

ESSAYS

COMMUNITARIAN THEORY

Does Socioeconomic Inequality Undermine Community? Implications for Communitarian Theory

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Communitarianism has sometimes been criticized for overlooking, or at the very least downplaying, the role of economic forces generally, and socioeconomic inequality in particular, in shaping social relations in the United States and other advanced (or “modern”) societies. In a minor way, I count myself among the critics (albeit one broadly sympathetic to the communitarian project), having made the following observations in a 1996 *Journal of Socio-Economics* article:

There is something fundamental missing in these [communitarian] discussions. Membership in a community (at least as this is understood in modern societies) implies a certain degree of access to the economic and political resources that the community has at its disposal. Vast differences in economic status . . . tend to prohibit the formation of any sort of meaningful community ties. For example, it is virtually impossible for the homeless person who lives under a bridge not too far from my house, and who is daily seen begging outside local stores, to be a member of the community in which I live. To speak of “community” without reference to the massively unequal distributions of income and wealth that actually exist in . . . the United States and many other

societies, and all that follows in terms of living conditions and life chances, is akin to homilies about the “family of man”—nice sounding words with a well-intentioned uplifting intent, but with little real meaning.

Steven Lukes expresses similar (and far less sympathetic) sentiments in a 1998 article published in *Dissent*. Explicitly focusing on articles published in *The Responsive Community* since its inception in 1990, Lukes contends that the communitarian debate has been “drastically” limited, with the economy as the “major absentee.” Lukes goes on to state that “There is very little here about the moral and cultural consequences of market processes, and virtually nothing about the ramifications of economic inequality.”

Lukes’s criticism, which is typical of leftist critiques of communitarianism during the 1990s, may have some merit, but it is overstated. A more careful reading of communitarian writings reveals that socioeconomic factors have not been entirely overlooked. In *The New Golden Rule*, for example, Amitai Etzioni alludes to the role of socioeconomic factors both as “enablers and constrictors of autonomy,” adding, however, that this is a vast and important subject that would require a separate volume to be properly treated. In addition, Etzioni devotes sections of several chapters of *Next: The Road to the Good Society* explicitly to questions of socioeconomic equality, offering specific proposals that include assuring a “rich basic minimum to all,” providing universal health care coverage, and “limiting inequality” as key items on the communitarian agenda.

Communitarians have expressed some concern about socioeconomic inequality, but it is not a topic that they have explored sufficiently. In this article, my main contention is that there is a distinctively communitarian rationale for wanting to limit socioeconomic inequality—namely, that extreme inequality undermines civic participation and the sense of community shared by members of the broader society. By promoting communities that are segregated along socioeconomic lines, extreme inequality weakens relations among the different groups that make up the community of communities, undermines concern for the common good, and weakens civil society and social solidarity. At the end of the paper, I discuss how much inequality communitarians should accept and under what conditions.

My discussion is limited to the instrumental consequences of socioeconomic inequality and does not refer to its implications for

social justice, although the latter is clearly important for communitarian theory. In addition, the examples I will draw on are taken from the United States, thus limiting the extent to which broader generalizations may be drawn. However, this article should have at least some implications for other advanced (or “modern”) societies.

Inequality and Communitarianism’s Core Concerns

Communitarianism differs from the conventional ideologies of both the right and the left in that it does not begin with an a priori set of assumptions about the role that socioeconomic inequality plays or ought to play in society. This lack of a clear a priori position on inequality can be viewed as a weakness of communitarian theory, and various critics have not been reticent to make this point. But viewed in a different light, this situation is merely a matter of focus and emphasis. In terms of setting priorities, communitarianism has tended to address those questions that are foundational to its core concerns, such as how to develop a sound conception of morality, what role group identification (including the role of race and ethnicity) plays in social harmony or conflict, and how to achieve a balance between individual liberty and social order in modern society. This is more than a full plate, and it is too much to expect that any theory or perspective can cover everything at once.

I would, however, agree that, at least until recently, communitarians have tended to assume, even if they don’t explicitly state, that American society has been sufficiently equal, both in terms of opportunity and outcomes, to allow for the development of strong, vital communities. For communitarians the chief threat to community in American society has not been class conflict or an excessive degree of socioeconomic inequality, but an excess of atomistic individualism, whether based on a hyperactive concern with individual liberty or an obsession with the pursuit of personal pleasure. The communitarian project has mainly concerned itself with questions concerning the relationship between “autonomy and order,” of how to achieve a balance between the pursuit of individual self-interest and sustenance of the common good. Neither autonomy nor order necessarily involves a primary concern with socioeconomic relations *as long as the latter are sufficiently benign that they do not undermine either or both autonomy or order*. Through the 1970s or so, it could be argued

with some justification that American society was “equal enough” (or at least moving in the right direction) to allow the question of socioeconomic inequality to be set aside as a central focus of communitarian attention. This assumption of “equal enough” has become untenable in the face of what appears to be a trend toward increasing socioeconomic inequality, and it is now incumbent on communitarians to squarely address the question of socioeconomic inequality.

Etzioni’s “Next” Step: Limiting Inequality

In his recent book, *Next*, Amitai Etzioni formulates several proposals for socioeconomic policy reform. These proposals represent the clearest statement to date of a distinctly communitarian set of socioeconomic policies. His proposals include guaranteeing a “rich basic minimum standard of living” for all people, irrespective of their conduct, that includes shelter, clothing, food, and basic health care. Etzioni also proposes a limited form of guaranteed employment, with the understanding that a labor market stimulated by a growing economy is the best way to provide jobs, but absent this “*community jobs* [should be made] available for all those needing work.” Most germane to the topic of this article, Etzioni argues that current levels of socioeconomic inequality are too high, and need to be reduced. He contends that in order to achieve a society that is a “community of communities,” the economic distance between the rich and poor cannot be allowed to grow to too great a level:

If some members of a community are increasingly distanced from the standard of living of most other members, they will lose contact with the rest of the community. The more those in charge of private and public institutions lead lives of hyperaffluence—replete with gated communities and estates, chauffeured limousines, servants, and personal trainers—the less in touch they are with other community members. Such isolation not only frays social bonds and insulates privileged people from the moral cultures of the community, but it also blinds them to the realities of the lives of their fellow citizens.

Here, Etzioni outlines distinctively communitarian reasons for wanting to limit inequality, and his policy proposals give substance to this prescription. The purpose of this article is to elaborate on the communitarian position on socioeconomic inequality. To begin with, I will explore the implications of some research on social networks,

religious participation, and residential housing patterns. This research points consistently to a variety of negative effects of socioeconomic inequality on civic participation and community.

Social Networks and Inequality

The pattern of associations that connect individuals to one another and to larger social circles is a fundamental building block of community. Sociological research into the nature of social networks over the past two decades or so, especially looking at the relationship between social networks and social structural variables, provides a glimpse into how socioeconomic factors can encourage or obstruct the development of affiliative associations and hence community. An individual's social network includes some combination of ties to the immediate family and other kin, friends and other close associates, and people with whom relationships are less intimate. In general, each type of network tie offers some advantages, but extremes in any one category appear to be detrimental to the formation of healthy community ties. For example, strong family ties may provide what Christopher Lasch described as a "haven in a heartless world," offering individuals succor, moral and even material support not readily available elsewhere. Communitarians often point to strong families as the foundation of strong communities. At the same time, an overly heavy reliance on kin to the exclusion of other types of ties can lead to isolation from the wider community, with a concomitant emphasis on caring about and trusting only one's family. For example, Edward Banfield provides a stark portrait of "amoral familism" in his description of the social life of southern Italian peasants. At the other extreme, a tendency to restrict one's social ties exclusively to impersonal relationships with strangers may, in terms of developing a strong sense of community, be no different in effect from the social isolation of the hermit. Without intimate relationships, people become in reality the "unencumbered selves" that Michael Sandel criticizes Rawls for postulating in theory.

The pertinent question here is how social structure, specifically patterns of socioeconomic inequality, is related to the characteristics of personal social networks. The relevant empirical findings are several. First, sociological research supports the commonsense notion that people generally tend to associate with others with whom they

share basic social characteristics—a tendency that social scientists refer to as “homophily.” In addition, and not too surprisingly, researchers have found that the further the social distance between people—as measured by differences in education, income, and occupation—the less frequent and strong their social network connections with one another are. Indeed, there appears to be persuasive empirical evidence that socioeconomic status exerts a variety of distinctive effects on the patterns of social ties that individuals establish and maintain. For example, using data from the General Social Survey, David Marsden reports that more educated people tend to have larger social networks overall, with a lower proportion of kin in “confiding networks” consisting of people with whom “important matters” are discussed. Marsden also notes that more educated people tend to have less “dense” confiding networks, meaning that fewer of those they name as friends are in turn associated with one other, and that the networks of people with more years of formal education are more varied in terms of sex and age. However, the social networks of people at the high and low extremes of socioeconomic status have a greater tendency to be closed off from wider social circles of relationships—in other words, they have a higher tendency toward so-called “inbreeding.” Marsden concludes that “occupational groups at the extremes of the status distribution have the highest tendencies toward inbreeding, while groups in the middle of the distribution have positive, but smaller, tendencies to confine their relations to others within their group.”

Mark Granovetter’s work in social network research reveals that “weak ties,” consisting of acquaintances, friends-of-friends, and other similar social connections, often provide valuable information and contacts that facilitate activities such as learning about job openings, finding housing, and, I would add, accessing various opportunities for civic participation. Weak ties, Granovetter insists, are “indispensable to individuals,” and foster social integration rather than inducing greater alienation. The inference I draw from this is that smaller, more inbred social networks at the lower reaches of the socioeconomic strata also lead to fewer and less extensive weak ties, and form part of a larger pattern of social and economic isolation in urban ghettos described by William Julius Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and other writings.

Putting together these and other findings from the social network research literature, we can construct a rough picture of what sorts of socioeconomic relations conduce toward the highest levels of individual participation in community. Holding other factors constant, people who are well-educated, not too dissimilar from other community members in terms of socioeconomic status, and not at either extreme of socioeconomic status will tend to have social networks that are wider, less inbred, and therefore most favorable to community participation. Likewise, persons who would tend to be most at risk of social isolation are those with little or no formal education and with low socioeconomic status, those whose social networks therefore tend to be restricted to kin or otherwise have a high degree of inbreeding. These are also persons who would tend to have few or no “weak ties” linking them to the wider society. These characteristics comprise a fairly accurate portrait of the impoverished “underclass” and describe a pattern also consistent with the contemporary European conception of the poor as *“les exclus”* (the excluded).

Those among the upper stratum of society appear to share with the poor the risk factors for social isolation that stem from highly inbred social networks, and indeed the wealthy’s experience of “community” may be limited due to their lack of social interaction with a broad cross section of society, but their situation is quite different from that of the poor. The upper strata do not experience the same kind of negative consequences as the poor in finding out about a job, a house to rent or buy, or other sorts of benefits that wider, less inbred social networks confer.

While social isolation often creates personal problems for poor individuals, it also creates problems for the society as a whole. The atomization of society into groups segregated according to socioeconomic status limits opportunities for participation in the wider society and weakens the degree to which the larger society can be considered a community.

Religious Participation

Communitarians have been understandably interested in the role of faith-based organizations as one of the pillars of civil society. Obviously, the role that religious groups play in defining core values

and behavioral norms, and the extent to which religious congregations serve to bond people together in worship and often collective action, makes them a key type of community from a communitarian perspective. The relationship between religion and socioeconomic inequality may not be clear at first blush, at least to those unfamiliar with the literature on the sociology of religion. Studies of religious participation leave little doubt that the socioeconomic profiles of churches reflect existing patterns of societal inequality. For example, based on a large-scale study of religious participation, one researcher concluded that “People meet together for worship within *the basic sociological groupings into which they are born*” (emphasis added). Two other researchers concluded that religious congregations tend to be highly “internally homogeneous,” and that “strong” religions help to create both “distinctive networks” and clearly delineated boundaries separating the congregation from others.

Religious congregations both mirror and focus the inequalities of the wider society. From a communitarian standpoint, religion’s positive contribution to fostering a stronger “community of communities” is undermined by the extent to which religious congregations tend to structure themselves along existing lines of socioeconomic stratification. This stratification is in turn reinforced by what one student of the sociology of religion terms the “amazing class segregation” of religious congregations. The lesson seems to be that the extent to which participation in organized religion offers opportunities for wider civic engagement depends to a significant degree on one’s place in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Middle-class congregations will tend to promote participation in the broader society while upper- and lower-class congregations will tend to be more isolated. Extreme inequality isolates more people.

Residential Housing and “Neighborhood”

“Neighborhood,” yet another building block of community, appears to defy precise definition as a concept, and its usage varies according to whether one is speaking about an urban center, suburb, or rural setting. However, there is no doubt that where one lives in relation to others structures communal social relations. Moreover, the social identification of a person’s place of residence is imbued with powerful significance. Indeed, one observer goes so far as to assert

that "The single most powerful expression of social status may be one's address."

Communitarians have rightly paid considerable attention to the implications of racial segregation in housing in the United States. Less conspicuous in discussions of residential housing patterns, however, are the purely socioeconomic factors that affect, for better or worse, the building of community. While it is true that a host of factors (e.g., discrimination, restrictive mortgage lending practices, zoning regulations, and public housing policies) serve to create or reinforce ethnic or racial boundaries delimiting "neighborhoods," housing patterns are mostly the predictable outcome of *market forces*. Individuals may exercise some choice in selecting a geographical location to live in, but such choices are bounded on the upper end by how much they can afford to pay. Persons of upper- or upper-middle-class status are free to elect to reside in a low-income or working-class neighborhood, but for obvious reasons they do not often do so. More importantly, the obverse is certainly not true: low-income, unskilled, or unemployed workers cannot decide to move up (or, in the case of American suburbs, "out") to even middle-class housing, much less to desirable upper- or upper-middle-class neighborhoods. The asymmetrical nature of constrained choices in the housing market, coupled with the great significance of where one lives both as a marker of social status and a crucial factor in determining access to social goods such as desirable schools, high quality public services, and a low crime rate, tends to produce patterns of residential housing that are relatively homogeneous in terms of social class—like social networks, like religious congregations. Thus, the role of "neighborhood" as an instrument for community participation is constrained by existing patterns of socioeconomic inequality.

The tendency for neighborhoods to reflect underlying socioeconomic forces in the housing market may not in and of itself be a problem for the formation of community at the neighborhood level. Neighborhoods segregated by socioeconomic status may be able to form strong communities. However, extremes of socioeconomic inequality produce housing patterns that tend to limit participation in the wider society, just as social networks and religious congregations affected by extreme inequality do. At the lowest socioeconomic strata, individuals are often trapped in enclaves where living conditions are

poor, public services substandard or nonexistent, access to educational and employment opportunities severely constrained, and a host of other destructive conditions present. In many instances, socioeconomic barriers are reinforced by racial or ethnic discrimination and their counterpart, residential housing segregated by race or ethnicity. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the most affluent individuals display an increasing tendency to withdraw to luxury apartments where access is closely controlled by doormen or to estates or so-called “gated communities” in the suburbs or the countryside. Whatever the motivation, the end result of housing with elevated levels of segregation along socioeconomic lines is the same: a serious undermining of the potential for the development of the kind of communities and participation in civil society to which communitarianism aspires.

Inequality in a Communitarian Society

Thus far my discussion of social networks, religious congregations, and housing patterns supports Etzioni’s contention that “limiting inequality” is critical to realizing the communitarian vision of the good society. The question remains, however, of how far efforts to limit socioeconomic inequality need to go in order to achieve this vision.

How much socioeconomic equality would communitarians prefer under an idealized set of circumstances? Or, stated somewhat differently, what sorts of socioeconomic distinctions would communitarianism prescribe according to its core principles for a communitarian society built from scratch? Although it is not possible to describe in detail what such a society would look like, I would like to suggest a few key principles of socioeconomic stratification that can be derived from communitarian theory.

First, absolute equality of outcomes is out of the question. From a communitarian point of view, imposing absolute equality makes as little sense as accepting grossly unequal outcomes based on market dynamics. Indeed, one is probably as detrimental to the formation of strong and healthy communities as the other. Communities, like wider societies, need to recognize and reward individuals who are creative, hardworking, and who exert themselves beyond the bare

minimum required. Although in some instances community recognition may be achieved through symbolic rather than monetary means—for example, a public memorial or a medal—a community in which an unskilled worker earns as much as a physician (roughly the situation that prevailed in the former USSR, where physicians were disproportionately women) would be as unworkable on communitarian grounds as a community in which a 20-year-old website programmer makes many times the salary of a caregiver in a nursing home or childcare center (a situation that prevailed in the United States in the late 1990s at the height of the Internet mania). In the first case, the functional virtues of the marketplace are denied; in the second case, the market is allowed to play havoc with reasonable societal priorities.

Second, under a communitarian approach, individual efforts should be encouraged and rewarded according to some measure of contribution to the common good, *through the marketplace where this occurs but by nonmarket means, including subsidies, where needed*. Setting aside the challenging question of exactly how such a metric could be formulated and applied, I ask only that we accept the possibility that with sufficient thought and discussion such a thing would be possible. The operative principle here would be to supplement market-based incentives and rewards with ones based on some calculus of contributions to the common good, recognizing that markets are not the sole or ultimate standard by which social value can be measured.

Third, recognizing that some types of economic activities are actively detrimental to the common good, an idealized communitarian system would contain a structure of disincentives to counter areas where the marketplace confers rewards upon (or is neutral to) activities that are destructive of the common social good. Industrial polluters, manufacturers of products harmful to health, and purveyors of gratuitously violent films, to cite just a few obvious examples, should expect to have their business activities heavily taxed and/or tightly regulated. It is important to note that taxing or regulating such behavior need not entail heavy-handed censorship or the arbitrary exercise of moral authoritarianism, but it does involve making judgments on grounds other than exclusively market-based criteria. For example, a communitarian principle of differential economic reward would recognize that a dedicated and talented high school teacher is inherently worth more to society than a marketing executive employed by a tobacco company.

As a condition of minimizing social barriers and maximizing opportunities for the development of shared values, the idealized picture of communitarian society I envision would be free from invidious extremes of individual wealth and poverty. Instead it would be characterized by a social structure—or *habitus*, to use Pierre Bourdieu's apt terminology—that offers broad inclusion rather than sharp distinctions based on socioeconomic status, and that explicitly includes factors beyond pure market dynamics as the basis for differential rewards. Such a social structure might, in fact, look quite a lot like the "middle-class society" that appears in popular American mythology and in the descriptions of many observers of the American scene going back to Tocqueville. There appears to be strong empirical support for the notion that the closer one gets to "middle class" status (broadly conceived) the greater the affinity for a commonly shared set of core values. For example, Alan Wolfe concludes that the United States is "one nation, after all," but his study of the core values Americans hold looks only at the middle strata of society. Wolfe's conclusion offers both hope and, more importantly, guidance to communitarians concerning the possible benefits of greater socioeconomic equality.

What Can Be Done?

The forces that have produced existing, unacceptable levels of socioeconomic inequality in the United States are immensely powerful and deeply rooted. The experience of recent decades shows the raw power of markets, especially in an increasingly globalized economy that drives down wages in manufacturing, renders many other jobs obsolete, and yet at the same time provides rich rewards for a privileged few. The dominant political view in American politics, which with a few exceptions cuts across party lines, has supported rather than challenged the primacy of market economics. Moreover, as this article has described, patterns of social relations tend to reflect, and even magnify, underlying socioeconomic disparities.

While the task of limiting, or even reducing, inequality presents formidable challenges that I can barely begin to address here, I will suggest a few constructive steps that can be taken. We might begin by recognizing that certain public policies are part of the problem. For example, tax cuts that primarily benefit upper-income brackets serve

to exacerbate already severe levels of inequality, and should be categorically opposed. Similarly, more needs to be done to buffer the impact of market forces on low-income, working families. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a good example of such a policy. The EITC should be expanded and, more importantly, better publicized and made easier for people with lower levels of formal education to access. At the community level, more can be done to pursue initiatives that include people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. One example is interfaith councils that bring together the leaders and activist members of a broad range of religious congregations and community organizations to engage in dialogues and formulate initiatives. Another example is neighborhood associations that seek out and forge alliances with one another on issues that have broad community impact. Although probably not much can be done to address patterns of socioeconomic segregation in neighborhoods themselves, cooperation among diverse neighborhood associations on problems of shared concern may make some progress towards breaking down social barriers.

The Ties that Bind

Andrew Carnegie, in his day one of America's richest men, observed that the "problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship." Achieving such a "harmonious relationship" in the United States consistent with communitarian precepts and ideals requires a substantial narrowing of the distance between the rich and poor. A reduction in baseline socioeconomic inequality would have the benefits of extending social networks and of offering wider opportunities for civic engagement via religious groups and residential neighborhoods that reach out to include a wide range of citizens rather than walling off citizens by socioeconomic status. As important as limiting socioeconomic inequality may be, however, it is only one part of the larger task of building strong and healthy communities—a necessary but not sufficient condition for building a society based on communitarian principles. In addition, it is important to recognize that there may be dimensions of invidious inequality grounded in social divisions independent of the misdistribution of economic resources, something that Mickey Kaus

suggests in *The End of Equality*. These and many other related issues remain open to future discussion.

It is important to guard against utopian speculation in attempting to envision what a fully realized system of communitarian socioeconomic stratification might look like, but there is little doubt that communitarian principles would produce a quite different, and more desirable, distribution of rewards than is currently the case in the United States.

Taxation and Misinformation

A recent survey by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement asked Americans, “As far as you know, does the federal government spend more on Social Security or on foreign aid?” In recent years, around 23 percent of federal spending has been devoted to Social Security, while under one percent has gone to foreign aid. However, 63 percent of the respondents to the survey believed the government spends more on foreign aid, while only 14 percent chose Social Security, and 23 percent said they didn’t know. Strangely, the figures were hardly different for those old enough to receive Social Security now or in the near future—only 16 percent of those 57 and older chose Social Security, while 63 percent selected foreign aid.