



The Politics of Community: Theory & Practice

Adrian Little

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The virtue of this book is to challenge the hegemony of the practice of market liberalism from a communitarian perspective, and to attempt to draw practical implications for social policy. Little makes a distinction between orthodox and radical communitarians. According to him, orthodox communitarians such as Francis Fukuyama, Robert Putnam and Henry Tam maintain that trust, communal bonds, social cohesion and mutual associations of civil society — ‘social capital’ — are not obstacles to, but the foundation of, economic activities. On this view, the success of an economy is owed to the social capital within that society. Orthodox communitarians argue against both the view of the socialist tradition, that capitalism is an enemy of society, and the view of the economic liberal tradition, that community is not relevant to economy. However, Little argues that the economic view of orthodox communitarians is still not free from market liberalism because of the way which they celebrate economic success. In contrast, radical theorists of community such as Richard Sennett, André Gorz and Little himself emphasize the value of non-economic activity and are sceptical about the optimism of an orthodox communitarian view of capitalism. The radical communitarians belong to a socialist tradition of suspicion of the market economy. Sennett especially revitalizes the socialist tradition with his argument about new capitalism: how the pursuit of flexibility and short-sighted interests in the new economy undermines communities and social virtues rather than reinforces them. Based upon Sennett’s argument, Little insists that the orthodox communitarian view is false because the economic successes of the ‘new capitalism’ subordinate the principles of community to economic rationality. In the era of new capitalism, the prescription of orthodox communitarians becomes ineffective. Social capital cannot solve the dichotomy between economy and community or economic and non-economic activity. The central difference between orthodox and radical communitarianism is in their conception of economic activity. All communitarians respect corporative participation in economic activity as the source of morality. However, unlike orthodox communitarians, radical theorists do not consider just any kind of participation in the economic sphere as virtuous.



I would argue that Little's critique of orthodox communitarians is somewhat inappropriate. The orthodox communitarian conception of social capital in the economy is reminiscent of Karl Polanyi's idea of the market embedded in society or Durkheim's idea of occupational associations. What Fukuyama and Putnam mean by economic success is *not* equal to Sennett's image of the new capitalism in which selfish and short-sighted economic activities are dominant. Rather, the new capitalism is an economic failure and orthodox communitarians would share Sennett's charges against it. For them social capital is expected to promote the long-term commitment of the employer and the employee to corporate activities, mutual trust and social cohesion, and to prevent the dominance of new capitalism. Given this, it follows that orthodox communitarians would view the victory of new capitalism as self-defeating. The flexibility and short-sightedness of the new capitalism might help to increase the benefits of shareholders in the short term at the micro-level, but it will eventually undermine social capital as the foundation of economic development at the macro-level: consequently, economic activities at the micro-level will stagnate in the long term.

One of the distinctive points in the arguments for the concept of social capital or 'embeddedness' is the refutation of the thin concept of economic rationality associated with market liberalism. Orthodox communitarians and Polanyi criticize the conceptual distinction between economic and non-economic activity, which economic liberals implicitly assume. They think that economic activities are not and should not be driven by economic rationality, but instead by social, moral or cultural motives. In other words, they drastically challenge the conventional concept of economic activity as economically rational conduct, which is shared analytically by both economic liberals and socialists. Based upon the analytical assumption of economic activity as culturally thick conduct, orthodox communitarians maintain that the market should be brought back into the thick texture of culture. Although Little also attempts to challenge the market liberal hegemony when he attacks the notion of social capital and advocates non-economic activity over economic activity, he shares with economic liberals the economic/non-economic activity distinction. In other words, while orthodox communitarians not only normatively but also analytically argue against the thin conception of economic activity of market liberalism, Little normatively rejects but analytically accepts it. In this sense, radical communitarians are less radical than orthodox communitarians in terms of the philosophical revolt against market liberal hegemony, although the policy prescriptions proposed by the radical theorists are certainly more radical and, therefore, difficult to fulfil.

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