict ourselves to traditional village communities as they exist today in various parts of the so-called third world – the contention that a moral social order as it may be developed and defined by a specific community should *prevail* over individual autonomy cannot be simply dismissed as ideological brainwashing, or as a “misunderstanding” that can be cleared up by open dialogue, as advocated by Etzioni.

To take an example used by the author of *The New Golden Rule* himself: the father who finds a much older husband for his daughter, one rich enough to afford the dowry price, may seem to us as “selling” his daughter to the highest bidder.<sup>4</sup> But the situation can be interpreted very differently from the point of view of a culture where kinship solidarity or economic survival of the family unit take clear precedence over the expressive needs, preferences, or individual rights of family members. To put it bluntly, sacrificing the individual rights of a kin-member on the altar of family solidarity or survival may be self-evidently immoral to an American university professor, but not at all so an impoverished Egyptian or Bolivian peasant. In other words, for a huge part of humankind still living in quasi-traditional settings, the *imbalance* between moral order and individual autonomy (in favor of the former) might be more morally compelling or more self-evident than the balance between these two cardinal virtues. To dismiss such orientations as the result of confusion or “distorted communication” simply won't do. It is as unconvincing as the Marxist argument of false consciousness that is supposed to explain why the proletariat does not revolt.

## Basic Assumptions and Difficulties of the Relativist Position

The above difficulties with the golden-rule concept do not necessarily result in total relativism. But I do think that, in order to overcome the relativistic position, the focus should shift from moral and political philosophy to sociology, and to adopt a more historically-oriented macro-comparative, evolutionist perspective. It would then be quite feasible to show that the golden rule, without being *universally* self-evident, does become morally compelling for a growing number of people living in *post-traditional* contexts all over the globe.

I shall begin by looking more closely at how post-modern, relativistic arguments are deployed. According to most post-modernist discourses, if we take into account the social and cultural pluralism that characterizes the contemporary world – as well as the fact that what is ethical/unethical, good/bad, valuable/non-valuable is strictly related to specific socio-historic contexts – then we are bound to conclude that there is no way of assessing and/or hierarchizing cultural values and modes of life based on them. There is no foundation, no Archimedian principle, no universal norm that would help us stand above multiple and often contradictory cultural codes or paradigms in order to judge which of them is more or less good, just, true.

On a more practical level this relativistic attitude means that, in our post-modern condition, even practices that are inhuman or repulsive from the western point of view (such as female circumcision, infanticide etc.) cannot be condemned on the basis of some universal standard – whatever it might be. On the other hand, in contrast to relativism, there is the view that values like moral order, individual freedom, respect for basic human rights, or a combination of them, are of trans-historical, universal character, and as such can be used in the assessment or evaluation of social practices in specific contexts.

In what follows I shall develop a position that avoids the post-modern type of relativism without subscribing to Etzioni's idea that certain values (like the balance between social virtues and individual rights) are morally compelling or self-evident in a universal, trans-historical manner. It is true of course that Etzioni does not explicitly emphasize the universal, trans-historical character of his golden rule. His whole argument, however – in so far as it does not distinguish between people still living in traditional and others living in post-traditional contexts today – implies that the balance between moral order and individual autonomy appeals to all people of good will. This is definitely not so.

Let us consider first total relativism. It generates severe difficulties in two particular areas.

*First*, notwithstanding the fact that values like those entailed by the golden rule are not universal, there is a very small number of human values which, because they are based on what evolutionists call biological or sociological universals<sup>5</sup>, are indeed universal or quasi-universal. Example: because all known human societies have a kinship system and because *homo sapiens* needs a long period of primary socialization, a certain altruism of the mother towards her biological child is to be found, as a norm<sup>6</sup>, in all socio-cultural formations from the least to the most differentiated. This statement does not necessarily lead to teleological functionalism<sup>7</sup>, because one can argue that cultures/societies without such altruistic values simply could not and did not survive.<sup>8</sup>

*Second*, and more important, as Ernest Gellner pointed out long ago, the notion of total relativism assumes the existence of societies or communities that are entirely self-contained, that have no linkages whatsoever with other societies or communities. It is based on a hypothetical, non-existent world where values do not spread from one socio-cultural whole to another via trade, war, migration etc.<sup>9</sup> Such a totally compartmentalized world not only has never existed, but is the extreme opposite of what we are witnessing today: i.e. the growing interpenetration and interdependence (via globalization) of cultures, civilizations, societies etc. The more advanced this interdependence and interpenetration, the less ground there is for the post-modern relativism to stand on. It loses its footing because it is precisely the growing overlap between various cultural traditions that provides a basis both for comparison and for serious assessment and evaluation of conflicting ways of life.

### **Stepping Stones towards Growing Socio-Cultural Interpenetration**

The above becomes clearer if we view processes of growing interdependence or interpenetration from a perspective not of *specific* but of *general* evolution<sup>10</sup> – pointing out in an illustrative, non-systematic manner, some of the key turning –points or institutional breakthroughs that have led to the present extraordinary, unprecedented fusion and interpenetration of cultural traditions.

- Starting from the city-states of antiquity, not only in Mediterranean Europe but also in Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, these miniscule socio-cultural formations were embedded in larger cultural-civilizational wholes. These wholes extended far beyond a specific city-state’s walls and its military-administrative organization.<sup>11</sup>
- The tendency of cultural values and norms to transcend specific juridico-administrative entities was dramatically reinforced by the shift from local, primitive to the so-called historic or world religions, which developed quasi-universal discourses – discourses whose abstractions made them “detachable” from local, particularistic conditions, thus increasing their appeal to million of people across a variety of societies, polities and civilizations.<sup>12</sup>
- According to I. Wallerstein, it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the first “world system” came into existence: system of various states competing with one another in the international economic, political and cultural arenas. What was unique about the system was that no one state was strong enough to destroy inter-state economic and politico-military competition by establishing an imperial order.<sup>13</sup> This “primitive” world system was, of course, very much strengthened in the eighteenth century by the emergence of the nation-state and the shift from the inter-*state* to an inter-*nation-state* world system.
- Another crucial breakthrough during the process of growing socio-cultural interpenetration was the dominance of the capitalist mode of production in eighteenth-century western Europe. If by capitalist mode of production we do not simply mean commercialization in the sphere of trade/distribution; if (following Marx) we use the narrow definition of capitalism as the entrance of capital into the sphere of agricultural and industrial production and the consequent creation of wage labor<sup>14</sup> on a massive scale – then the dominance of the capitalist mode of production not only peripheralizes non-capitalist modes, but it also, together with the nation-

state, systematically destroys the economic, political and cultural segmental localisms of the pre-capitalist era.

Furthermore, it dramatically advances the internationalization or globalization of the economy. If in the nineteenth century international capital was mainly oriented towards infrastructural investments (e.g. ports, railways), and in the twentieth towards the global production of consumer goods (e.g. cars), on the eve of the twenty-first century the globalization of the economy is being completed by its massive entrance into the service sphere (banking, insurance, management, accounting, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

- The global process of democratization after the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>16</sup> – although often superficial and extremely uneven – is another fundamental mechanism that is bringing late-modern societies closer together on the level of political, social, and cultural values.

Summing up: world religions in the cultural sphere, the system of nation-states and the more recent trend of global democratization in the political sphere, the massive entrance of capital into the sphere of national and international production in the economic sphere – all these, as well as the extraordinary technologies with which they are inextricably linked, have brought us to a situation that is the exact opposite of total societal self-containment and cultural isolation.

Today's situation creates conditions that encourage the gradual spread and acceptance of the core values of late modernity – values such as productivity in the economic sphere, democracy in the political, solidarity in the social, and individual autonomy/self-realization in the cultural sphere. These values, as I have argued already, are certainly not trans-historical or universal, but they do appeal to the growing number of people who live in *post-traditional* settings, whether in Blairite Britain, social-democratic Sweden, authoritarian Korea, or quasi-totalitarian China. It is precisely because the above values are gradually becoming global among “late-modern” individuals that it is possible to transcend relativism and condemn the violation of human rights, whether this occurs in Israel, Turkey, Northern Ireland, or China.

## **Eurocentrism**

Of course, the “politically correct” relativist may argue that the above way of founding trans-cultural values is clearly Eurocentric, since values relating to parliamentary democracy and entailing individual freedoms are specifically western cultural products that have been imposed on the rest of the world via imperialism or the less violent western-dominated mechanisms of the world market. The Eurocentrism debate is a highly complex one, and I do not intend to tackle it at all systematically.<sup>17</sup> What I do want to point out here is that the values of democracy and of human liberties and rights – without being universal or “eternal” in the Platonic, idealistic sense of the term – transcend the narrow limits of western-European culture or civilization. This is so because:

- Despite the fact that parliamentary democracy and the civil, political, and social rights associated with it took their most developed form in the “West”, important elements of such institutions are to be found in various non-European civilizations, past as well as present.
- As the historian William McNeil has persuasively argued<sup>18</sup>, the types of revolution (scientific, technological, economic, and political) that have “modernized” western

Europe could equally well have happened in other “civilized” parts of the pre-industrial world. The fact that they occurred in the West has more to do with conjunctural factors than with the uniqueness or superiority of western culture. Another way of putting this is to say that the reason why the breakthrough happened in western Europe was due less to “unique” elements (such as the Protestant work ethic) than to the combination and timing of elements that were not unique but could be found in several others complex civilizations during the breakthrough period.<sup>19</sup>

- The modernization of the non-western world took various forms. Some of these proved less “effective” (e.g. Soviet collectivist modernization) than the western one, whereas other may, in the long run, prove more so (i.e. the Japanese or Chinese type of modernization). This is particularly so if one takes into account that democracy is not always compatible with development. In fact, contrary to Etzioni (see *The New Golden Rule*, 234-42), I am not at all sure that “late-late”-comers, whatever the stage of their development, can overcome the usual bottlenecks created by underdevelopment without – *at least at some initial state* – a strong dose of authoritarianism. Etzioni gives India as an example of development without authoritarianism, but I do not think he is convincing. India is still a country where a large part of the population lives in conditions of utter poverty and degradation.

Considering certain features of Japanese modernity that sharply distinguish it from the Anglo-Saxon variant – such as concern for long-term growth and development rather than immediate profit maximization, horizontal co-operation between branches of industry, selective and flexible state support for growth industries, more emphasis on training and developing human resources and less on “downsizing”, reluctance to let the market set the level of unemployment, etc. etc. – it is highly possible that in the next century quasi-authoritarian Asian capitalism may prevail over its more liberal Anglo-Saxon competitor.<sup>20</sup>

This prognosis becomes particularly plausible in view of the at present rather spectacular development of Chinese modernization – a modernization combining foreign-capital led economic development with rigid capital controls. As has frequently been argued, it is highly likely that, as Chinese capitalism develops further, there will be both internal and external pressures for the democratic opening-up of the political system. (This has happened in Korea.) Such an opening-up might lead to a Japanese style of authoritarian modernity, with weak liberal-democratic political institutions providing some degree of political pluralism and democratic representation. On the other hand, the possibility cannot be excluded that, in the long term, Chinese modernity might combine effective capitalist development with political forms that continue to remain strongly authoritarian-totalitarian.

However, regardless of which modernizing route China follows, perhaps with lower rates of economic growth than now, there is no doubt that in the decades to come a more developed China will, with her demographic weight, drastically change the global capitalist landscape.

It is true, of course, that at present the Asian economies are experiencing serious difficulties. But however serious the crisis, there is no doubt that in terms of both production and distribution of wealth, Asian capitalism is greatly superior to Indian or Latin-American capitalism, for instance.

If we take the above into consideration it becomes clear that values related to political rights, for example (regardless of where they became fully institutionalized for the first time), constitute what Parsons has called *evolutionary universals*: at a certain stage in the evolution of human societies they become basic preconditions if a society is to move up to higher levels of differentiation and “adaptive capacity”.<sup>21</sup> As such they have a very broad, trans-cultural appeal which, as I have already argued, addresses itself to post-traditional individuals all over the world. This does not mean, of course, that the above values are totally accepted, always respected, or followed in practice. It does mean, however, that they have become a basic reference point for assessing and legitimizing or condemning political practices on a global, trans-cultural level.

What, therefore, distinguishes today’s major living cultural traditions or civilizations is not their focus on radically conflicting values, but rather the way in which a small number of commonly accepted core values articulate with each other. For example, in the Anglo-Saxon world, at least at the level of the elites, political pluralism (as a core dimension of liberal democracy) has much more weight than social solidarity. In Japan, on the other hand, the priorities are reversed. And if for Europeans and North Americans the political repression in China is totally unacceptable, for many Asians this negative feature of the Chinese regime must be seen in the light of Russia’s disastrous “democratic” revolution and of China’s spectacular economic growth - a growth which, for the first time in the country’s history, has freed millions of peasants from the specter of starvation or chronic undernourishment.<sup>22</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

Etzioni deals with relativism by saying that his “golden rule”, i.e. balance between individual autonomy and the moral, social order, constitutes a self-evident, morally compelling truth. I have argued that this is not the case, and that a more effective way of overcoming post-modern relativism is adopting an evolutionist, macro-historical perspective. If this is done certain values, or combinations of values (like the combination of individual autonomy and order), without being universally valid, tend to have a trans-cultural, global appeal today for those individuals who live in post-traditional settings.

I have tried to support this claim by saying that:

- a) Relativism takes into account neither certain common biological and sociological features of all human societies, nor the fact that societies and civilizations are not isolated, totally self-contained wholes.
- b) From an evolutionist point of view, the interrelatedness/interdependence of societies is dramatically increased by the emergence of world religions, the development of a system of nation-states, the penetration of capital not only into the sphere of distribution but also of production, present-day globalizing trends, etc.
- c) Despite the fact that some of the above values were first institutionalized (on a large scale) in the West, they are not just western but constitute *evolutionary universals*. As such, in different combinations, they appeal to all “modern” people, whether in Europe, Asia, or Africa.
- d) What, in late modernity, distinguishes various socio-cultural wholes is not so much the absolute “uniqueness” of their values, but rather the unique way in which a small number of common, trans-cultural values are related to each other.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A. Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 246.

<sup>2</sup> Etzioni, 244-47.

<sup>3</sup> According to Beck, individualization entails three fundamental dimensions: (i) *disembedding*, or removal from “historically prescribed social forms and commitments”; (ii) *the loss of traditional security* with respect to practical knowledge, faith, and guiding norms; and (iii) *re-embedding*, or reintegration into a new context, requiring a post-traditional type of social commitment.

U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992), 128.

See also U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, “Individualization and ‘Precarious Freedoms’: Perspectives and Controversies of a Subject-Object Oriented Sociology”, in *Decentralization*, eds P. Heelas *et al* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996). Also U. Beck, A. Giddens, and S. Lash, eds, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Etzioni, 245-47.

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of biological and sociological universals see T. Parsons, “Evolutionary Universals in Society”, *American Sociological Review*, 29, 1964; and his *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> I emphasize *norm* because, obviously, there are always discrepancies between normative expectations (as these are embedded in specific rules and institutions) and actual performance.

<sup>7</sup> Teleological functionalism in a methodologically illegitimate manner transforms social needs into causes, i.e. it explains the emergence, persistence, or transformation of social wholes in terms of society’s functional requirements for stability, adaptation, cohesion, etc.

<sup>8</sup> For the theoretical elaboration of such an argument see R. Dore, “Function and Cause”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 26, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, value overlap or similarities between different societies is due not only to diffusion. Given similar structural conditions or systemic requirements, the same values may emerge in disconnected parts of the world. See on this point T. Parsons, “Evolutionary Universals”.

<sup>10</sup> Specific evolution refers to a process of cumulative growth that is historically and geographically specific, in the sense that it takes place within a specific social whole evolving through time (e.g. the process of bureaucratization in post-revolutionary France). General evolution, on the other hand, refers to a process of cumulative growth which, historically and geographically, cuts across specific evolutionary lines. It is a process that can be understood by looking at the evolutionary patterns of all or of several societies or cultures. A good example is Auguste Comte’s three-stage evolutionary theory, which argues that one can identify a general pattern of growing rationalization as humanity moves from theological to metaphysical and, finally, positivistic modes of social explanation. Comte’s mistake was to consider this pattern of rationalization not in terms of general but of specific evolution. He wrongly thought that all societies go through these three stages. For the concepts of general and specific evolution see M.D. Sahlins and E.R. Service, eds, *Evolution and Culture* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Univ. of

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Michigan Press, 1960). In what follows, I consider the growing interdependence of societies/cultures as a process of general evolution.

<sup>11</sup> See M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol. I (New York and London: Academic Press, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> Comte, in discussing the theological stage of his evolutionist theory, is one of the first classical social theorists who focused on the connection between the growing “abstraction” of religious belief (as one moves from animism to polytheism and monotheism) and the decline of cultural localism. The link between growing differentiation and the emergence of “free-floating”, “disembedded” religious ideas and values constitutes a central theme in the work of Parsons and some of his disciples (Eisenstadt, Bellah, etc).

<sup>13</sup> See I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*. vol. I (New York and London: Academic Press, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> For a systematic discussion of Marx’s definition of capitalism see M. Dobbs, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 1-32. For a debate on the meaning of capitalism and the relevance of diverging definitions in explaining the transition from feudalism to capitalism in western Europe, cf. R. Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> See C. Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation: Structures of the World Economy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> See L. Diamond and M. Plattner, eds. *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the Eurocentrism issue see my “Modernity: A Non-Eurocentric Conceptualization”, *British Journal of Sociology*, forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> See W. H. McNeil, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1963).

<sup>19</sup> See W. H. McNeil, “A Swan-Song of British Liberalism?”, in *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*. eds J. Hall and I. Jarvie (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of Sciences and Humanities Series, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> For the difference between Anglo-Saxon and Japanese capitalism see S. Berger and A. Dore, *National Diversity and Global Capitalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> See T. Parsons, “Evolutionary Universals”.

<sup>22</sup> See on this point N. Mouzelis, *Rethinking the Left: Social Democratic Tasks and Prospects* (Department of Sociology, London School of Economics Series, 1998).