

Social Justice in the Post-Affluent Society

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Operating under the assumption that the current technological revolution will result in increased unemployment due to smart machines being used in roles traditionally occupied by humans, this article addresses how societal promotion of communitarian pursuits over affluence will lead to increased social justice. A greater reallocation of wealth can be expected when communitarianism thrives because social bonds create a sense of obligation to support less endowed members. Furthermore, even though the shift to a post-affluent society has not yet occurred, millions are already committed to pro-social pursuits and are demonstrating that when people of means embrace social justice, they are willing to share more readily. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2017 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

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The article spells out the reasons and provides evidence in support of the hypothesis that if the culture of a society shifts from one that extols affluence to one that extols communitarian pursuits—major gains for social justice will become much more probable. An obvious reason to expect that this hypothesis will hold true is that the more members of a particular social grouping view each other as members of the same

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community—the more they are likely to be willing to support reallocations of wealth that reduce inequality in that society. However, there are much deeper and stronger links between a communitarian culture and social justice. Before I can outline those and present relevant evidence, I need to outline the reasons such a culture shift is called for and what it may encompass.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

- a. In the near future, a large number of jobs will be lost to smart (AI-equipped) instruments, machines, and robots.
- b. Unlike previous technological revolutions, this one is unlikely to generate a large number of new jobs.
- c. Hence, underemployment will increase and many of those who do find jobs will be paid poorly and have few benefits. Indeed many will work in the gig economy.
- d. Those who design, produce, and own the smart instruments will increase their wealth, leading to growing inequality.
- e. As a result, most people—who currently expect to improve their economic conditions and to be able to bequeath to their children a better life than they had—will be very frustrated.
- f. As a result of these trends—as well as others not explored here—these frustrations will result in growing hostility toward the government, the affluent, minorities, and foreigners. These trends are already visible in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the US.
- g. These consequences can be mitigated if those who have *their basic needs well sated and secured* find contentment in pursuits that are not labor or capital intensive and hence have low costs. These communitarian pursuits include spending more time cultivating meaningful relationships; in spiritual pursuits widely understood (from religion to meditation); and in community activism. Reference is not to a culture that favors an austere life but one in which one's consumption is capped at a level at which true needs are fully sated but status goods are avoided –and are sated through one or more communitarian pursuits. (To flag the difference between an austere culture and the one just outlined, I refer to the latter one as a capping

society, one in which a person's quest for material goods is not minimized but bounded).²

Such a society will be much less taxing on the environment, and much more sustainable, than the affluent society. This is the case because transcendental activities require relatively few scarce resources, fossil fuels, or other sources of physical energy. Social activities (such as spending more time with one's children) require time and personal energy but not large material or financial outlays. (Often those who spend large amounts of money on their kids' toys or entertainment bond less with them than those whose relations are less mediated by objects.) The same holds for cultural and spiritual activities such as prayer, meditation, enjoying and making music, art, sports, and adult education. True, consumerism has turned many of these pursuits into expensive endeavors. However, one can break out of this mentality and find that it is possible to engage in most transcendental activities quite profoundly using a moderate amount of goods and services. One does not need designer clothes to enjoy the sunset or shoes with fancy labels to benefit from a hike. The Lord does not listen better to prayers read from a leather-bound Bible than to those read from a plain one, printed on recycled paper. In short, the transcendental society is much more sustainable than consumer capitalism.

RELEVANCE FOR ATTAINING A SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER LEVEL OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Much less obvious are the ways the capped culture serves social justice. Social justice entails transferring wealth from those disproportionally endowed to those who are underprivileged. A major reason such reallocation of wealth has been surprisingly limited in free societies is that those who command the "extra" assets tend also to be those who are politically powerful. Promoting social justice by organizing those with less, and forcing those in power to yield some of their assets to those less powerful, has had limited success in democratic

² For more discussion on these points, see:

Etzioni, Amitai. 2013. "A Silk Purse out of a Sow's Ear" *Journal of Modern Wisdom* 2;

Etzioni, Amitai. 2016. "Happiness is the Wrong Metric." *Society* 53.3: 246-257;

Etzioni, Amitai. "Happiness is the Wrong Metric" (extended version).

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2753233;

Etzioni, Amitai. 2015. "The Five Minute Communitarian"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKA4JjkiU4A>.

countries and has led to massive bloodshed in others. However, one must expect if those in power were to embrace the capped culture, they would be much more ready to share than otherwise. They will be able to find much contentment without hogging their surplus.

In exploring these arguments with various colleagues and audiences, I found that many readily agreed with all the steps—until the last one. They held that to expect that people who find contentment in communitarian pursuits rather than affluence-maximizing ones, will be more willing to significantly share their wealth with others, was ‘unrealistic, utopian or visionary’. The purpose of the following discussion is to support the thesis that a shift from an affluent society to a communitarian one will enable major gains in social justice. The thesis is based on two arguments, one rather familiar and hence only briefly treated, and the other in need of more elaboration and support.

1. THE REALLOCATION EFFECTS OF COMMUNAL BONDS

Sociologists used to hold that modern society arose as people shifted from being members of small communities (i.e. villages), in which people knew each other personally and had a strong sense of mutual obligations—to a society that encompasses millions, a so called mass society (i.e. cities), in which one acts like free standing individuals, each pursuing their self-interest. They refer to this thesis as a shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*.³ Initially this shift was considered as enhancing human values as villages were considered oppressive and cities as liberating. However, communitarians pointed out that when people cut off their social moorings, they felt isolated and bereft, and acted out in anti-social ways. In response, communitarians called for a restoration of communal bonds, albeit much less encompassing and overpowering than the traditional ones. To the extent that this renewal of bonds has been achieved, most often not as a result of some kind of sociological analysis, but out of people yearning for social bonds, people have been content.

The most telling example in American society of the role of social bonds in supporting a sense of obligation to the less endowed members is that of ethnic groups. Typically, immigrants to the USA are absorbed by communities with people of their own kind, in neighborhoods (such as Chinatown, South Boston, Spanish Harlem, Little Havana) and

³ Toennies, Ferdinand. [1887] 1955. *Community and Association (Gemeinschaft und gesellschaft)*. Trans. Charles P. Loomis. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

associations (such as Jewish charities, Catholic charities and many others). Members of these groups shared resources with the new immigrants, provided welfare, housing, work and otherwise shared some of their goods. (These immigrants gradually acquired other affiliations and memberships, which protected them from being dominated by any one group). This holds for many other kinds of communities including those based on faith, gender, mission among others. It follows that the more people in the post-affluent society become more communitarian (in the sense of forging new communities or strengthening or renewing their bonds to one community or another), the more reallocation of wealth can be expected.

2. THE ROLE OF NORMATIVE CONTENT

A case study serves to introduce my next point.⁴ John graduated from Columbia University with an MBA and at the same time with a JD from NYU, after studying for four years, and accumulating considerable debt. He could have had his pick of Wall Street jobs, but instead moved to Chicago to work at an anti-poverty bank, where his salary was a modest one. He married Rachel, who he met at law school. In an era where talented lawyers were in high demand and gained high salaries and bonuses, she instead chose to work for Planned Parenthood, with a similarly modest salary. They did not live a life of poverty but what might be called a version of voluntary simplicity. They were more likely to go out to a pizza joint than a four star restaurant; they did ski but in nearby places; and they put their kids in public schools. Their son became active in high school as an elected head of an activist group that fought to make the school greener, and then he ended up in college. He spent part of his time tutoring a child in a disadvantaged neighborhood and built a home for Habitat for Humanity during his spring break.

Using a high conservative estimate of the differences in salary bonuses and benefits the couple gained and would have gained if they worked on Wall Street or a major law firm, assuming early retirement at 65, they gave up some 20 million dollars of consumption in order to serve the social goals they believed in, helping those less endowed. Because they believed in what they were doing, they were at least as content as those who worked on Wall Street or major law firms.

There are already---before a transition to a communitarian society---millions of people, upper middle class ones, that choose such lives which

⁴ Identifying details have been changed.

Amitai Etzioni

are centered on pro-social pursuits and reduced consumption, feeling enabled rather than deprived or coerced. Moreover, most of these people subscribe to religious faith or left liberal belief systems, that favor reallocation. These are people who embrace beliefs associated with the Social Gospel, liberation theology, Tikkun Olam, and left liberal or social democratic beliefs.⁵

Many of the supporters of Sanders, who called for raising taxes on the rich and were upper middle class young people, whose income (or that of their parents) would suffer but they enthusiastically supported him, because they believed in the ideals he was speaking for. They are but the most recent example of the observation that when people of means embrace a reallocation belief, they will be ready to share more than those who do not.

Economists may argue that these kinds of believers gain other satisfactions than those they would derive from consumer goods, such as self-esteem and camaraderie, from these acts, and hence they are not truly altruistic. This matters not, because even if they do agree to share the material surplus because of selfish reasons, these believers are still more willing to share than the non-believers. Hence, the more the communitarians beliefs are embraced, the more social justice one should expect.

⁵ Robert Putnam and David Campbell. 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. (New York: Simon and Schuster). See also: "Connected to Give: Faith Communities." 2014. *Jumpstart Labs*.