

The links of community according to liberalism and communitarianism

Francesco VIOLA*

The current debate between liberalism and communitarianism is substantially a conflict about the way of interpreting the concept of political community. This aspect of the controversy is however rarely highlighted, and this gives rise to misunderstanding and equivocation. Both liberals and communitarians show a certain lack of interest in any careful thematization of the concept of "political community". In fact, the term 'community'- has become popular once again in social and political philosophy without anyone really knowing why.

This is not the place to fill such a serious gap, but it may be possible to help to clarify the questions and problems that liberalism and communitarianism obliged to face if they are to present a satisfactory conception of political community.

We shall first seek to demonstrate that the idea of a political community depends on the way we interpret the pre-political links between those who belong to it.

We shall then argue that the emerging of the good of personal and cultural identity is the principal demand directed at the political community.

*. Department of Studies on Politics, Law and Society. University of Palermo.

Finally, we shall defend the need not to confuse the political community with the other forms of community, in particular the cultural community.

1. The tasks of the political community according to liberalism

The idea of community is closely linked to the reasons for the formation of a commonality, i.e. to the benefits that common life brings to the individuals participating therein. If there is a community, the common good must be significant, i.e. it must concern the benefits of those taking part in it. These benefits are both the object of social cooperation and its justification. One need only consider the fundamental questions that give rise to theories of justice to realize the nature of these benefits.

Theories of justice have moved on from answers to questions regarding the uncertainty of interests to answers to questions regarding the uncertainty of identity¹. When an attempt is made to resolve the conflict of distribution, which concerns the division of costs and benefits among the participants in social life, it is assumed that the identities are already established and that it is merely a question of harmonizing preferences in a communitarian context. The rules of justice will therefore be the justified restrictions of persons already identified outside communitarian life. Consequently, social aggregation will be a "community of preferences", i.e. an attempt to achieve the harmonious coexistence of preferences which in principle vary considerably. This is the idea of community as seen in the liberal tradition.

An idea of community based on these premises is composed of the following elements: its participants are individuals who have already been identified; the individuals have

1. See S. MAFFETONE, S. VECA (eds.), *Filosofia, politica, società*, Donzelli, Roma 1995, pp. 193-206.

preferences that are chosen freely and independently; the individuals need cooperation in order to realize their preferences; the individuals agree on the rules coordinating their preferences and on the authorities ensuring their application.

This model is however still incomplete, as it lacks the determination that supports the possibility of the realization of this idea of community. Were the possibility of the aggregation of preferences entirely entrusted to an authoritative body — i.e. to central state organs, however democratically constituted — the idea of coercive restriction would be dominant and, strictly speaking, one could not speak of "community" at all. It is precisely for this reason that this model of community has been significantly integrated by the fundamental role played by the institution of the market. It is generally held that the market is able to aggregate individual preferences agnostically in relation to a particular conception of the common good. There would thus be two methods for the coordination of preferences: the agnostic, neutral method of the market and the directive, authoritarian method of the State. The ideal solution is obviously to reduce the second to a minimum, as the market appears to a large extent to be capable of pooling and coordinating different preferences.

The market thus constitutes the pre-political link of this conception of political community. However, it is important to note that the market can actually perform this function only when there is some considerable convergence in the preferential orders among the persons concerned, as K. Arrow demonstrated. However different and contrasting these personal preferences may be, they must belong, generally speaking, to the same order or category if they are to be coordinated and calculated by the market system. But in cases where personal preferential priorities vary and basic conflicts arise, the market is unserviceable and loses its agnostic character, to which it in fact owes its success.

This is precisely what has happened with the pluralism of contemporary society. This should not be interpreted as the pluralism of preferences belonging to the same category of benefits, according to the interpretation of classical liberal-

ism, but rather as the pluralism of categories of preferences. In this sense, pluralism creates serious difficulties for liberalism, which has always been its historical supporter, or rather it creates difficulties for the liberal conception of community, as outlined above. Basically, despite the unlimited opening to plurality of choice, the liberal individual of modernity is a faceless and unencumbered self, governed by a mechanism of self-interest and a capacity for rational calculation. This self makes it possible to see the market as an exchange of goods at zero sum and the state as being based on a mechanism of the threat of disadvantages or the promise of advantages. The problem of the identity of these selves is unimportant or, at least, must be made unimportant. This model today appears to be an oversimplification.

The complexity and variety in the hierarchy of preferences sets us before differentiated individuals who are indissolubly linked to their identity and who consider this to be a priority asset of social importance.

Since —as we have pointed out— identity has begun to be part of a political demand, it is now necessary to attempt to identify which basic constitutive aspects of identity are of political importance.

2. The elements of identity

If we now consider identity as a pre-political link and a basic good that the political community has to protect and promote, we must reduce the elements composing it to three main categories.

The first group of characters has a biological, cultural and historical dimension. Cultural diversities are diversities from birth. They confer an identity that has not been chosen and does not create a commonality among them. In a multiethnic and multiracial society the citizens, from this point of view, feel separated. This type of identity therefore constitutes one of the most considerable difficulties for a political community. The political question that concerns it differs radically

from the logic of free choice and has to be related to that of the free acceptance of what one already is and to the recognition of other people's diversity.

The second group of characters regards the existential phases of human life. Human beings have to be considered in the particular condition in which happen to be, i.e. as young people, as adults, as the elderly, as the sick, as handicapped persons, as workers. From the existential point of view, human life passes through stages that are often beyond our will. But these stages potentially come to all mankind and the demands that they present can be understood by each and every one of us.

The last category of diversity is linked to voluntary choices. All free and responsible persons try to give their lives the form that to them seems most appropriate. In a free and multidimensional society the result is a greater variety of ways of interpreting the common good and consequently a greater variety of personal identities. However, the different personal choices do not prevent the possibility of a certain communication and commonality, as they all refer to the same social and political environment, from which they draw the means and ways for their realization. The reciprocal recognition of the legitimacy of one another's existential projects is the basis for cooperation in the construction of a political society.

Identity is therefore made up of natural and cultural elements, of existential aspects and ethical choices.

The evolution of the rights of man started from man as an abstraction, without any qualities, after which it extended to states of life and, finally, with predictable logical consequentially, to diversity by birth and culture.

It is obvious that liberalism and communitarianism are distinguished by the different interpretation they give to these diversities and by the different accentuations of the importance of one or the other.

Liberalism places great importance on ethical diversity and tends to consider diversity by birth as irrelevant to problems of identity. The greatest "communitarian" effort of liber-

alism leads to considerations of cultural structures as "contexts of choice", i.e. as the market of available values². According to liberalism, our true identity is not the one we discover we possess, without any voluntary act, but rather the one we freely opt for. Cultures should therefore be protected in order to ensure the freedom of choice of their adherents, and not just to preserve their collective identity.

Communitarianism places decisive importance on diversity by birth and maintains that our existential projects always have certain irremovable cultural presuppositions in common, which we do not choose ourselves but find ourselves experiencing.

The argument about the existence of collective rights linked to communitarian and cultural contexts is substantially an application of the debate on the prevalence or otherwise of diversities by birth (i.e. cultural diversities) over ethical diversities.

It is clearly evident today that the conflict between liberalism and communitarianism mainly concerns the way in which the demand for the political recognition of cultural diversity is interpreted. This demand is basically a demand for the recognition of a form of life that is common to a group of individuals.

It is significant that when communitarians oppose liberals they accuse them of not recognizing individual rights, but that when they have to justify the basis of these rights they relate them to the protection of the value per se of a form of life. This transformation of the original demand is evident in the thought of Charles Taylor, who starts from the rights of individuals to identity, but then objectivizes cultural traditions in distinct values which clash with the individuals' own rights.

According to Sandel, the story of my life is always linked to the story of the community to which I belong, for it is

2. See W. KYMLICKA, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991, pp. 164 ss.

linked to interpersonal relations without which, for me, there would not be any story. This communitarian conception of self can be taken to the opposite extreme of the decontextualized individual of liberalism. What appears at first sight to be my moral equipment is in reality common, in a multiplicity of meanings, because others have contributed to it. In reality, I am participating, with others, in a common identity made up of things held in common. A consequence of this is that the use of my ethical equipment must have an effect on the community. Even my own sacrifice is justified if this leads to an extension of the common identity³.

If we were at this point to compare liberalism with communitarianism, we should have to say that the cultural community has now taken the place of the market, because it too can be regarded as a sort of pre-political link, with the difference however that the market, at least in its liberistic form, is certainly not a community and therefore not a constitutive part of the identity of its participants. However, to speak of "cultural community" is not the same as speaking of "political community". To propose a constitutive conception of community does not mean attributing to "political community" a constitutive function of individual identities.

This point is often neglected in the current debate, despite its great importance for our discussion. It could indeed be held that the cultural community has a constitutive function in personal identity and, at the same time, that politics does not constitute a community in this sense. In other words, we could be communitarians from the first point of view and liberals from the other, attacking the liberals when they reduce social contexts to mere opportunities for interaction and attacking the communitarians when they see the political community as the logical development of a moral community that is already constituted or, at least, as the sign of the pre-existence of a moral community. This hypothesis can

3. M.J. SANDEL, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 1982, p. 143.

certainly be tested, although it requires further reflection on the relationship between culture and politics.

3. The difference between political community and cultural community

Any kind of commonality is not sufficient to create a community, not even if this commonality is significant. It is not sufficient that the participants in social life should share the final objectives and consider cooperation a good in itself. It is not sufficient that their interests should not always be antagonistic but in many case complementary and overlapping. A community cannot be reduced to an association, without the loss of its basic concept, nor can participation be reduced to cooperation, or a common bond to a relationship, or sharing to reciprocity, or that which is common to that which is collective⁴.

The communitarian way of increasing the value of a cultural community cannot at first be related to a single model. According to Sandel the primary communities are those of the nation or class, i.e. those that are in a certain sense already political. MacIntyre, in contrast, considers in particular the model of the family, the tribe, or neighbourhood relationships, i.e. communities of life. Taylor stresses the commonality of culture, i.e. the sharing of common horizons of sense as a precondition for the exercise of moral autonomy⁵. However, when all is said and done, the original links of community life are never strictly political, since political authority will always require cultural reasons on which to base its legitimization.

Both liberalism and communitarianism substantially treat cultural communities as if they were individuals that have already been identified previously and independently of poli-

4. *Id.*, pp. 150 ss.

5. See S. AVINERI and A. DE-SHALIT (eds.), *Communitarianism and Individualism*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 1992, p. 4.

tical life⁶. The difference lies mainly in the role allotted to political life: either the weak role of liberalism or the strong role of communitarianism. However, in either case, it is not politics that makes the community or produces the sense of belonging and the good of identity. If it is true that liberalism takes note of the "political community", it is also true that it gives this expression a metaphorical and reductive meaning, whereas communitarianism sees behind it, in every case, the force and compactness of the cultural community. The main difference between liberals and communitarians does not lie so much in the theory of State but in the mental conception of society, which for liberals is the market of existential choices and for communitarians is the sharing of a common way of life. And it has to be recognized that the facts seem to justify the liberals rather than the communitarians, but also that there are evident signs of a return of "civil society", i.e. of a civil society that presents itself in a manner not altogether in line with the principles of liberalism. Whatever the case, it is necessary to reconsider the concept of "political community".

The fact that the demand for recognition of the asset of identity is becoming ever more urgent means that in our post-modern society ethnocultural identities are in a state of insecurity and uncertainty. It is indeed the liberal society that instigates this loss of identity, which is a fertile soil for communitarianism⁷. In a society of separate individuals we feel the need to be reassured about our existential choices and we lose all sense certainty that they are good choices, also in other people's eyes. If they were not good choices, uncertainty would remain about the validity of them and, furthermore, we should feel rejected and excluded from common life. The political recognition of identity therefore plays the important role of reassuring individuals who place all the

6. See W. KYMLICKA, *Multicultural Citizenship. A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 1996.

7. See A. ETZIONI (ed.), *New Communitarian Thinking. Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities*, The University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 1995.

meaning of their lives in the choices they have made and in their existential projects. In the identity conflict, it is necessary to establish what each person politically is, i.e. each person's political subjectivity. But this means that politics contributes in some way to the construction of personal and collective identity. By this I mean that the political life itself not only presupposes identities that are already constituted, but also produces new identities. Thus, uncertainty about identity does not concern only that which one already is but also that which one wishes to become. A cultural minority often seeks not only to be recognized but also at the same time to participate in a collective cooperation with different identities, which may lead to new forms of common life. For this is the true content of the request for citizenship.

From this point of view the thesis of the flattening of the political community into a one-culture dimension is not only out of date but also unsupported by the historical experience of the past. Is it the State's task to achieve the co-existence of strangers? Is this indeed possible if they remain strangers? Is it not necessary that the State in some way should overcome this condition of strangeness?

Between the ethical State, which seeks to confer identity on its citizens by virtue of its authority, and the neutral State, which eliminates the problems of identity from the tasks of justice, there is the social State, which includes among its aims that of creating better conditions for the common search for the good of identity, i.e. a "social" State, in the sense of one "concerned with civil society". This means that a theory of justice has to include among the primary goods also that of identity. Since the determination of this good is uncertain, as it cannot be assumed that it is prior to, or independent of, political life, it is inevitable that justice should in some way take an interest in it. But it must not take an interest in the sense of predetermining what instead must be achieved by public discourse, but rather in the sense of rendering possible the cooperative dialogue that is essential if the loss of identity is to be overcome. The passage from the problem of the distribution of goods among already identified persons to the prob-

lem of the justification of the context within which this distribution is to take place, i.e. the passage from distributive to political justice, is not just a different way of interpreting the theory of justice but also a different way of interpreting politics and its relationship to civil society. In this sense the crisis of the social State must be interpreted as a forgetting of its legitimate function.

In this regard a political community, though neutral towards the way its citizens give form to their lives, cannot remain indifferent towards the general horizon of human good. If there is no protection for the perceptible conception of the good, pluralism would lead to the destruction of the very possibility of survival of the noblest components of our culture⁸. We in fact expect the State to safeguard our cultural heritage, the natural environment and art treasures, but in so doing we do not consider we are supporting an ethical State. The support of the State is necessary to guarantee the survival of a sufficient range of options for those who have not yet defined their existential projects.

Liberals object that one cannot deduce from this the consequence that the State must evaluate the particular conceptions of good and personal existential projects, as communitarians would like⁹. Here they are right, yet they should also recognize that the political community must have its own conception of the general horizons of the human good, a conception that is as wide-open as one will and therefore capable of distinguishing that which belongs to human progress from that which represents its decline.

If the task of the State is to achieve the coexistence of strangers, and if this coexistence is to be something more than a mere *modus vivendi*, its work will have to consist in making possible the "mutual domestication" (or civilization) that is the *raison d'être* of civil society. It is a question of cre-

8. J. RAZ, *The Morality of Freedom*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 1986, p. 162.

9. See, for instance, W. KYMLICKA, *Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Introduction*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990.

ating a common language that allows dialogue between diversities. Networks of co-responsibility are constructed on the basis of customs of living and reciprocal care.

If politics did not give rise to a communitarian dimension, it could not perform the function of the constitution of identifying collectivities, by means of which those who have similar problems of identification can aggregate and those who have different problems can recognize each other reciprocally in a cooperative dimension.

As it is characterized by diversity, the political society cannot be considered a moral community, which has a uniform vision of the good. Politics must be able to gather within it a vast plurality of conceptions of the good. They are not simply "tolerated" (i.e. "put up with"), but approved and ratified, although in a critical dimension.

Political life undoubtedly has many points of contact with a cultural community, because it cannot manage without cooperative contexts and forms of life. To work and live together, even among different identities, generates a community of history. It means having common memories and a common destiny. To have rights of citizenship does not mean primarily to find oneself in a given place governed by a given political authority, but is itself a cultural fact. However this is no justification for confusing the political community with the cultural community.

The objective of a cultural community is the conservation of its existential forms, which are in turn a function of personal and collective identity. Communitarian structures are the ultimate objective of the life of a cultural community. It is necessary to protect the habits and customs of the aborigines because otherwise the aborigines will lose their point of reference in the world. For a political community, in contrast, social practices and forms of life are the means by which individuals who are different from many points of view – also culturally – can communicate together and understand each other. But the objective of politics is not a cultural community but rather the discourse that it enables to take place between diversities.

In this sense, multiculturalism and pluralism highlight better the *raison d'être* of politics, the specific (if not the only) objective of which is to create channels of communication between those who do not already possess a commonality of ideas, interests and values.