

Elizabeth Frazer

**The Problems of Communitarian
Politics: unity and conflict**

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book brings together and substantially revises a number of articles, lectures and seminar papers written since the publication of *The Politics of Community*, co-authored with Nicola Lacey¹. In that book we critically examined both sides of the liberal versus communitarian disputes, finding that, when they are viewed from the perspective of feminism - a political project which seeks to establish a world characterised by sexual equality - both camps are revealed to be unable to provide models of person, society, social institutions and political processes which are adequate to that task.

The papers reworked here continue to elaborate, refine and in some cases amend, our analysis and criticisms of the communitarian side of that divide. In this book I offer a much more detailed study of communitarianism, paying particular attention to what I call 'political communitarianism'. Political communitarianism is the political platform from which would-be political entrepreneurs, political commentators, and some established politicians, attempt to propel communitarian analyses, programmes and projects into practical politics. In particular, I have had the opportunity to study in some detail the relationship between political communitarianism and recent debates about local government, about family policy, and about democracy in general. I have also taken the opportunity to elaborate the methodological arguments and themes - about the role and nature of conceptual analysis, and about interpretivism and social constructionism in political theory - that Nicola Lacey and I identified to be central in the liberal versus communitarian disputes.

I am indebted to countless individuals and groups, then, for keeping me focussed on these subjects by inviting me to write papers, by listening attentively, challenging my analyses and arguments, making suggestions, reading and commenting on drafts, and writing me letters about the ever-engaging, so it seems, subject of community. I have had endless encouragement, stimulating questions, and some robust challenges from conference participants at: the ESRC conference "Rethinking Local Democracy", St Johns College Oxford in 1994; "Citizenship and Cultural Frontiers" Staffordshire University, 1994; "Difference and Political Community", University of Hull 1995; the 10th International Congress of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science, Florence, 1995; "Ideas of Community" at the University of West of England, 1995; "Morality and Ideology", University of Oxford, 1996; Political Thought Conference, University of Wales, Swansea, at Gregynog 1997; "Community and Morality in a

Democratic Society" New York University, 1997; "Liberalism and Communitarianism" Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences, 1997; and the 10th Annual International Conference on Socio-Economics, Vienna, 1998. In this period I have given seminar papers at the University of Edinburgh, Department of Politics; University of Kent, Departments of Politics and Philosophy; University of East Anglia, Department of Social Sciences; University of Cambridge, Seminar in Political Theory and Intellectual History; University of California at Los Angeles, Centre for the Study of Women, and Law School; University College, Dublin, Department of Politics; University of Oxford, Politics Research Seminar; University of Sussex, Social and Political Thought Seminar; ANU Research School of Social Sciences Philosophy seminar. I am particularly indebted to the Director and members of the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra for their hospitality, civility and intellectual stimulation when I was fortunate enough to have a visiting fellowship there from October to December 1997.

Some of the arguments and analysis from the chapters that follow have appeared in: Caroline Wright and Jill Jagger (eds) *Changing Family Values* Routledge 1999; Adam Lent (ed) *New Political Thought* Lawrence and Wishart 1998; Andrew Vincent (ed) *Political theory: tradition, diversity, ideology* Cambridge University Press 1997; Desmond King and Gerry Stoker (eds) *Rethinking Local Democracy* Macmillan 1996; *Imprints* vol 1 1997; *Pouvoirs* no.82 1997. I am grateful to all these people and publications for giving me the opportunity to write on these topics, and for very helpful comments on and reactions to drafts.

Finally many colleagues have read and commented on the original papers or drafts of chapters, have discussed the issues with me, and have provided all kinds of practical assistance. I am particularly indebted to: John Braithwaite, Valerie Braithwaite, John Campbell, Nick Emler, Amitai Etzioni, Max Farrar, Lawrence Goldman, Robert Goodin, Michael Hechter, Joanna Hodge, Richard Holton, Charles King, Chandran Kukathas, Nicola Lacey, Rae Langton, Susan MacRae, Chantal Mouffe, Vicki Nash, Glen Newey, Mike Noble, Noel O'Sullivan, Phillip Pettit, Anne Phillips, Mark Philp, Phillip Selznick, Quentin Skinner, Michael Smith, Teresa Smith, Adam Swift, Peter Wagner, Matthew Weait. I am particularly grateful to those colleagues and friends who read the complete first draft. This final version is very much longer and more detailed and contains attempts to respond to their criticisms and questions, no doubt prompting more in the process. I am grateful to Rebekah Lee and Zofia Stemplowska for help with the references and the bibliography. I would like to thank Dominic Byatt from Oxford University Press for his encouragement and assistance.

Finally, I owe a particular debt to the students who have worked with me in political theory during this period, from whom I learn so much year after year.

Footnote

1.Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey *The Politics of Community: a feminist critique of the liberal-communitarian debate* Hemel Hempstead, Harvester, 1993

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Unity and Conflict - Introduction

This book takes as its starting point, and elaborates and develops, a number of problems with 'communitarianism' that Nicola Lacey and I specified and laid out as the culmination of our reading of the 'liberal versus communitarian debates'.

There we criticised liberal models of individual, society and state, and liberal analyses of the values of individual freedom, autonomy, formal equality, privacy, rationality and the rule of law on a number of grounds. First, they fail to capture and endogenise a number of important social mechanisms of disadvantage and dominance. For instance, cultural and other social processes construct and position men and women at the outset as unequally endowed - unless these processes of initial endowment are understood by liberal theorists and brought within their theories, their models will fail to predict or identify the kinds of inequality that characterise modern societies. Similarly, liberal prescriptive distinctions between private, domestic life with its particularistic relationships and practices, and public political life with its abstract and universal laws and rules, prevent liberal theorists from accurately analysing the political nature of interpersonal relationships and social practices, or fully perceiving the roles of established quotidian social practices in the conduct of public life.

We find a structurally similar problem with communitarianism. Communitarian models feature a set of elements that contrast with liberal models: social individual, community, wider political society, and the values of tradition, settlement, socially constructed reason, intra-community trust, reciprocity, mutuality and inter-dependence, and the communal realisation of values such as freedom, equality, and rights. But such models fail to endogenise the movement of individuals across social formations and the antagonism and conflict that this movement engenders. Communitarian theorists tend to emphasise the communal construction of social individuals and social formations, and of values and practices. A problem is that these constructive processes themselves need to be analysed in terms of power - power which can account for when individuals manage to reconstruct their circumstances, when they move from context to context, when they get trapped, when they rest content. Communitarians, that is, overlook precisely the politics of 'community' - to such an extent, we argued, that communitarianism barely looks like a political theory at all.

We began, however, with a pronounced consciousness of the affinities between feminism and communitarianism. The feminist political project of changing social identities so fundamentally as to seek to transform gender (indeed, the very discontent with forms of femininity and masculinity that start feminist political projects off) relies on some version of social constructionism. It seems to be the social constructionist strand of the communitarian approach to political and social theory that attracts many feminist theorists in the first place. Further, feminism shares with communitarianism an emphasis on the values connected with human relatedness - reciprocity, trust, solidarity. And feminist politics has tended to emphasise the significance of local and mundane contexts as the key centres of social, and therefore political, organisation. On the basis of the theory that kinship and social structures are the site of women's oppression, feminist politics challenges and attempts to re-structure family and social networks, and does so, furthermore, on the terrain of the family itself with the provision of refuges, helplines, advice centres etc as well as

challenges to the conventions and norms of personal relationships, rhetorically and theoretically supported by the slogan "the personal is political". This strategic approach has been informed by feminist criticism of the principle that state power and conventional party political activity in pursuit of national legislation are the primary or only legitimate route to change.

This analysis of the nature and limits of the affinity between feminism and communitarianism led us in the final section of *The Politics of Community* to propose a modified communitarianism - a model of social individual, social formations, and wider networks of these 'communities', in which values, practices and meanings are shared, albeit contested. We proposed 'dialogic communitarianism' - dialogic, because it features a normative commitment to promoting the individual's engagement with others, and because value commitments are conceptualised as the upshot of dialogue (in contrast to the effective monologue of traditional communitarianisms and liberalisms alike). This communitarianism would need to develop theoretical models of how individuals cross and re-cross the boundaries from 'community' to 'community' in the course of their daily lives and across their lifecourse. It also needs to develop models of how individuals with different community memberships and allegiance can relate to and engage with members of other communities. Such a model would potentially re-politicise political theory by emphasising the contest for political power and authority. It is in the theoretical analysis of these processes that we can grasp both the possibilities for and constraints on political change.

Although I still believe that such a model is on the right lines, and should form the foundation of political theory and political endeavour alike, I have come to believe that the continued presence of the term 'community' in this formulation is regrettable. It seems to me now that conceptual and theoretical problems with 'community' are very far-reaching. They undermine the validity of models. They resonate in discourses, and have particular (not progressive) rhetorical effects. They impact in policy and practice in perverse ways. In the chapters that follow I attempt to explain why and how this is so.

In *The Politics of Community* we also argued that 'political theory' needs an interdisciplinary focus and that both liberals and communitarians tend to misrepresent the nature of political relations, actions and processes. In what follows I also explore these two themes in more detail. There is a bias in my discussion here towards the inter-relationships between political theory and sociological and cultural theory (as opposed to psychology or economics). But my main point is not damaged by this bias. That point is, that having an eye on the interrelationships between politics and sociology (or anything else) does not entail that politics is reducible to sociology (or anything else).

These conceptual, theoretical and methodological themes are explored in this volume in the context of political rather than philosophical communitarianism. By 'philosophical communitarianism' I mean the texts produced by philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer and Michael Sandel that together constitute, for many readers, a coherent critique of late twentieth century anglophone 'liberal individualism' - a critique that focusses on questions of epistemology, metaphysics or ontology, and methodology. As many have noted, the precise practical political implications of this philosophical critique of liberalism are

by no means clear - it might be thought to rule some kinds of political order (radical anarchism, for instance) out, but it is potentially consistent with liberal, social democratic, socialist, welfare liberal, and certain sorts of conservative party programmes. The idea of 'community' - central to 'communitarianism' - is politically relevant for many kinds of political actor and political programme. It has been present in political discourse and in public policy (for example in the promotion of 'care in the community', 'community policing', 'community activism' and the like) for many years. For many activists and political actors, indeed, the idea and ideal of community is key in their understanding of political effort - political principles, goals and strategies can come together in activists' lives and in political and social institutions so as to constitute a more or less clearly articulated and crystallised 'lay communitarianism' or 'vernacular communitarianism'. Participants in the economy, in local organisations, in civil society in general, deploy ideas and ideals of community, discuss theories of community - asking and debating why it has been lost in recent times, or how it might be regained. These discourses, and their interrelationships with action and organisation, appear again and again in reports by sociologists and others, in journalism and elsewhere.

Recently some strands from these discourses have crystallised into a political platform, and been published in explicitly manifesto-like form, in a way that seems to me to be novel. This platform has been occupied by would-be political entrepreneurs and established politicians, so the relationship of these ideas to established party programmes has now become a practical question, as has their relationship with the older, established traditions of community activism and vernacular communitarianism mentioned before. Political communitarianism brings to the forefront of practical politics some problems that critics of philosophical communitarianism had identified as problems in theory. One common theme in the 'liberal communitarian' debates is the nature of community - a vague concept and an elusive ideal. This vagueness matters in a new way when, for instance, government policies enjoin bureaucracies and authorities to 'involve the community at every stage in the process'. Similarly, contributors to the liberal communitarian debates asked questions about the nature of local politics and governance, the difficulties and dilemmas of neighbourhood and social movement organisation, controversies over sex-roles, parenting, and kinship and family relations. In the context of debates about philosophical communitarianism, such was their abstraction, detailed discussion of these seemed misplaced. Now that communitarianism is a political programme it is of more obvious relevance and worth.

These then are the main issues treated in this book. Chapter One discusses and criticises 'political communitarianism' and explores its relationship with philosophical communitarianism, with earlier community politics of the left, and with appeals to 'community' from the right. The discussion of the 'communitarian critique of liberalism' undertaken here is very quick and decidedly sketchy - it is not the purpose of this book to offer yet another detailed discussion of the debates, or make any further direct contribution to them. However, in the chapters that follow I do pick up themes from those debates where they have clearly relevant political implications. Chapter Two takes up the concept community, examining its contested and indeterminate nature, and analysing a range of attempts at decontestation. Here I offer analysis and interpretation of the concept, and on the way I address the question of what we are doing when we analyse concepts.

Chapter Three examines the relationship between communitarianism and interpretivism in political theory. The main focus of the chapter is on the role of 'the community' in communitarian accounts of how interpretations are grounded and validated. Critical political theories, which foreground the analysis of and role of social power, cast doubt on the view that invocation of the, or a, community can be a solution to the problem of adjudication of interpretations. In Chapter Four I discuss 'social constructionism' - a prominent theme in communitarianism. It is a theme which is the key to the attractiveness of communitarianism to theorists in a number of disciplines. It is also a theme that, wherever it arises, causes extraordinary levels of hostility and apparent bafflement. It is also one, I would be the first to admit, which is often taken for granted in social and cultural theory and in related empirical research, but rarely rigorously analysed or tested. Disputes about it in epistemology and the philosophy of science and social science are more than usually unilluminating - it is frequently extremely difficult to discern exactly what is at issue.

The following chapters attempt to assess the merits of three communitarian models - the models of locality as community, family as community, and polity as community. In Chapter Five I discuss the relationship between 'community' and 'locality', and in Chapter Six the political communitarian model of the 'the communitarian family'. In both of these chapters the main burden of argument is that the category 'community' has perverse effects on theory and in practice. Conceptualising locality and family as community works against the theoretical and practical appreciation of the structure and significance of households, kinship groups, families, neighbourhoods and associations that the communitarians set out to establish. Finally, Chapter Seven examines the way the concepts 'community' and 'politics' are hooked together, not only by communitarians, but also by a range of liberal, social democratic, socialist and feminist theorists. The main point the chapter makes is that the concept of community conduces to a model of political relations as based in shared culture and practices, and thereby bounded. A preferable conception of democratic politics emphasises the unsettlement of boundaries.

It may be wise to offer some terminological clarifications at this point. In this book I wish to examine the concept 'community' and I shall be doing this in part by examining a number of discursive and practical political contexts. For instance, at a number of points I discuss the success and failures and dilemmas of 'community action' and 'community activism', or make reference to such policy initiatives as 'care in the community'. I take it that in such contexts 'community' means something, and that, although it may be impossible to give a definitive account of what that is, it is nevertheless open to critics and analysts to try to analyse what actors mean by 'community', how the term 'community' operates in these discourses and practices, in short to analyse the concept community. In the course of such analysis we will meet many different conceptions of community, different views of what community is and ought to be, and varying projects to try to realise or achieve 'community' as a kind of social group, formation or system of institutions. Examples I discuss in what follows include 'local communities', 'national communities', 'political communities', 'religious communities' and so forth. As well as referring to a particular set of social groups 'community' also refers to the peculiar relations between persons that constitute those groups. My analysis of this element of the concept reveals less variation and vagueness than might be expected. There are theoretical disagreements, for instance over whether community implies equality or is consistent with hierarchy. But

underlying all such theoretical disputes that I have read is a surprisingly definite set of concepts - the relation of community is centred on sharing; it inheres between human beings or persons as such (not individuals in social roles), and it involves an orientation on the part of each to the whole and to all.

One important set of discursive contexts in which the concept or term 'community' is very prominent is 'communitarianism'. 'Communitarianism' refers to a range of positions in social and political discourse, which, like other 'isms', consist typically of sets of concepts which are tied to beliefs, propositions and theories about the world, values, and prescriptions about acceptable and appropriate strategies for realising these values. Just as there are a number of varieties of socialism and anarchism, so there are a number of varieties of communitarianism, and like others who try to write about 'isms' I face a number of methodological and analytical difficulties in judging what texts and thinkers should be included in the class of 'communitarianisms', how to characterise or analyse 'communitarianism as such' (which obviously can only be an abstraction or an ideal type), and within that class which texts and thinkers should be thought of as members of this or that sub-division. A number of sub-divisions of the class of 'communitarianisms' are worth exploring - in particular it strikes many critics that it is important to distinguish between 'left' and 'right' communitarianism. As we have seen, a number of theorists have set out to develop a dialogic, as opposed to what they understand to be the more monologic, communitarianism. In this book, as I have already stated, I am interested in a distinction within the communitarian literature between a set of texts and theorists I think of as the 'philosophical communitarians' and a rather distinctive set of texts, thinkers and discourses I label 'political communitarianism', paying more attention, here, to the latter than the former.

I want to make it clear that when I talk about political, as opposed to philosophical, communitarianism, I mean 'political' and 'philosophical' to modify communitarianism; I do not mean them to modify 'community'. What I mean by philosophical communitarianism is a set of propositions and values as analysed, with an eye primarily on their epistemological, metaphysical, logical and ethical implications, by writers who are addressing, for the most part, an academic audience and who are deploying, for the most part, familiar philosophical techniques. What I mean by political communitarianism is a set of propositions, values, and recommendations about strategies, as analysed and defended, with an eye primarily on their political implications, by writers addressing a mixed audience of academics and political actors, with a view to making a persuasive case for a particular direction to political and social change.

In both philosophical and political communitarianism the concept 'community' is, unsurprisingly central. However, it is also important to note that the concept 'community' is likewise salient for non-communitarians - for liberals, socialists, feminists, conservatives and others. It is also salient in a number of discourses that, although they are relatively coherent, should not be thought of as 'isms' - for instance, in discussions of policy in the field of criminal law, such as 'community justice', or projects for non-custodial sentencing. A central purpose I have in this book is to argue that in many although not all contexts the concept community should be displaced by a more precise set of group or network concepts, the application and relevance of which needs to be established, theoretically and empirically, on a case by case basis. Association, society, network, group - perhaps in a limited number of cases,

community itself - are some politically and socially salient formations, governed by differing rules or norms of membership and participation, given unity and identity by different kinds of boundaries with different conditions and constraints governing boundary crossings. Why there has been a tendency in political theory and philosophy to label all of these, indiscriminately, 'community' is one question I now set out to address.

Footnotes

I. Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey *The Politics of Community: a feminist critique of the liberal-communitarian debate* Hemel Hempstead, Harvester, 1993.

II. See Frazer and Lacey 1993, pp 130, 137, 161; this a-political nature of much 'political theory' is a theme that pervades a good deal of recent thought and critique within the subject - see for instance Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1993; Richard Bellamy *Liberalism and Modern Society* Cambridge, Polity Press 1992; Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London Verso 1993

III. Note for instance the implicit and explicit references to social constructionism in Alison M Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Brighton: Harvester 1983 especially chs 6 and 10; and in the essays in Sandra Harding (ed) *Feminism and Methodology* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, especially Nancy C M Hartsock "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism".

IV. See for example Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell *Sweet Freedom: the struggle for women's liberation* 2nd edn, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1987; Suzanne Franzway, Dianne Court and R W Connell *Staking a Claim: Feminism, bureaucracy and the state* Cambridge: Polity Press 1989; Gabriele Griffin (ed) *Feminist Activism in the 1990s* London: Taylor and Francis, 1995; Nancy A Naples (ed) *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: organising across Race, Class and Gender* New York and London: Routledge, 1998

V. Our approach to 'dialogue' was influenced by Drucilla Cornell, especially 'Beyond Tragedy and Complacency', *Northwestern University Law Review*, 81,, 693 ff 1987; Seyla Benhabib, , "Liberal Dialogue versus a Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation" in N. Rosenblum, ed. *Liberalism and the Moral Life* Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press 1989; and 'Autonomy, Modernity and Community: communitarianism and critical social theory in dialogue' in *Situating the Self* Cambridge: Polity Press 1992; but for dialogue and community see also Martin Buber, , *A Believing Humanism: My Testament 1902-1965*, trans and intro Maurice Friedman, New York Simon and Schuster 1967; *I and Thou*, Trans and Prologue by Walter Kaufman, New York Charles Scribner's Sons 1970 [fp German 1923] while dialogue has its place in Alasdair MacIntyre's communitarianism - *After Virtue* London: Duckworth, 1985 - and in Michael Walzer's - see especially *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press 1987; *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame, Ia: University of Notre Dame Press 1994. Our argument in *The Politics of Community* was that MacIntyre's

and Walzer's models of 'dialogue' are not robust enough to incorporate the kind of radical interventions and innovations in debate exemplified by feminist politics.

VI. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, New York: Basic Books 1983; Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London: Duckworth 1988; *Three Rival Versions of Moral Theory*, London: Duckworth 1990; Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982; Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985

VII. Jeremy Brent "Community without unity" paper delivered to conference "Ideas of community" University of the West of England September 1995 uses the term 'vernacular communitarianism'

VIII. See Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda*, New York: Crown Publishers Inc which includes a copy of 'The Communitarian Platform' promulgated by the Communitarian Network in 1991; In the UK, see Henry Tam, *Citizen's Agenda for building democratic communities*, Cambridge: Centre for Citizenship Development 1995; On Tony Blair's communitarian beliefs and programme see Peter Mandelson, and Roger Liddle, *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?*, London Faber and Faber 1996. This 'political communitarianism' has received considerable press coverage and journalistic comment on both sides of the Atlantic. It has also made its way into prominent political speeches: US President Clinton's State of the Union Address in January 1995 contained notable communitarian themes and was widely commented on as such; in British Prime Minister Blair's speech to the Labour Party Conference in September 1998 'communitarian' principles were also prominent.

IX. The elusive nature of the ideal is testified to by the number of books on the subject that contain the terms 'quest', 'search' and the like. For instance Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Standish Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform 1880-1914: the search for community* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), Robert A Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: a study in the ethics of order and freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); Ken Young, et al., *In Search of Community Identity*, (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1996); Robert Wuthnow *Sharing the Journey: support groups and America's new quest for community* New York, Free Press, 1994

X. As does the British Home Office 'Guidance on Statutory Crime and Disorder Partnerships, 1998' foreword

XI. Adam Crawford, 'Appeals to Community and Crime Prevention', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 22, 97-126 1995; Eugene Kamenka, ed., *Community as a Social Ideal*, London Edward Arnold 1982

XII. For example Benhabib, *Situating the Self*

XIII. I am harping on my intended meaning here, because some readers have understood me to be talking about 'political community' as opposed to 'philosophical community' when I draw this distinction. The idea of a 'political community' is one I

analyse and question in this book; but this is an idea which can be elaborated by both political and philosophical communitarians.

XIV. See particularly Kamenka, Eugene (ed) *Community as a Social Ideal* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982)

XV. Adam Crawford, *The Local Governance of Crime: appeals to Community and Partnerships*, Oxford Clarendon Press 1997; *Crime Prevention and Community Safety: politics, policies and practices*, London Longman 1998; on 'community care' see Martin Bulmer, *The Social Basis of Community Care*, London Unwin Hyman 1987

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