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[Individualism and Community](#)

David Boaz - May 23, 2011



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Is there a conflict between [individualism](#) and community? Critics of liberal individualism, on both left and right, have often said so. Some, like Marx, have called for abolishing capitalism to eradicate “bourgeois individualism.” Others just think that individuals need a strong and nurturing government to protect them and prevent them from their selfishness in their pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. In the past two decades Amitai Etzioni has been a vigorous critic of what he sees as excessive individualism. And he’s suddenly popped up [twice here](#) at the Britannica and in a [debate](#) I moderated at the Cato Institute.

In many of his appearances (including the [Cato debate](#) at about 38:30) Etzioni makes an unexceptional point about three elements of our world: coercive government, free-standing individuals, and the “rich fabric of families, places of worship, voluntary associations, Tocqueville’s world.” And he suggests that we need less individualism, less government—though it’s hard to find any actual government program or activity he wants less of—and more civil society.

[Libertarians](#) and their intellectual forebears have been celebrating the virtues of civil society for centuries. (See Tom G. Palmer, “[Classical Liberalism and Civil Society](#).”) I note that it’s not obvious in Etzioni’s three-part analysis where he puts business enterprises, the space where most of us spend most of our time and where the progress that has lifted us from poverty to abundance happens. I include commercial society as part of civil society, the realm of non-coerced association. And since Americans have been forming associations for centuries (see [Tocqueville](#)), I don’t think we need the kinds of government support for civil society that Etzioni calls for.

But it won’t surprise the reader to know that as a libertarian, I disagree with the communitarian argument that we have too much individualism and [too many rights](#). When I hear communitarians like Etzioni describe the libertarian view of individualism, I wonder if they’ve ever read any libertarian writing other than a Classic Comics edition of Ayn Rand. In the Cato debate (39:30, unchecked transcription), he claims:

The individual which libertarians cherish and see exists only in community. If you take people and really isolate them, and set them to act out on their own, they become nasty, subject to demagogues. As the Manhattan Project shows, they have very high levels of mental illness....

People need each other, not in an exchange relationship, but in a bonding relationship. Not only for shared purposes ... but for their own psychological integration. The way people stand up to tyranny is not each one alone but by drawing and relying on each other....

There’s too much individualism in this particular sense: People who don’t regard each other and maximize their selfishness.

Well, of course no individualist envisions or celebrates this sort of “atomistic” individual who is isolated and unconnected to family and friends, and doesn’t regard other people. This is a straw man. And maybe it’s not fair to put too much emphasis on off-the-cuff remarks, even by a venerable professor who has been discussing the topic for decades. But in fact, in 1995, in his [Presidential Address](#) to the American Sociological Association, later published in the *American Sociological Review*, Etzioni made the same argument:

The libertarian perspective, put succinctly, begins with the assumption that individual agents are fully formed and their value preferences are in place prior to and outside of any society. It ignores robust social scientific evidence about the ill effects of isolation, the deep-seated human need for communal attachments, the social anchoring of reasoning itself, and the consistent interactive influence of society members on one another. Much of the communitarian writing in the 1980s by nonsociologists focused on remaking this basic sociological point: There are no well formed individuals bereft of social bonds or culture.

Most important for the point at hand is that libertarians actively oppose the notion of “shared values” or the idea of “the common good.”

Who thinks this? Where are the quotations? There never are any. As Tom Palmer wrote in “Myths of Individualism”:

No one believes that there are actually “abstract individuals,” for all individuals are necessarily concrete. Nor are there any truly “self-sufficient” individuals, as any reader of *The Wealth of Nations* would realize. Rather, classical liberals and libertarians argue that the *system of justice* should abstract from the concrete characteristics of individuals....

It is precisely because neither individuals nor small groups can be fully self-sufficient that cooperation is necessary to human survival and

flourishing. And because that cooperation takes place among countless individuals unknown to each other, the rules governing that interaction are abstract in nature. Abstract rules, which establish in advance what we may expect of one another, make cooperation possible on a wide scale.

No reasonable person could possibly believe that individuals are fully formed outside society—in isolation, if you will. That would mean that no one could have had any parents, cousins, friends, personal heroes, or even neighbors. Obviously, all of us have been influenced by those around us. What libertarians assert is simply that differences among normal adults do not imply different fundamental rights.

Of course, there may be a social value to having a few antisocial individuals around. Bernard DeVoto's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Across the Wide Missouri* was [described](#) as "A tribute to the mountain man—rapacious, tough, and antisocial." Aren't we glad that early America had some antisocial men who lit out for the mountains and opened the West? But very few of us, including very few libertarians, are like that. The libertarians I know have family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. They participate in businesses, churches, charities, clubs, and political groups.

If you're building your defense of "communitarianism" on such a thin reed as a completely unfounded description of libertarianism and individualism, then the listener's got to wonder if you really have much of a point. In 1994, when communitarianism was all the rage, the Economist distinguished between "high communitarians," who "reject[] the western liberal tradition explicitly [and] frankly place society and community above the individual," and "low communitarians," who back off when their rhetoric actually bumps up against "core American ideals—democratic political institutions, the legal concepts of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, and the notion of social and religious tolerance—[which] are deeply non-communitarian—that is, they are expressly concerned with restricting the claims that society can make on the individual." And thus communitarianism becomes fairly standard-issue modern American welfare-liberalism.

There's no conflict between individualism and community. There's a conflict between voluntary association and coerced association. And communitarians dance around that conflict.

Bonus link: My own [debate](#) with Etzioni back in 1993.

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