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Communitarianism, Taylor-Made: An Interview with Charles Taylor

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# Communitarianism, Taylor-made

*An interview with Charles Taylor*

*Ruth Abbey and Charles Taylor*

THERE is a sense in which ‘we’re all communitarians now’. As its name suggests, communitarianism’s central concern is with the bonds of community—their creation, maintenance and reproduction. In the 1990s, analysts from across the political spectrum are taking an interest in communitarian questions, with conservatives, liberals and collectivists alike reflecting on what community life is and how it can be nourished. The current interest in the notion of trust, from Francis Fukuyama to Annette Baier<sup>1</sup>, is just one manifestation of this. In Australia, communitarian concerns resonate through the work of thinkers as varied as feminist collectivist, Eva Cox, whose 1995 Boyer Lectures call for the creation of ‘a truly civil society’ to contributors to a 1995 Institute of Public Affairs conference *A Stitch in Time: Repairing the Social Fabric*.<sup>2</sup>

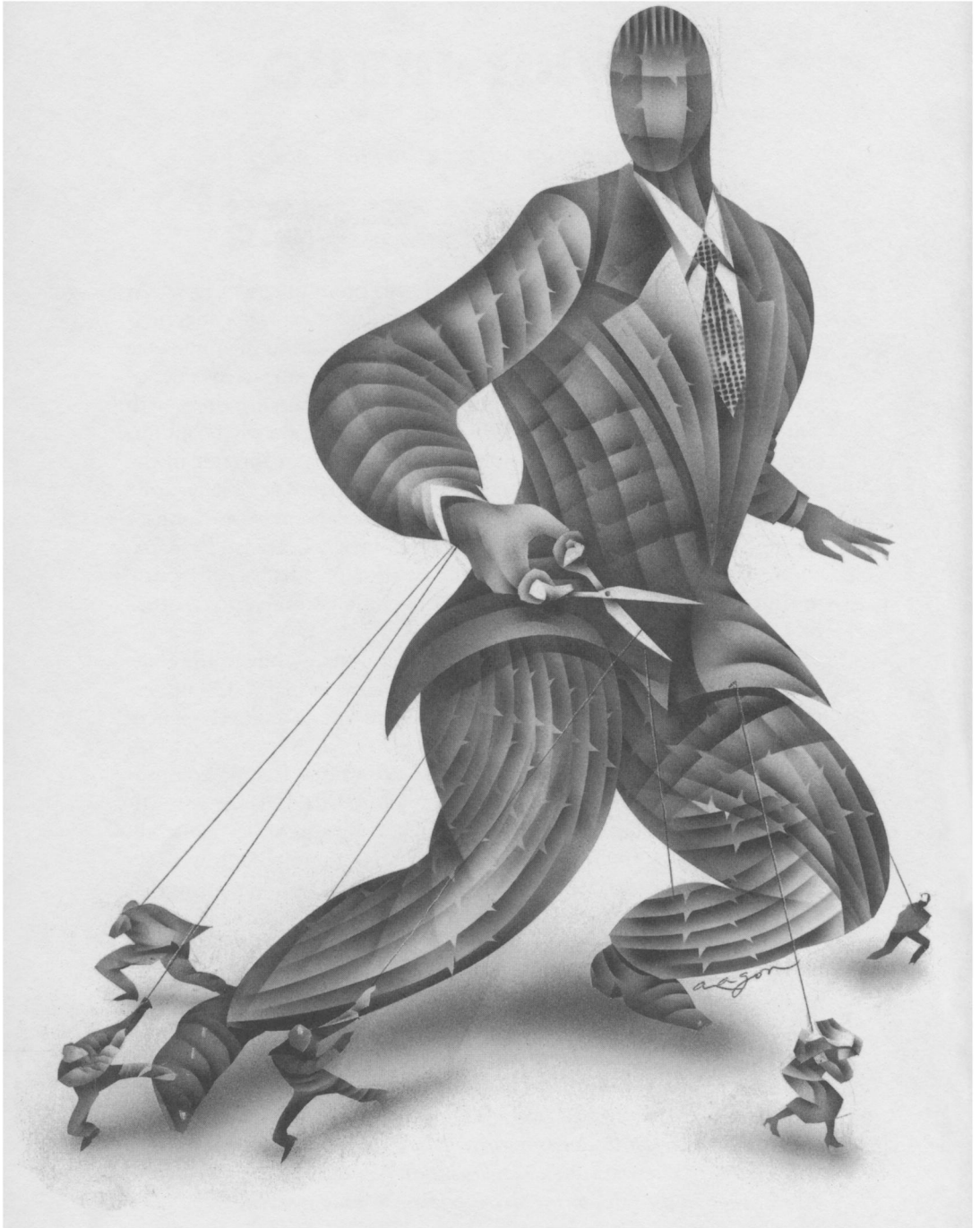
In this interview, Charles Taylor, who is considered one of the English-speaking world’s leading communitarians, explains his understanding of communitarianism and considers some of its consequences for political action and organisation.

**Ruth Abbey:** Although you are considered to be a leading communitarian thinker, along with Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Amitai Etzioni and Richard Rorty and Seyla Benhabib, you have some reservations about the term ‘communitarianism’ (Taylor 1989a; 1994: 250). Is there a definition of communitarianism that you would apply to yourself, a Taylor-made type of communitarianism?

**Charles Taylor:** ‘Communitarianism’ has lots of meanings. It was originally invented by ‘liberals’ (itself a term with many senses) to block together all their critics. As such, it wasn’t much use, because these

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critics come from so many different places. MacIntyre was onto a quite different set of issues from Walzer, etc. But recently, the term has been taken up by a group under the leadership of Amitai Etzioni in the US. This group has a political agenda. One might say that they are concerned social democrats who are worried about the way that various forms of individualism are undermining the welfare state (or preventing its development in the US case). They see the need for solidarity, and hence for 'community' on a number of levels, from the family to the state. I have a lot of sympathy for this group, and have signed on to various of their statements.

**RA:** As this suggests, the relationship between liberalism and communitarianism is obviously important in understanding communitarianism. It is not unusual to find these doctrines depicted as rival approaches to social and political life—in fact Alan Ryan calls 'hostility to liberalism . . . the main defining feature of communitarianism' (Goodin and Pettit 1993: 292). Yet in 'Cross purposes: the liberal-communitarian debate', you suggest that in its starkest terms this supposed antagonism is false and that someone who subscribed to communitarianism at the analytical level could advocate certain liberal goods, such as the freedom of speech and of religion. So what is the correct relationship between communitarianism and liberalism?

**CT:** The debate between liberals and communitarians is actually much more complex and multi-layered than even many of its participants seem to realise. To get the relationship and the differences between liberalism and communitarianism right, it is necessary to distinguish ontological from advocacy issues. Ontological issues have to do with how you explain social life while advocacy issues encompass things that are valued, held to be good and worth promoting. At the ontological level, you could explain social life and personal identity in atomist terms, as liberalism traditionally has. Or you could explain it in terms of shared goods, of language and other factors that cannot be accounted for by nor reduced to individuals—factors that I've called 'irreducibly social' (Taylor 1990).

So, at the ontological level I'm a communitarian. However, the mistake has been to assume that a communitarian stance at this level necessarily commits one to a communitarian stance at the advocacy level and vice versa. This is a mistake because it is possible for someone to have a communitarian or holist ontology and to value liberalism's individual rights. Wilhelm von Humboldt seems to be an example of this.

The confusion really comes from the fact that 'liberalism' too has many meanings, as I said above. One rather narrow philosophy has arrogated the name to itself in the English-speaking academy in recent years, associated with the names of John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and Bruce Ackerman, for instance. These have been deeply concerned with the importance of the neutrality of the liberal state; in pursuit of this, they have often tried to define liberalism in terms of procedure rather

than of substantive ends. They make autonomy their highest good and are less concerned with participation as intrinsically valuable. But the liberal tradition, on any sensible definition, includes people like Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, L.T. Hobhouse, T.H. Green and Humboldt, just to mention a few, who weren't orthodox 'liberals' in today's narrow sense. It's time we took the word back from the contemporary sect.

**RA:** Mary Wollstonecraft could be another figure in this resurrection of a richer liberalism. Although she does rate independence highly, she also values participation, citizenship and the extension of community feeling and love for the wider society.

**CT:** Yes, I thoroughly agree.

**RA:** So you're a communitarian at both the ontological and the advocacy levels. You're a communitarian ontologically because you think this is the correct way to explain social life and you're an advocate because you think that acknowledging and affirming some of the irreducibly social goods that you identify at the ontological level is important. However, this does not mean that you must throw out the liberal baby with the atomist bathwater. Yet one important aspect of liberalism that you reject entirely is the ideal of the neutral state (Taylor 1994: 251–3; Goodin and Pettit 1993: 374). Can you explain why? Would it be logically possible for another communitarian to retain this as an ideal?

**CT:** There are lots of objections to the neutral state. One way of putting the case against it is that it is impossible. Think of family policy as an example. Many modern democratic states have tried to make things easier for families in the traditional sense, heterosexual married couples with children. They have provided child allowances, tax breaks of various kinds, and so on. The main reasons have been that everyone recognises the supreme interest that all people in a society share that the next generation be brought up healthy, sane, sharing democratic values, etc. Now the family is being challenged in various ways. Some people live in groups including adults and children, but the adults are not the standard married couple. Others wish to live together in some kind of sexual union without children. So there is some reason to look again at traditional policy. Perhaps the category of 'family' which should be the recipient of assistance should be broadened?

One can take different positions on this. But one thing one cannot do is pretend that there is a safe neutral position, in which the state adopts a neutral stance on the issue of the family. You might think you were doing this if you cancelled all child allowance and all the tax breaks to any clusters of people living together. But then the government would have to get into the business of child support in other ways—e.g., coping in orphanages with the children whose parent(s) couldn't cope unaided. In effect, this would be taking a stance against

the family. There's no way to be neutral. Neutral liberalism is an angelic view, unconnected to the real world in which democracies function.

**RA:** Communitarianism is sometimes associated with republicanism (Goodin and Pettit 1993: 309, 571), and you identify your position with civic humanism, a tradition that has borne many of the republican ideals, such as the self-government of a free people. I'd welcome your reflections on two issues connected with this. In the 1990s republicanism has become an important issue on the Australian political agenda, but among republicans the debate is whose republic? Or what sort of republic should we have? Would your communitarian standpoint yield any recommendations in this regard?

Secondly, although Canada is also a constitutional monarchy, republicanism is barely mentioned there. Are Canadians impervious to this possibility, and if so, why? Is it that political debate has been so dominated by the Quebec question that there is neither room nor energy for a republican movement or is it that with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Westminster system has been so modified that the Crown seems irrelevant to Canadian political life?

**CT:** With regard to my standpoint, a 'republican' in the sense in which I define myself is not necessarily an anti-monarchist—in the era of constitutional monarchy, anyway. Republicanism, or civic humanism, is about the intrinsic value of participatory self-rule. In the light of my point above, it is interesting to remember that this is another basic good, celebrated by many liberals (e.g. de Tocqueville, J.S. Mill) which is off the map of today's liberals.

With regard to Canada, the fact that it is a constitutional monarchy is a barely noticed feature of political life. Canadians seem rarely to think about it. But in various parts of the country, there is a strong sense of the importance of participation. In the October 30, 1995 referendum in Quebec, voter participation was 94%. I believe this is equal to or greater than Australia, where voting is compulsory. The point is not just this fact, but the self-congratulations with which Quebecers from both sides greeted it. We (Canadians) are sometimes a little too smug about our democracy, but we value this dimension of it highly, unlike our neighbours to the South. This is a sign of widespread 'republican' sentiment in our society.

**RA:** I'm surprised that you're so insouciant about the monarchy, constitutional or otherwise, given the importance you attribute to symbols in political life. Surely in the case of the former dominions, the monarchy is a symbol of rule from elsewhere? And, when they are multicultural societies like Canada and Australia, that elsewhere might seem a very foreign place to substantial minorities?

**CT:** I don't have anything against or for monarchy as such. Constitutional monarchy can be part of a people's historical evolution towards liberal societies—as one might argue for Britons, although here there is plainly room for dispute, and some have held that the holdover



of the Imperial Monarchy in Britain has given more weight to the forces of hierarchy and stasis. But this plainly is not built in to monarchy as such, as one can see in the much more different, and decidedly non-Imperial, Scandinavian royal houses, which seem integrated into the democratic consciousness of their respective polities—though here I speak as a not very knowledgeable outsider. Then there is the Spanish case, where Juan Carlos intervened decisively at the time of the post-Franquist putsch on the side of democracy.

As far as Canada is concerned, the monarchy is barely noticed and it isn't an issue. We certainly don't think of it as rule from elsewhere. But the British connection has long ago shrunk to a minor feature of our society, whereas it probably bulks larger in Australia.

**RA:** Despite Jeremy Waldron's claim that an antipathy exists between communitarians and defenders of rights (Goodin and Pettit 1993: 582), your brand of communitarianism accommodates typically liberal goods like rights. If this works in theory, how does it work in practice? How do you interpret the impact that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has on Canadian political life? Does this bear out your claim that communitarians need not eschew all elements of liberalism? Has the Charter even strengthened the sense of community in Canadian political life now that all citizens are officially rights bearers and can appeal to the Supreme Court if their rights are infringed? The relationship between rights and political community is of more than academic interest to Australian readers because sporadic mention is made of introducing a Bill of Rights here.

**CT:** Rights and their entrenchment constitute one dimension of liberalism, and liberals of all kinds support them. The issue around Charters concerns how much of our political life ought to be carried on through the building of legislative majorities which enact laws, and how much through the decisions of courts. In other words, the question is; what kinds of issues ought to be settled where?

I don't think anyone in today's liberal democracies would say that no questions can receive their ultimate resolution in the courts. Obviously, there are basic rights—to life, to free speech, to due process etc.—where the courts ought to be able to trump wayward legislatures. On the other hand, I see a real danger in the present American scene, where so much political life is determined by Supreme Court decisions.

There are several things which seem wrong with this. The first is that rights polarise. Legislatures can, and often have to, compromise. But rights challenges are generally posed in all-or-nothing fashion.

The second problem is that judicial review can take on such importance that it begins to drain energy from the patient building of legislative majorities. Certain high-profile issues, phrased in black-and-white terms, attract citizen energy through single-issue organisations. Abortion is a good example on the American scene. The strength of these organisations in turn makes the party system more fragile. The

inability of this weakened system to deliver anything meaningful in legislation further strengthens single-issue politics, and so on.

Thirdly, the political weight put on the judicial system is more than it can bear. Witness the highly politicised procedures of nomination to the US Supreme Court, which are already producing their harvest of cynicism. This situation is aggravated by the immense emotional and dramatic investment of Americans in their judicial system, which latterly produced the scandalous O.J. Simpson soap opera, and the deep disaffection in the aftermath of the verdict.

Of course, none of these maladies on the US scene follow necessarily from entrenching Charters of Rights. But they represent dangers to keep in mind when framing such a Charter.

**RA:** Continuing the communitarian approach to political institutions and arrangements, you have described yourself as 'a strong federalist' (Taylor 1989b: 27). One reason for this is that federalism decentralises power and so is more conducive to citizen participation and empowerment at many levels. But isn't there a danger that decentralising power also fragments the sense of community that you value or at least that it reinforces local feelings of community while eroding the wider community of the state? Can't federalism also make it harder for collective programs and policies to be implemented as these can be vetoed at many points?

**CT:** Yes, federalism can also weaken ties. Federalism is a gamble. But it is eminently worth it, for two reasons. One is the one you mention: it allows units to exist which are closer to the people governed. The second is that it can allow multi-national states to exist in which all the components are recognised. This is the principle from which Canada has been departing, to our great peril. The alternatives to federalism are undemocratic empires (ex-USSR) or over one thousand mini nation-states or some kind of quasi-federal arrangement where a unitary state devolves certain powers to a region. Democracy can't do without federalism.

**RA:** One of the things you have proposed as a way to accommodate Quebec within the Canadian federation is asymmetrical federalism (Taylor 1992; 1994: 254). According to this notion, a federation can be made up of states that have different amounts and sorts of power. So, for example, one or some states might have power over employment and training policy or education or health in their domains while other states concede this power to the centre. This unequal distribution of powers is premised on the idea that the parts can belong to the whole differently—shared membership and a sense of belonging do not require strict equality and uniformity among the components.

Although you developed this notion in the context of Quebec's place within Canada, could it be relevant to Australia? Of course there is not the Francophone/Anglophone linguistic and cultural divide here but many of the other issues facing Canadian society resemble those facing



Australia. Things such as multiculturalism, governing a large but thinly populated terrain, reconciliation with the native population and the ways different states are adjusting to changes in the international economy are just some of the two countries' shared concerns.

**CT:** I don't feel competent to answer about Australia, but the principle of asymmetry is certainly valid elsewhere in Canada and even outside federations. Two unitary states which have allowed and/or are about to allow some measure of devolution to some regions are Spain and the UK. In the Spanish case, the devolution to Catalonia seems to have been a great success, and headed off a clash which had deep historical roots, and where the anger at the Franquist suppression of the language was still fresh in people's minds. The next Labour government in the UK will set up an assembly in Edinburgh. All of this is part of the process whereby mature democracies will be able to accommodate more than one nation within a single state. But whether something like this might work outside the multi-nation context, I have no idea.

**RA:** I suggested above that the question of Quebec and its future has dominated the Canadian political agenda. Within Canada you are well known for your support for the preservation and promotion of Francophone culture and for Quebec remaining in the federation. You returned from Oxford to get involved in the 1980 referendum on Quebec sovereignty and you have again been involved in the 'No' campaign in the 1995 referendum asking whether Quebecers support sovereignty. Is this stand informed by your communitarian philosophy? If so, how do you respond to the argument that communitarian arguments can easily be marshalled in support of independence for Quebec? As a civic humanist, you emphasise citizen empowerment and having 'a strong sense of identity with the community in which you live' (Taylor 1989b: 25). From this standpoint, it could be that after endless debate the Quebec community, or its majority anyway, has decided that it prefers self-government, rule by 'us', rather than belonging to a government that it feels is alien and distant—rule by 'them'. It could be that the Quebecers feel a history of humiliation at the hands of English Canada and that independence will be one of those 'climactic transitions' you refer to (Taylor 1989a) which will shape the community's future identity and transvalue their past.

**CT:** Quebec independence might easily happen. One might even say that that is now more likely than not, after the result of October 30—not that I'm giving up the fight! There is nothing illegitimate in Quebec's push for independence in my view. But I'm against it because I think that there is a better way to be in this turn of the century than organising oneself in one's own narrow nation-state, following the classical model of the last century and a half. There are much better chances for openness, for complex identities, for the kind of universalism and mutual enrichment which comes from co-existing differences, within multi-national states than within the classical nation-state. I under-

stand why so many Quebecers yearn for the old model. They couldn't have it when it was in its heyday, and they have a deep hunger to live the experience. But I don't think this is the best path for us, and I'm going to go on trying to convince people here, and in the rest of Canada (which is now itself turning back to its old intolerance) that we have a richer and more human future together.

**RA:** This concern with 'openness, . . . complex identities . . . and [the] mutual enrichment which comes from co-existing differences' sounds thoroughly liberal to me, if we use liberal in the richer, non-sectarian sense you're suggesting. In fact, I'm reminded of the quotation from Humboldt which provides the epigraph to Mill's *On Liberty*:

The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.

Could it be that your major approaches to and concerns for social and political life could be accommodated by liberalism, broadly conceived, and that the communitarian label could be abandoned altogether when discussing your standpoint?

**CT:** Yes, if we really recovered a rich liberal theory, able to recognise the diversity of goods that we seek, then we wouldn't need to mount a 'communitarian' critique of liberalism. A complex liberalism, more in the spirit of some of the founding figures, say Mill or de Tocqueville, is what we need today. A continuing danger is from the narrowing of ethical vision which dominates most modern moral philosophy. We believe that everything can be derived from one principle; and then we begin to believe that only one set of goals is legitimate, and then we lose sight of how we're marginalising goods which are also very important to us, and which may even in the long run be essential to the survival of the good we openly seek. De Tocqueville showed, for instance, how a certain kind of citizen cohesion is necessary in the long run even for the survival of negative liberty. People trapped in a tunnel vision, seeking only negative liberty whatever the cost to the community, could be sawing off the branch on which they sit. Bad philosophy doesn't cause this kind of self-destructive behaviour, but it can prevent you seeing it happen until it's too late. We urgently need to recover a theory of complex liberalism. **AQ**

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## Notes

1. For example, the recent collection of Baier's essays includes titles such as 'Trust and Antitrust', 'Trust and its vulnerabilities', 'Sustaining Trust' and 'Trusting People'.
2. Among the contributors are Geoffrey Blainey on 'Citizenship: its meaning, privileges and obligations' pp 45-50 and Glenn Loury on 'Values and judgements: creating social incentives for good behaviour', pp 33-44. See also the *IPA Review* (1995) (48)2 subtitled 'What's happened to community spirit?'