

Communitarian Thought

Thursdays from 1:00 to 2:30

Virtual

Jack Mitchell

Jwmitch1@wisc.edu

My knee jerks with the rest of liberal Madison, but I find more satisfaction in exploring ideas that challenge me. Last spring, I led a discussion of “conservative thought.” This spring I want to look at “communitarianism,” fashionable in the Clinton administration. Remember, “It takes a village to raise a child”? Communitarianism seemed a middle ground that might unite liberals and conservatives. At the same time, it angered both liberals and conservatives. Provocative.

Week One – February 22 (George Washington’s Birthday)

From the 18th century “Enlightenment,” western cultures have prioritized the rights and freedom of individuals. Asian cultures, on the other hand, have emphasized individual responsibilities to the family and the broader community. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. The communitarian movement sought to strike a balance.

We will discuss “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” Robert Putnam’s widely publicized study published in 2000. Was he right then? Does his critique apply in 2024?

Background reading “Who Wants to Be a Legionnaire?”

Week Two – February 29

Michael Sandell draws more students to his Harvard classes than any other professor there. He is also seen as a primary philosopher of communitarianism. We will discuss and try to understand his ideas.

Background reading, “The Celebrity Political Philosopher”

Week Three – March 7

Amitai Etzioni, a George Washington University sociologist, became the most prominent public advocate for communitarianism and an advisor to the Clintons.

Background reading, “Amitai Etzioni dies: Envisioned a society built on the common good”.

Week Four – March 14

In 1991, Etzioni and other thinkers from the left and right issued the *Responsive Communitarian Manifesto*, summarizing their shared beliefs.

Background reading, The Responsive Communitarian Manifesto, part one.

Week Five – March 21

Background reading, The Responsive Communitarian Manifesto, part two.

Week Six – March 28

Two communitarians:

Dorothy Day, from Communist to Catholic communitarian.

David Brooks, from free market conservative to secular communitarian.

Background reading, Dorothy Day's Radical Faith and David Brooks as a Communitarian

Week Seven – April 4

British conservative philosophy Roger Scruton contended that communitarianism is just another way of promoting the liberal agenda. Etzioni responded that Scruton did not understand what communitarians advocate.

*Background reading, Roger Scruton, Communitarian Dreams
Amatai Etzioni, Community, Yes, But Whose?*

Week Eight – April 11

To conclude our exploration of the communitarian debate, we turn to a summary of the movement published in Slate in 1996.

Background reading, Fareed Zakaria, The ABCs of Communitarianism