

A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism

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According to Amitai Etzioni, the starting point of responsive communitarian thinking is “the concept of a permanently tensed relation between individuals and the society of which they are members. Centrifugal forces will tend to lead individuals to break out, dangerously reducing the social realm, in their quest for ever more attention to their particular individual or bond-breaking subgroup agendas; centripetal forces will tend to collectivize members’ energies ever more in the service of shared goals and to curb their degrees of freedom. A society functions best when both forces are well balanced.” On this view, the relation between individual liberties and commitments to the common good is a zero-sum game: the greater the personal freedom, the less the commitment to the public good, and vice versa. Thus, Etzioni concludes, “it is the role of social observers and commentators, of intellectuals, to establish in which direction society is leaning and to throw their weight on the other side of history... while responsive communitarians within any one given societal context or historical period may argue for more community (as in the present-day United States) or more individual rights (as in present-day China), they actually seek to maintain the elementary balance that is at the foundation of all good societies.” My essay will question both the premise that there is a necessary trade-off between individual liberties and commitment to the community, and the conclusion that, in societies such as China where citizens are relatively deprived of freedom, communitarians

ought to be concerned primarily with the promotion of individual rights.

Individual Liberties and Commitment to the Community: A Zero-Sum Game?

The statement that “centripetal forces will tend to collectivize members’ energies ever more in the service of shared goals and to curb their degrees of freedom” can be interpreted to mean that the greater the deprivation of freedom, the greater the commitment to shared goals (I do not believe that Etzioni intends this reading, but it is a plausible interpretation of his “starting point” that can be readily used by authoritarian forces). The unfortunate reality, however, is that depriving citizens of basic rights such as the freedom of the press and the freedom to run for the opposition without fear of retaliation tends only to increase disaffection and alienation from other members of society. This is true not just of harsh totalitarian regimes such as China’s, but also, perhaps more surprisingly, of “soft authoritarian” regimes such as Singapore’s. I consider both countries in turn.

The Chinese government argues that it needs to curb the freedom of the press, including the press’s right to publicize misdeeds of government officials, in order to maintain political stability and harmony in society. Whatever the government’s intentions, however, the result is that many government officials feel free to engage in various forms of corruption, ranging from bribery and nepotism to smuggling and profiteering,

unchecked and unsupervised by members of the public. According to Liu Binyan, China's best known journalist (expelled from the Chinese Communist Party in 1988 for having "slandered the party" by exposing official corruption, now living in exile in Princeton), corruption in China is at least as bad as it was during the last years of the Kuomintang in the late 1940s, a time many regard as the most corrupt period in recent Chinese history.

Widespread and systematic official corruption causes ordinary people to join in the corruption themselves. China scholar Perry Link recounts the following conversation with a taxi driver: "Why should I report all my foreign exchange certificates? The state leaders are pulling them in by the net load. Am I supposed to report the small amounts I get? Besides, if I did hand them in, the money would just get swiped by someone higher up. Do you think it would ever get to the bank? Hah!" Corruption breeds cynicism, cynicism in turn breeds more corruption, and the whole vicious circle leads to a situation in which the Chinese increasingly operate in a world devoid of any shared values or commitments to the public good. As the twelve signers of a February 26, 1995, anticorruption petition put it, "in the China of today, exchanging power for money, 'back door' style, has become an established practice throughout society, and is even quasi-legal. Some people have lost even a minimum sense of social justice and professional ethics, and not only are they not ashamed of 'going through the back door,' they are proud of it... The spiritual vacuum created by the so-called 'absence of values' and 'collapse of faith' has to a great extent led to a poisoning of the nation's soul by political corruption in which 'if you have power, you have everything.'" In short, curtailing the right to publicly criticize the government allows corruption to flourish and ultimately makes people ruthlessly self-regarding rather than mobilizing their energies in the service of shared goals. Conversely, an important first step to increase commitment to the common good in China may involve securing the right to freely criticize government officials, including the right to publicize corruption and other forms of official malfeasance (of course, this right would have to be complemented with more independence for a judiciary that would prosecute corrupt officials once they are identified).

While one can in a Chinese context establish a causal link between a timid press too fearful to expose the corruption of high government officials and increasing cynicism and atomization in society at large, it should be noted that other countries do in fact man-

age to control corruption even without the benefits of a free press. In Singapore, for example, the freedom of expression (including the right to criticize government officials) is explicitly limited in the name of "nation building," yet even critics concede that Singapore is one of the least corrupt countries in the world. The government's anticorruption strategy includes stiff penalties for corrupt behavior, and it reduces the incentive for corruption among civil servants and ministers by constantly improving their salaries and working conditions (as founding father Lee Kuan Yew put it, "I'm one of the best paid and probably one of the poorest of the Third World prime ministers"), a strategy that seems to have succeeded thus far.

Unfortunately from the communitarian perspective, however, the relative absence of corruption and official recognition of the value of communitarianism (one of the four core values of Singapore as identified in a presidential address to Parliament on January 9, 1989) is not enough to secure substantial commitment to the common good. The explanation yet again resides in the fact that the government curtails certain individual liberties—in this case, the freedom to run for the opposition without fear of retaliation and the freedom to associate.

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The Singapore government does not hide the fact that it makes life difficult for many who aim to enter the political arena on the side of opposition parties: Between 1971 and 1993, according to Attorney General Chan Sek Keong, eleven opposition politicians have been made bankrupt (and hence ineligible to run in elections). Whether intended or not, such actions send an "unpatriotic" message to the community at large: "Politics is a dangerous game for those who haven't been specially anointed by the top leadership of the ruling party, so you should stick to your own private affairs." As Singaporean journalist Cherian George puts it, one can hardly blame people for ignoring their social and political obligations "when they hear so many cautionary tales: Of Singaporeans whose careers came to a premature end after they voiced dissent; of critics who found themselves under investi-

gation; of individuals who were detained without trial even though they seemed not to pose any real threat; of tapped phones and opened letters.... The moral of these stories: In Singapore, better to mind your own business, make money, and leave politics to the politicians." Put positively, if the aim is to secure attachment to the community at large, then implementing genuinely competitive elections, including the freedom to run for the opposition without fear of retaliation, is an essential first step.

Competitive elections, however, cannot by themselves foster widespread commitment to the common good. Political theorists ranging from G. W. F. Hegel to Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill have argued that intermediary associations in civil society (groups between the family and the state) are absolutely essential for public-spiritedness because they break down social isolation and allow people to cooperate and to discover common interests that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. As Tocqueville put it, they are "large free schools," where citizens "take a look at something other than themselves," where their political interests are stimulated and their organizational skills enhanced, thus countering the disposition to give precedence to personal ends over the public interest and fostering habits of public-spiritedness that spill over into the larger political world.

The problem in Singapore is that strict limits are placed on civil associations: Concerned citizens who attempt to organize discussion groups on public issues are subjected to intimidating visits and interrogation by the widely feared Internal Security Department; public gatherings of more than five people must apply for a government permit; legislation was passed in the late 1980s to erode the power and status of the Law Society after it had engaged in public criticism of the government's policies regarding control of the media; the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act was passed in 1990 to prohibit religious groups from engaging in political activity such as providing legal aid and shelter to foreign domestics facing problems with their employers or the Labour Ministry; and even political parties are prevented in various ways from debating and criticizing domestic politics in Singapore. In short, just about all the independent forces in civil society have been either co-opted into official organizations or expunged from the political scene, and not surprisingly, few citizens have developed a sense of concern for the national community and a willingness to act in the public sphere out of a concern for the common good. Instead, the large majority have simply withdrawn into the "pri-

vate realm," devoting their time and energy first and foremost to the accumulation of material goods—as one local observer put it, "increasingly, acquisitiveness has become the very soul of society, penetrating almost every aspect of social life and thought. Everything has a price attached to it, so much so that Singaporeans, especially during the 1970s when the economy grew by leaps and bounds, appeared to be fast developing a system of values according to which the worth or significance of any person, object or activity was calculated exclusively in terms of his or its potential or actual pecuniary value." Even government minister George Yeo recently lamented the fact that Singapore is like a "five-star hotel," where residents might like to spend a vacation because the economic benefits are good, but never a lifetime.

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To summarize this section: In both China and Singapore it is the *lack* of individual liberties that in large part explains the lack of community, which argues against the view that individual liberties and commitments to the common good are necessarily in conflict. In China, the lack of a free press allows official corruption to flourish, which encourages ordinary people to join in the corruption themselves (why stay clean if the whole system is dirty?) and thus further undermines their commitment to the common good. In Singapore, citizens lack the freedom to run for the opposition without fear of retaliation and the freedom to form or join independent groups in civil society, thus reinforcing a tendency to stick to private affairs irrespective of the interests of society at large.

Individual Liberties as a Means to Promote the Common Good

Working with the assumption that individual liberties and commitments to the common good necessarily conflict, Etzioni concludes that since China obviously lacks individual liberties (and presumably has an abundance of civic virtue), responsive communitarians ought to be arguing for more individual

liberties in China so as “to maintain the elementary balance that is at the foundation of all good societies.” But if I am correct that China and Singapore lack *both* individual liberties and public-spiritedness (though I do not mean to deny that those societies provide many other benefits to citizens, such as social peace, opportunities for enrichment, and a context for the pursuit of rich family lives), where does that leave the responsive communitarian? My view is that communitarians ought to remain communitarians even in China, that is, they ought to be stressing the need for more community as a goal, combining this moral stance with the argument that as an empirical matter greater protection of individual liberties is the best (and easiest to implement) starting point for getting there.

The goal of the American Revolution, James Q. Wilson points out, “was liberty. It was not the first revolution with that object; it may not have been the last; but it was perhaps the clearest case of a people altering the political order violently, simply in order to protect their liberties.” In the United States, from its very beginnings to the present, much political debate has been premised on the assumption that the protection of individual liberties is the final justification for political power—a government is just to the extent that it secures basic liberties (though of course one can identify a “second language” of community, as Robert Bellah and the other authors of *Habits of the Heart* have shown).

But the “language of individualism” that prioritizes individual liberties does not resonate to nearly the same extent in an East Asian context more well versed in the “language of community.” For many in East Asia, a government is just to the extent that it secures the social conditions for individuals to lead rich communal lives. Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister Lee Shien Loong stated that “in general, Western societies place more weight on the individual, while Oriental societies tend to place more weight on the group”; few familiar with both Western and East Asian societies would disagree that this statement accurately captures a deep difference in people’s moral aspirations.

Skeptics may respond that official governmental spokesmen who denigrate the priority of individual rights have an obvious motive in doing so (to justify authoritarian rule) and that their views do not necessarily represent the aspirations of “the people,” but it is interesting to note that even opposition forces generally justify their social criticism first and foremost by appealing to the importance of community. Pro-democracy activists in twentieth-century China, for example, tend to value democracy primarily as a means

for building a strong nation, not as an essential instantiation of government by free individuals or as a means for the protection of individual liberties: Liang Qichao, China’s first democrat, argued in 1905 that “freedom, constitutionalism, republicanism: these are but the general terms that describe majority rule.” China scholar Orville Schell notes that

there was something too fundamentally alien to Confucian culture about the Western notion of natural rights, which liberal Western political philosophers held all citizens to possess by the fact of birth. In Liang’s more Confucian scheme of democracy, rights were not considered “natural,” but rather something a leader might manufacture and grant to his people if it served his purposes. It was this legacy of individual rights as a device, and democracy as a utilitarian means of energizing the nation so that it might become wealthy and powerful, that Liang codified and passed on to future generations of Chinese. In so doing, Liang, as the founding father of Chinese democracy, left a legacy in which, if rights did not serve to “save the nation” (*jiuguo*), or even to “build the nation” (*jianguo*), they were dispensable.

The famous slogan of the May Fourth 1919 student movement was that only Mr. Sai (Science) and Mr. De (Democracy) could save China. Tu Wei-ming, professor of Chinese history and philosophy at Harvard University, notes that

the advocacy of science and democracy as true manifestations of the Enlightenment symbolized a broad consensus of the Chinese intelligentsia. With few notable exceptions, they strongly believed that the mobilization of all the energies of the Chinese people based on a comprehensive vision of social reconstruction was the necessary and most economical way to save China. The absence of other Enlightenment values, such as liberty, the dignity of the individual, private property, privacy, human rights, and due process of law, occasionally stirred the more refined scholarly minds, but most intellectuals were satisfied with the simplicity and neatness of the agenda. For eighty years, the sanctity of science and democracy has never been questioned. Neither the CCP [the Chinese Communist Party] nor its most severe critics ever raised any doubts about it. It was not an accident that the likeness of the Statue

of Liberty which appeared in Tiananmen Square was rechristened the Goddess of Democracy.

The twelve intellectuals mentioned above who petitioned the government on February 26, 1995, to investigate corruption concluded their statement with these words: "As long as the ruling party and the civil political powers all put the greatest emphasis on the public's interests, on the nation's interests and on the righteous cause of the nation, and under the principle of equality, conduct a responsible, constructive, consultative political dialogue; if there is a little more tolerance, a little less enmity; if we oppose corruption together and encourage social reconciliation—*China's future will be a magnificent one*" (my emphasis).

In short, China's "internal critics" (to borrow Michael Walzer's terminology) tend to justify their criticism of authoritarianism by appealing to the patriotic idea that democracy is the best means for building a stronger, healthier nation. It is almost inconceivable that the Chinese people could be mobilized around the overtly self-interested slogan "no taxation without representation," and more generally the idea that democracy is needed chiefly to secure more individual freedom is quite foreign in a Chinese context.

In both China and Singapore it is the lack of individual liberties that in large part explains the lack of community.

One can tell a similar story about the opposition in Singapore (76 percent ethnic Chinese). Dr. Chee Soon Juan, acting Secretary General of the Singapore Democratic Party (the largest opposition group in Singapore, with three out of the four opposition Members of Parliament), opened his 1994 political manifesto *Dare to Change: An Alternative Vision for Singapore* with a chapter exposing the gap between the official rhetoric of communitarianism and the more individualistic reality in Singapore, arguing for measures that would lead to greater national cohesion. He puts the blame squarely on excessive intervention by an authoritarian government that causes people to feel apathetic and atomized, lacking even minimal concern for the common good of Singaporeans: "Presently, the state of mind among Singaporeans is one of alienation and detachment from the decision-making process. We

have a society that enjoys a high standard of living but without a comparable quality which is essential for building a strong and socially cohesive society." If the aim is nation building, "to forge an identity which makes [Singaporeans] feel that they are one people, one nation," Dr. Chee argues, "the government should allow civic organisations to help educate Singaporeans... By joining these organisations and having a greater say on public issues, Singaporeans can get more involved in the goings-on of their community and, hence, become more responsible for their fellow citizens as well as the environment." The more "communitarian" Japanese society is then invoked as a positive example: "With responsibility comes pride and care of one's environment. A people proud of its society and not resentful to an imposing and overbearing authority shows greater respect for the environment. Japan is such a society. Because the Japanese take such a strong sense of pride in their communities, the environment is also well taken care of. The difference is that all this happens without incessant campaigns and harsh fines."

In both China and Singapore, social critics condemn authoritarianism not because it promotes excessive community and undermines "particular individual or bond-breaking sub-group agendas," but rather for the opposite reason that it undermines attachment to the national community and promotes excessive individualism. Such critics appeal to a deeply felt patriotic language that emphasizes commitment to the cause of nation building, arguing that greater protection for individual rights such as the freedom of the press, the freedom to run for political office as a member of the opposition without fear of retaliation, and the freedom of association is the best way of increasing public-spiritedness in society.

Let me return at this point to the view stated at the beginning of this section—that communitarians ought to be stressing the need for more community in China and Singapore, combining this moral stance with the argument that as an empirical matter greater protection of individual liberties is a particularly promising way of closing the gap between the communitarian rhetoric and the individualistic reality. Two reasons can now be advanced in favor of this approach.

First, both defenders and critics of authoritarianism in an East Asian context justify political practices by appealing to the value of community. The "language of individualism" is almost totally absent, even as a "second language" buried beneath persistent and dominant shared understandings. Thus, respect for the choices of others (a deeply embedded Western norm)

may lead one to the conclusion that outsiders should try to work within the moral system (in this case, the “language of community”) endorsed by the intended audience (East Asians of Chinese descent).

And second, justifying one’s criticism of authoritarianism by appealing to the value of community is more likely to be an *effective* strategy than founding one’s criticism on the belief that the value of personal freedom is an overriding goal or the society’s most pressing moral concern. American individualists are welcome to try their approach in a Chinese context, but they will most likely be “screaming in the wilderness,” of less political relevance than, say, a gun-control advocate addressing a group of proud upholders of the Second Amendment in rural South Carolina.

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Some readers may be left with a nagging worry that if individual liberties are treated “merely” as means for nation building, they can be readily disposed of when superior means are available—only an argument that values individual rights as ends in themselves, as intrinsically valuable regardless of the consequences, can provide a sufficiently secure foundation for individual rights. Nor is this a purely theoretical point, the critic may add: The large majority of Chinese intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s did in fact come to be persuaded that a Stalinist brand of Marxism was the best way to build a stronger and prouder Chinese nation, and attachment to individual rights was swiftly set aside, to the great detriment of future generations afflicted by such disasters as the Great Leap Forward (at least 20 million starved to death as a direct result of a foolhardy scheme to modernize the country in the late 1950s and early 1960s) and the Cultural Revolution (from 1966–1976, a period regarded by the Chinese themselves as ten years of collective insanity).

The choice in an East Asian context, however, is not between valuing individual rights as ends in them-

selves and valuing individual rights as means for increasing public-spiritedness; rather, the choice is between valuing individual rights as means for public-spiritedness and not valuing them at all. Fortunately, a plausible case can be made that greater protection for individual rights can as a matter of fact increase public-spiritedness, an argument advanced by opposition forces in China and Singapore. Moreover, all other means of increasing public-spiritedness seem infinitely less promising in a modern context. Marxism is thoroughly discredited, and isolationism is not an option available to countries such as China and Singapore now interconnected in a global trading and information system (thus ruling out the “Japanese” method of nation building—Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate literally closed off the country to foreigners for 250 years and eventually succeeded in building a proud and united nation out of highly disparate and decentralized units).

Freedom and Community

Once basic individual liberties are secure, it may be the case that the quest for more freedom can begin to seriously erode communal attachments, thus justifying communitarian attempts in a U.S. context to resuscitate an older, almost forgotten language that prioritizes republican commitments to the common good over self-interest narrowly conceived. Governmental attempts to curtail basic liberties such as the freedom of the press and the freedom of association, however, may also undermine social solidarity. Such is the case, I argued earlier in this essay, in contemporary China and Singapore. I then argued that since the moral language (shared even by local critics of authoritarianism) prioritizes community in East Asia, a Western norm of respect for the choices of others and strategic considerations of political relevance may lead one to the view that communitarians—and U.S. critics of authoritarianism more generally—need to pay more attention to the argument that greater protection of individual liberties is the best means of increasing commitment to the common good in an East Asian context.

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