In the following essay, first the domain of community is very informally introduced in terms if its meanings for developed nations, as those of the developing countries are much more familiar with it. In the second part of the essay, the same issue is covered in terms of the current debates among scholars on these issues. The essay closes with an examination of the dangers of communities turning on each other. Parts one and two focus internally, while part three focuses externally.

I. THE COMMUNITY DIMENSION: AN INFORMAL INTRODUCTION

The thesis I put before my fellow citizens who live in the developed countries of the West and the East is that the welfare state has exhausted its capacity to undertake an ever-widening array of social missions and to pay in full for those it has already shouldered, because it has exhausted its ability to raise taxes and is losing political legitimacy. Communitarians like myself do not oppose the welfare state in principle, and we join with many, including conservatives, who call for a responsible economy or "social market." Others refer to this as "welfare capitalism," the notion that the state will continue to play a central role in providing social services, from health insurance to unemployment benefits. However, it seems that as new social needs are identified (e.g., a need for extensive nursing home services as the population ages), and as the costs of health care and other services continue to rise rather rapidly, it is not possible to expect the welfare state to expand much more. On the contrary, within many developed nations there are movements afoot to reduce the scope of benefits and services already provided by the state. It follows that citizens of these countries might do well to ponder what I call the Seattle story.

Imagine that you are the top health commissioner of Seattle. You report to the mayor that new medical research strongly suggests that once a person has a heart attack he/she must be reached within four minutes to prevent irreparable brain damage. This requires positioning an ambulance every 32 blocks, you report further, which would cost the city millions of dollars each year. The mayor responds, "Sorry, I do not have that kind of money." Without the necessary funding, what would you do next?

You could do what Seattle did in reality; call upon individuals and organizations to lend a helping hand. Various private groups in Seattle have trained 400,000 people, nearly half its citizens, in Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) since 1985. Now it is very likely that if you keel over in Seattle, within 30 seconds someone will be present to assist you, without any costs to the public. Low in costs, high in benefits, the act of helping one another also serves to sustain the spirit of community, which in turn has many indirect beneficial effects albeit none as dramatic as turning a breathless, blue body into a fully functional fellow human being.

In Seattle, people feel better about themselves and others than in more atomistic urban environments, such as in New York City. They are less isolated (e.g., they meet in various CPR training and refresher classes). Moreover, their communitarian spirit spills into other areas; for instance, Seattle has one of the highest levels of voluntary recycling in the United States. Last but not least, these are the places in which people develop their civic "muscles," because participation in such social activities is a seed bed for cultivating democratic practices.

In the United States much public good is done through such means, ranging from several thousand neighborhood crime-watches and patrol groups, to ethnic groups that help immigrants of their "own kind," to associations that organize block parties and other social events. Above all, I suggest, that in the future developed societies will need to do more societal business following this model because
there is little evidence that the economies of developed nations will shift into high gear in the foreseeable future, able to generate a large amount of additional public resources (from increased tax revenues). Hence, the debate that is often waged, between liberals who favor reliance on the state and laissez faire conservatives who believe in the market, is beside the point. Both overlook the communitarian sector that we must rely upon even more in the coming years.

About half of those who joined the communitarian dialogues that I conducted in several European cities resisted this idea. A German student remarked somewhat pointedly that Seattle was a rather affluent city, but that the communitarian agenda would face greater difficulty in the inner cities, such as the poverty-ridden neighborhoods of Los Angeles. I suggested that one should not "ghetto-test" programs by judging their merits on the bases of their success or failure in the inner city. To do so implies that other parts of society are free of decay, or that if a proposal works only for the middle classes and blue-collar workers, it is worthless. In addition, I pointed out that the poor are quick to share and help their own at least as much as the rich. (A wonderful description of this phenomenon can be found in Dominique Lapierre's *City of Joy*, a book about the slums of Calcutta.)

The participants raised a variety of other objections to my community-building ideas. Those on the left of the political spectrum suggested that I was actually a conservative in communitarian disguise, whose real purpose was to provide a rationale for dismantling the welfare state. I acknowledged that communitarians believe that people must take responsibility for themselves to a large extent, and that families and communities should be the second line of social defense and support. However, I also explained that communitarians favor a significant role for the state in providing social services, but not as a first resort or only stay. Indeed, I suggested, the best way to protect the welfare state is to shelter it from further burdens and responsibilities.

Several of the participants in these dialogues also felt that this "volunteerism" was a uniquely American way of doing social business. They implied that volunteerism was a form of charity, an affluent indulgence like giving alms to the poor to assuage a guilty conscience. I explained that the communitarian approach stresses mutuality in which we do things for one another, though of course there is nothing wrong with acts of generosity or charity. I also pointed out that in reality Europeans can be quite adept at using communitarian bodies and techniques, such as in organizing sporting events or social clubs; but they do not naturally think of these as precedents for attending to other, as more essential, social missions.

In Cologne, someone responded that Europeans are basically statist by nature. An older member of the audience in Munich allowed that "I pay my taxes; the government should provide the services." When I asked if he would be willing to pay higher taxes when the costs of services rose, he demurred and seemed more willing to accord a hearing to the communitarian argument.

If one lives on the American side of the Atlantic Ocean, one tends to forget how elaborate the European welfare state remains, despite some recent trimming. While we now have (after much hand-wringing) a Family and Medical Leave Act that permits people ninety days of unpaid leave if they work for corporations that have more than fifty employees, Germans are entitled to a year of paid leave, plus a guarantee that their job will await them upon their return for up to three years if they seek to take unpaid leave after the first paid year. For nearly a century, universal national health insurance has been taken for granted and covers a wide variety of benefits, even three weeks of "taking the cure" at the spas. Unemployment pay has recently been reduced from 63% of a worker's previous salary to 60% for the first year. After that benefits can be collected for a lifetime "until a person retires" to a state financed pension. When I expressed some concern that two theaters were recently closed in Berlin to save public funds, I was reassured that the government is still paying more or less in full for another 29 theaters, not across Germany but in Berlin alone.Trimming of budgets has also led publicly financed symphonies in Germany to be available "only" to towns with a population of 100,000 or more, rather than the traditional 30,000.
And yet the public is very disaffected. The signs of intense alienation exhibited by many citizens in practically all European societies, despite their very elaborate welfare services, constitute a sociological warning light suggesting that there are masses of people disengaged from the democratic polities masses that could be engaged by extremists from the left or right. During a visit to Belgium (a country where welfare services seems even more lavish than in Germany), frequent reference was made to the Zoilen (pillars) of social services, from child care to elder care, that reach into every neighborhood. However, Belgians do not feel supported by these pillars or involved in these services provided by what we would call tightly organized bureaucracies; instead, they incessantly complain about "the government." In all the countries I visited, mentioning political leaders either in power or in opposition elicits groans, and public opinion polls expose even lower approval ratings for politicians than in the United States. (Those of Helmut Kohl and John Major were in the twenties.) In a recent election in Hamburg, the second largest vote-winner was "none of the above" and both the extreme right and left gained at the expense of the major parties.

True, democracy does not require as high a degree of involvement or participation as a social-movement society, such as Israel in the hey day of pioneering. However, democracies do not fare well over the long run if there is a high degree of disaffection. A less statist society, a more communitarian one, might serve to re-engage the members of society as they participate in shared activities which they fashion, advance, and control, even if many of these are apolitical.

While I have listed the objections that were raised by European politicians, intellectuals, and community leaders I should also indicate that there were a fair number, including some major figures, who expressed keen interest. More important, while they occasionally use different terminology, they are quite inclined toward the communitarian ideas all on their own. Thomas Meyer, a leading intellectual of the SPD in Germany, seemed more preoccupied with convincing his labor union and ideological left-wingers of the merits of communitarian arguments than with questioning these ideas himself. I sensed the same reaction in the comments of Gordon Brown, the second in command of the British Labor shadow government. Norbert Burger, the SPD mayor of Cologne, seemed a natural communitarian, making many of the same arguments himself long before any American visitor bent his ear. Minister-President Kurt Biedenkopf, the governor of Saxony, who is a leading conservative thinker and a member of the CSD, developed a whole line of communitarian thinking while occasionally lapsing into pure Thatcherism. (His close associate Meinhard Miegel just published a book entitled The End of Individualism.) Thus, while he generally supported mutuality in society, he also suggested that privatization would solve many of Germany's problems. This same attempt to combine communitarian message with laissez faire conservatives ones was also evident in the comments of David Willets, a conservative MP in Britain. He spoke on the one hand about the importance of the family and the social fabric for the community, and on the other mused that the "modern society was transient, voluntary, and contractual," overlooking the importance of social bonds and values he otherwise recognized. Nor did all those who lent a favorable ear to communitarian ideas come from either the labor or conservative camp. The person who hosted the presentation of communitarian ideas in Bonn, for example, was a leader of the Green (environmentalist) Party and a State Minister, Joschka Fischer. In Britain, the conversation was joined by a representative of the Liberal Democrats, Ben Rich.

Among the leaders of Europe, several who recently expressed strong communitarian sentiments are Tony Blair, the head of Britain's Labor Party, and former European Community President Jacques Delors. Delors explains, "The individual cannot live without participating in the societies which bind him to people." He further states, "Socialism is liberty, solidarity, and responsibility."

In exploring the role of communitarian relations many Europeans are held back by powerful ghosts from the past, which are used to stop discussions leading in this direction. For Czechs and former East Germans it is the specter of Communism, and for all concerned it is the memory of fascism. While
some individuals may hanker for the "good old days" when there were "strong" leaders and law and order, many intellectuals and quite a few political leaders are anxious not to open the door, even a crack, for the return of totalitarian regimes. Because any discussion of social responsibilities and civic order generates considerable agitation among these quarters, communitarian thinking can be a hard sell.

At the same time more and more Europeans are realizing that the protection of individual freedoms requires social bonds and civic values. Without these elements of community, isolated individuals are much more open to totalitarian appeals. Indeed, as the new rules of the game are formulated, crime, drug use, and pornography are proliferating while children and the elderly are being abandoned. These social ills are already feeding discussion about the need for "strong" measures and a nostalgia for an orderly past. In short, the choice Europeans face is not between an individualistic free market philosophy (everyone for themselves) applied to the body society and a totalitarian state, but between tyranny and an "ordered liberty" ordered by a robust civil society. Social and moral anarchy creates a dangerous political vacuum that gets filled sooner or later. What Europeans need, and are beginning to grope toward, is a society in which people share values and internalize them to the point that most people do most of the time what is socially required attend to their families, act civilly to the neighbors, and so on and then go beyond the call of duty because they believe it is the right thing to do. They need a society in which people do more for one another and rely less on the state or the market to fulfill their social needs. To put it more succinctly, Europe needs more of the communitarian bonds we used to have and need again, ourselves.

II. COMMUNITARIANS AND THEIR CRITICS

The Grooved Debate

The intellectual debate about the foundations of communitarians thinking is stuck like a phonograph's needle in a overplayed record groove. For decades now communitarians have been pointing out to libertarians[1] that individuals are not free standing agents but members of communities. While people survive without communities, the thinner their community bonds, the more alienated and unreasoning they tend to be. Moreover, because for communities to flourish they require that their members not be completely self-oriented, the common good has a normative standing in the same sense that life and health do: They all are essential for our physical and spiritual well-being.

Libertarians in turn have either simply ignored these arguments, spinning ever more tales about the choices individual consumers, voters, or others make on their own, or come to depict communities as social contracts, something free standing individuals construct because it suits their individual purposes. Libertarians seem to fear that the recognition of the common good as a value that is co-equal with personal freedom will endanger the standing of that liberty. Among the recent books that cover this debate extensively and well are Philip Selznick's The Moral Commonwealth and Daniel Bell's Communitarianism and Its Critics. The is also Derek Phillips' Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought. The topic dominates collections of essays by Markate Daly (Communitarianism: A New Public Ethics) and Seyla Benhabib (Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics). These collections suffer from a tendency strong in public debates, the tendency to polarize. Social theorists, philosophers, and writers are readily labeled as liberal or conservative; there simply seems no room, or at least no patience, to recognize other, more nuanced positions. (Often when I speak for communitarian ideas on campuses, the first question I am asked seeks directly or implicitly to establish whether the position I am advancing is conservative or liberal, as if the audience is saying, "If we label your thinking, we achieve a great amount of economy of intellectual labor; once we know in what category to place you we know a priori what we think about the arguments you are about to put in front of us.")
Last, but not least, as Talcott Parsons pointed out in his discussion of the pattern variables, while value systems can maximize one dimension or theme, societies which must attend to a variety of conflicting requirements are inevitably organized by several principles. They must concern themselves both with order and with the freedom needed to search for new adaptive patterns of social order; concern themselves with the justice of allocations and with productivity, and so on. In short, ideologies and ideologues can afford to be, in fact even benefit from being, one dimensional; students of society should know better.

The Responsive Community

From here on, we shall build on a composite concept that has built into it the assumption of the irreducible, partially productive, tensed relation between the centripetal forces of community and the centrifugal forces of autonomy. To remind that reference is a composite concept, the sociological equivalent of ordered liberties (rather than a free for all), I use the term responsive communitarians. First, the term refers to the position that takes it for granted that individuals are members of one another, that people are ontologically embedded in a social existence. Second, because all that members of a society value, liberty included, is dependent on sustaining the social realm, a measure of commitment to the commons has a moral standing. Third, that it is not possible, desirable, nor morally justifiable to absorb fully members' identities, energies, and commitments into the social realm. Providing for individual liberties limits the costs of maintaining social order, allows members of society to express the idiosyncratic aspects of their selves, and enables the development of new social patterns that are more adaptive to the ever changing environment and internal balances than the traditional patterns.

The term responsive communitarians serves not only to distinguish this position from the libertarian one (that builds on free individuals as its conceptual and normative cornerstone), but also to distinguish it from those communitarians who build on the empirical and ethical significance of the community without attention (or with insufficient attention) to individual rights. One example of the latter is Alister MacIntyre, who dismisses rights as "fictions" (After Virtue, p.70). The term responsive denotes that the society is not merely setting and fostering norms for its members but also is responding to the expressions of their values, viewpoints and communications in refashioning its culture and structure.[2]

Taken together these three assumptions suggest that the starting point in the primary concept of responsive communitarian thinking and one that should be able to advance the communitarian-libertarian debate beyond its current groove 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 sub-group agendas; centripetal forces will tend to collectivize members' energies ever more in the service of shared goals, and curb their degrees of freedom. A society functions best when both forces are well balanced. However, as both forces continually tug, the society and its members are constantly pulled in one direction or another. It is the role of social observers and commentators, of intellectuals, to establish in which direction society is leaning and throw their weight on the other side of history. Thus, in contemporary China, Albania and the former Soviet Union, the intellectual case is for better anchoring of individual liberties; in the contemporary United States the case is for more commitments to the common good.

Thus, while responsive communitarians within any one given societal context or historical period may argue for more community (in the present day United States) or more individual rights (in present day China), they actually seek to maintain the elementary balance that is at the foundation of all good societies.
We are now ready to face several important subsidiary issues that arise once this basic position is accepted. Those who attack community argue that the term community is ill-defined; that communitarians are nostalgic and overlook the darker sides of community or that they wish to retrieve those less appealing features too; that communities, as communitarians define them, never existed or are not sustainable in a modern society; that communities are inherently majoritarian; and that communities oppress their members. Thorough discussion of each of these issues could fill a volume; here we provide only the essence of the challenges made by critics and the responses.

Community Ill-defined?

Robert Booth Fowler wrote a whole book, *The Dance with Community*, dedicated to the confusion that arises from the concept from which communitarians derive their name, namely "community." As he sees it the term is not well-defined; indeed it harbors a large variety of meanings. (He analyzes six.) "The picture is thus confused and complicated. The meaning of community is elusive, a word without an essence or a text without meaning" (p.3).

Some who are less friendly to the idea of community make the same point as Fowler. In *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* Stephen Holmes asks, "But what is community? What does it look like?" (p.177) He finds the communitarian answers to these questions to be inadequate. Jack Crittenden says that communitarians avoid difficult questions concerning community by "remaining vague about the nature of community" (*Beyond Individualism: Reconstituting the Liberal Self*, p.136).

Actually the term community can be defined with reasonable precision. Community refers to a group of people who share affective bonds and a culture. It is defined by two characteristics: Communities require a web of affect laden relations among a group of individuals (rather than merely one-on-one or a chain of individual relations), relations that often criss-cross and reinforce one another. And being a community entails having a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings.

The Darker Side of Community?

Some who object to the call for returning to community accuse communitarians of being nostalgic and/or conservative. The nostalgia accusation is that communitarians have a rosy-eyed view of the past. Those who long for community, this argument goes, conveniently ignore the darker side of traditional communities. "In the new communitarian appeal to tradition, communities of mutual aid and memory,' and the Founders," writes Linda McClain in "Rights and Irresponsibility" in the *Duke Law Journal*, "there is a problematic inattention to the less attractive, unjust features of tradition" (p.1029).

The charge of conservatism accuses communitarians of not merely overlooking the less attractive features of traditional communities, but of willfully longing to retrieve those features. According to Michael Taves ("Roundtable on Communitarianism," *Telos*, Summer, 1988, p.8.) the communitarian vision of community rejects modernism, concerning itself mostly with "reclaiming a reliance on traditional values and all that entails with regard to the family, sexual relations, religion and the rejection of secularism." Katha Pollitt, after discussing the communities that communitarians wish to retrieve, concludes that communitarianism is a conservative movement masquerading as something else. "Communitarianism [is] Reaganism with a human face." ("Subject to Debate," *The Nation*, July 25/August 1, 1994.) As Fowler puts it, these critics "see talk of community as interfering with the necessary breaking down of dominant forces and cultures." Community is viewed as inherently traditional and conservative.

These criticisms are sound but misdirected. Early communitarians might be charged with being in effect social conservatives if not authoritarians. However, the new school of responsive communitarians, including scholars such as Charles Taylor, Philip Selznick, Robert Bellah, Thomas
Spragens, William Galston and, less directly involved, Michael Walzer and Michael Sandel, fully realize and often stress that they do not seek to return to traditional communities, with their discriminatory practices against minorities and women and authoritarian power structure and rigid stratification. Responsive communitarians seek to build communities on open participation, dialogue and truly shared values. (To be fair to McClain, she recognizes this feature of the responsive communitarians, writing that some communitarians do "recognize the need for careful evaluation of what was good and bad about [any specific] tradition and the possibility of severing certain... features from other [features]" (p.1030).) And political scientist R. Bruce Douglass writes "Unlike conservatives, communitarians are aware that the days when the issues we face as a society could be settled on the basis of the beliefs of a privileged segment of the population have long since passed." (Responsive Community, v4n3, p.55)

Never Existed, Incompatible with Modernity?

Fair enough, argues another group of community critics, but we cannot lose nor reform what we never had, and anyhow community is not sustainable under conditions of modern life. "Communitarians have been mistaken in their claims about the prominence of community in times gone by," writes Derek Phillips in Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought.(p.175) He adds, lest he be misunderstood, "If the sort of community depicted by communitarian thinkers did not exist in the past, then it obviously cannot be said to have given way to the forces of modernization."(p.149) And in what is known in legal circles as the kitchen sink defense ("If the first line does not work, I will try this one.") Phillips adds to his attack: "Even if community was once widespread, that does not mean that it is a viable option today."(p.8)

The high rate of geographic mobility of modern society is the obstacle most often cited by those who question the current feasibility of community. Ken Anderson maintains, "[W]hen push comes to shove, most people are not so enamored of community as they are of mobility."("Roundtable on Communitarianism," Telos, Summer, 1988, p.22) David Seeley believes that the communitarian vision "smacks of a Norman Rockwell America that no longer exists and, perhaps, never did. More Americans live in faceless apartment buildings, condos and housing tracts than in towns where rustic but decent folk gather regularly to speak their minds."(Letter to the Editor, Wall Street Journal, November 1, 1991)

The fact is that communities are not relics of a pre-modern era. While it is true that modern economies entail a highly mobile society, people have learned to develop community bonds relatively quickly. Moreover, many communities are not residential and hence provide a measure of adaption to mobility. A member of the gay community who moves to a different city is likely to know personally some individuals in the new city or at least to meet some who know people he knows personally. He will be able to find the core institutions in which his community aggregates, and know the basic elements of its culture, norms, and meanings. He will be relatively quickly integrated into the local embodiment of his community. The same holds for a Jew (who is likely to be a member of a sub-community of orthodox, conservative, or secular Jews), for Korean-Americans, for Cuban-Americans, and for many others.

Majoritarian?

Communities are said to be majoritarian because the majority determines the course that is followed to the extent that the community has shared public policies. This argument comes in numerous forms. Nadine Strossen, a professor of law at New York University and the president of the ACLU, sees communities as threats to minorities, claiming that communitarians are "majoritarians" who are willing to tinker with the rights of minorities. (The Press-Enterprise, January 30, 1993) Tibor Machan sees in the communitarian conception of community a threat to the individual. "Communitarians wish to place community and individual on a collision course, saying there is some kind of balance that is
needed between the rights of individuals and the rights of community," writes Machan, "But if we consider that community means simply a lot of people other than oneself, this simply makes for majority rule" ("The Communitarian Manifesto," Orange County Register, May 12, 1991). And according to Charles Derber, the consensual values that are a crucial aspect of community are also potentially majoritarian, as these values are simply "the voice of one part of the community usually the majority or an elite minority against the others."("Coming Glued: Communitarianism to the Rescue,"Tikkun, July/August 1993, p.29)

Michael Sandel offers a response to these charges. "The answer to that majoritarian threat is to try to appeal to a richer conception of democracy than just adding up votes."(The World of Ideas, Bill Moyers, p.155) American society has both constitutional and moral safeguards against majoritarianism that communitarians very much respect. These safeguards basically work through differentiation, by defining some areas in which the majority does not and ought not have a say and those in which it does and should. The United States is not simply a vote-counting majoritarian democracy, but a constitutional democracy. That is, some choices, defined by the U.S. Constitution, are beyond the realm of the majority.

Clearest among these is the Bill of Rights, which singles out matters that are exempt from majority rule and from typical democratic rule-making. The First Amendment, which protects the right of free speech, is a prime example of an area in which minority and individual rights take precedence. Similarly, the majority may not deny any opposition group the right to vote; even Communists were not banned in the days when they were most hated and feared.

The U.S. Constitution and American legal traditions and institutions indicate clearly, however, that other matters are subject to majority rule. Thus majorities decide how much tax Americans must pay, which side of the road to drive on, and at what age young adults can vote. There is neither moral nor legal support for the notion, indeed it is inconceivable to believe, that individuals could decide for themselves whether or not to pay social security taxes, which side of the road to drive on, and so on.

Culturally Oppressive?

In a criticism that combines the allegations of conservatism with that of traditionalism, critics have argued that communities even when they do not use coercion may strongly pressure their members to abide by a culture the members do not truly share. According to Will Kymlicka (in a response to Daniel Bell's Communitarianism and its Critics that is included in Bell's book) this oppression can entail the community prescribing roles of subordination, roles that limit people's individual potential and threaten their psychological well-being. Similarly, according to Michael D'Antonio, writing in the Los Angeles Times Magazine, communitarians ignore the "stifling pressure to conform that is usually present in...close-knit settlements."(March 22, 1992, p.50.) Amy Gutmann pointedly proclaims that communitarians "want us to live in Salem" ("Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," Philosophy and Public Affairs, p.319).

From a contemporary responsive communitarian view, the combination of a concern with traditionalism and cultural oppression is not accidental: Traditional communities often were both. (Hence the well-know line that "the air of the cities frees," which is what the farmers of traditional villages must have felt when they first moved into cities at the onset of industrialization.) And there is no need or reason to deny that totalitarian communities exist in our time, one example being China. However contemporary communities are typically not exclusive even when they are territorial, which they often are not. A person may be a member of a suburban community and a work community, a residential community and an ethnic one, and so on. The result is that each community has less of a strong hold on the person. Also the relative ease of mobility indicates that people choose which community to join and to continue. In short, the problem of most contemporary communities in pluralistic, democratic societies is that they are rather anemic, not overpowering.
A much more challenging issue is hidden here, though. It is sometimes touched upon under the charge of conformism promoted by communities, even of the weaker kind. The question is what is the normative/moral standing of whatever values the community promotes, however gently it is that it promotes them. (Note that all communities share some values by definition, and tend to promote these shared values to sustain themselves.) Should members abide by them? On what grounds? Under all conditions?

Some liberal communitarians solve this problem by arguing that communities should not have one shared characterization of the common good but rather should maintain a plurality of conceptions. In this way, each person could choose to which values to subscribe. However, this assumption flies in the face of sociological fact; numerous communities have a shared set of core values, and these values are necessary for a community to be able to build consensus on specific norms and policies, in short to function as a community.

It follows that both members of communities and outside observers need to evaluate the moral standing of the values of any given community rather than merely endorse them because they are shared, in place or some other such utilitarian ground. One criteria for evaluation might be whether or not the vision of a community and future these values underwrite is fully responsive to all the authentic needs of all the members of the community. This criteria is based on the notion that values that do not meet this demand, sanction a community and future in which only some parts of the members are responded to (say, the elites, or white members, or old timers) which is not morally justifiable on the ground that values should be generalizable and universal rather than serve as justifications for the privileges of one group against others. Reference is made to all the needs of the members, because even if the values cover well say the economic needs of all the members, they may leave them without attention to say their spiritual requirements. Responsive cultures are encompassing, attending not merely to all the members but to all their basic human needs.

Finally, the term "authentic" calls attention to the possibility that extensive propaganda may make members of a community support values to which they are not truly committed. It further recognizes that a community need not be responsive to surface demands but only to true ones. The ways to distinguish authentic from false preferences cannot be discussed here in any detail, but suffice it to say that when people are falsely committed this is evidenced by their behavior, above all by strong tendencies to return to their authentic values whenever the propaganda and state controls slacken, and by extensive maneuvers by members of the community to seek to circumvent the behavior sanctioned by false values. (For further discussion see Robert E. Goodin, "Permissible Paternalism: In Defense of the Nanny State," The Responsive Community, Summer 1991; Daniel Bell's Communitarianism and its Critics, pp.73-78; and the author's The Active Society)

Many may find this position difficult to accept on the grounds that it raises empirical difficulties (for instance, how to assess authenticity) and normative ones (especially for those who seek to challenge the shared values of the community in the name of one sub-group or another). But the issue cannot be avoided. Communitarians must be able to account not merely for the fact that the communities share values but to respond to the question: Is it morally appropriate to be guided by the particular values that are shared? On what criteria is one to draw in evaluating values?

In short, while responsive communitarians seem to have reasonably sound responses to many of the criticisms raised against them recently, the standing of community values is the one that needs the most attention and so far has received the least. More broadly speaking, communitarians and their critics must break out of the grooved debate about the social embedded self and turn to deal with numerous subsequent issues that have been raised. As I see it, none challenges the basic communitarian thesis, that communities, properly constructed, are of great value.
Economic penalties for those who fragment, as prohibitive as they might be, are the lesser of two evils. The main drawback of excessive self-determination is that it works against the democratization of countries seeking to establish democratic government and threatens democracy in countries that have already attained it. The main reasons are two: one structural and one socio-psychological. The first one concerns pluralism; the second, tolerance. By necessity we explore those one at a time although there is a deep connection between the two.

The Merits of Pluralism

The structural foundations of democracy entail much more than regular elections. Elections were conducted frequently both by authoritarian countries such as Egypt and by tyrannical ones, such as the former USSR. An institutionalized, non-violent change of those in power in response to changes in the preferences of the populace is essential for democratic structure. Such changes ensure that the government can be responsive to the changing needs and desires of the people, and that if the government becomes unresponsive it will be changed without undue difficulties.

To ensure that the variety of needs within the population will find effective political expression, democracies require that the government in place not "homogenize" the population in some artificial manner (e.g., imposing one state-approved religion; Quebec prohibiting outdoor signs in English). For it is the plurality of social, cultural, and economic loyalties and power centers within society that makes it possible, at each point in time, for a new need, group or sub-culture, to break into the political scene, find allies, build coalitions and have its effect. (E.g., the Great Society reforms in the early 1960s in the United States were, politically speaking, the result of rising black groups forming a coalition with white liberals and labor unions.)

Aside from keeping the government and its closest allies in the population in check, the pluralistic array of groups also keeps one another at bay. In contrast, when historical processes or deliberate government policies weakens all other groups and leave only its supporters within the society organized, as the Nazis did in post-World War I Germany, the foundations of democracy are undermined. In short, social pluralism is a major sociological factor that supports democratic government.

While there are several bases along which social pluralism can be sustained, the best are those that cut across other existing lines of division, dampening the power of each and allowing for a large number of possible combinations of social bases to build political power. Thus, a society rigidly divided into two or three economic classes (say, landed gentry, bourgeois, and working class) may have a structure that is somewhat more conducive to democratic government than a society with only one class. However, the potential for democracy is much enhanced when there are other groups that draw on members from various classes, so that loyalty to these groups cuts across class lines.

Historically, ethnic groups have "cut-across" socio-economic levels within the United States, thus dampening both class and ethnic divisions. Thus, American Jews may be largely middle class, but there are many in the middle class who are not Jewish and there are Jews in the other classes. WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) may be "over represented" in the upper classes but are also found in large numbers in all other classes and so on. The fact that both classes and ethnic loyalties cut across regional and other geographical lines and loyalties further helps cement the foundations of pluralism and hence democracy.

In contrast, the net effect of break-away states that are based on ethnic groups is to fashion communities that are sociologically much more monolithic than the states they break away from. Thus, Quebec obviously would be much more "French" and the remaining Canada "English" than the
existing composite. This polarization is heightened by the great intolerance break-away states tend to have for minority ethnic groups composed of people who were in the majority or in power in the country they broke away from. In short, ethnic based break-away states tend to see more ethnic homogeneity, less pluralism, and this is one reason they often lack the deeper sociological foundations of democracy.

The Role of Tolerance

Tolerance of people of a different background, sub-culture, religion, or language is a crucial psychological trait democracy requires; the same trait is needed for new communities to solidify. Democracy requires tolerance (which in turn is based on impulse control and ego distance) because it is the psychological basis for playing by the rules; for being willing to accept the outcome of elections even if they favor a party or coalition of groups one is strongly opposed to; and for being willing to accept compromises.

Community requires the same basic psychological trait. The capacity to bind people of different backgrounds and traditions; the ability to work out differences with people whose religions, histories and habits one does not share. When these are absent, the predisposition to fragmentation is high.

To put it differently, tolerance is a psychological trait that is essential both for inter-ethnic peace within one country and for democratic government. People who beat to death members of other ethnic groups on their turf, burn their houses to the ground, or otherwise engage in massive violence because of some alleged or real indignities or injustices are most unlikely to be able to sit down with other groups they disagree with and work out the kind of compromises or community-wide consensus the daily working of democracy requires. Violence is of course only the most extreme and highly visible sign of intolerance. Wide spread prejudice and discrimination suffice to prevent a community and a democracy from functioning properly.

Hence, since the ultimate purpose of self-determination is not self-determination per se but a government responsive to those governed, developing tolerance might be what many of the people of the sub-communities involved need most and first. At least before they take a wrecking ball to their nations, it seems reasonable to expect them to try to work out their differences by insisting on reforms in the existing government, to render them more responsive, change the government structures (e.g., make them less unitary and more federal) and otherwise express ethnic needs within the existing community. Only if these governments are unresponsive to such legitimate demands does there seem to be justification for an ethnic group to break away. And when this last-resort course is embraced, we should expect the newly formed communities to take special pains to develop tolerance, lest they will, to reiterate, be even less democratic and unresponsive to major groups of their citizens than the nations from which they are seceding.

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1. The terms “liberals,” “classical liberals,” “contemporary liberals,” and “libertarians” have all been used to characterize the critics of communitarians. These labels are confusing; for instance, many readers do not realize that the labels are not confined to or even necessarily inclusive of those who are called liberals in typical daily parlance. Most importantly, because the defining element of the position is the championing of the individual, “libertarian” seems both the less obfuscating term and the one that is substantively most appropriate.

2. For a further discussion of this issue, see the author’s The Active Society and A Responsive Society.