

RICHARD CORNUELLE'S QUEST FOR COMMUNITY: REFLECTIONS ON "DE-NATIONALIZING COMMUNITY"

William Schambra

Introduction

For a man whose obituaries almost universally and exclusively affixed to him the label "libertarian," it may be surprising to hear that Richard Cornuelle described himself, in his presentation to the Philanthropy Roundtable entitled "De-Nationalizing Community," as a "closet communitarian for most of my life." He even claimed to have been "honored recently when a libertarian critic included me in his denunciation of Amitai," referring to his fellow panelist Amitai Etzioni, the liberal sociologist widely acclaimed as the founding theorist of modern communitarianism (1996, 10).

Yet this unusual and perhaps perplexing alignment of allies and antagonists was apparent early on in Cornuelle's career. In the January 16, 1970, issue of *Commonweal*, Etzioni remarked, "reluctantly, liberal Democrat that I am, I must admit that the Nixon Administration has come up with a rather good idea." That idea, based on Cornuelle's writings, was "Nixon's plan to activate a large variety of private citizens, groups, and institutions to launch and fuel overdue domestic reforms" (426).

Even then, critics denounced what they regarded as Cornuelle's apostasy from his early libertarian beliefs, acquired at the feet of Ludwig von Mises himself. In the first issue of *The Libertarian* (March 1, 1969), Murray Rothbard penned a scathing attack on "Creeping Cornuellism." Nixon's (and Cornuelle's) plan to activate private groups, in Rothbard's view, had about it "the smell of Mussolini's fascism, in which coercive government multiplied its power by mobilizing the support of masses of misguided 'volunteers' from among the citizenry" (2).

But Cornuelle's willingness to seek out unusual allies, even at the cost of

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Schambra, William. 2013-14. Richard Cornuelle's Quest for Community: Reflections on "De-Nationalizing Community." *Conversations on Philanthropy X*: 63-74. ISSN 1552-9592 ©The Philanthropic Enterprise.

upsetting those who should have been his political friends, was one of the most admirable features of his career, one that should be studied and emulated.

Defining and Redefining Community

Unlike so many of those friends, Cornuelle seemed to be driven by what Robert Nisbet (another sociologist much admired by Cornuelle) described as “the quest for community” (1990 [1962]). According to the standard political configurations of our day, that should have been enough to classify Cornuelle as a modern progressive liberal rather than a conservative or libertarian, for the latter tend to regard “community” as one of those cloying, sentimental expressions that trip far too readily off the tongues of bleeding-heart liberals.

But Cornuelle’s understanding of community defied such simple categorization. As he makes clear in “De-Nationalizing Community,” he could by no means embrace modern liberalism’s understanding of that concept. For liberalism had, in the twentieth century, turned its back on community’s “natural” forms—family, neighborhood, congregation, ethnic and voluntary association—within which citizens come together, directly and immediately, to solve their own problems according to their own moral and spiritual convictions. For Cornuelle, as for Tocqueville, only such small, local community associations could draw the otherwise isolated democratic individual into the vigorous, stimulating, socializing, and humanizing practice of self-governance, learned by undertaking public affairs together with one’s fellow citizens.

In place of local community, modern liberalism had instead devoted itself to the establishment of a great national community—a monumental effort to summon citizens out of their partial, parochial, ostensibly contemptible local allegiances in order to bring together one vast, tightly knit, integrated, continent-spanning family. Within that great community, as Herbert Croly famously put it, there would be a “subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose.” A citizen would begin to “think first of the State and next of himself,” and “individuals of all kinds will find their most edifying individual opportunities in serving their country.” Indeed, America would come to be bound together by a “religion of human brotherhood” which “can be realized only through the loving-kindness which individuals feel . . . particularly toward their fellow-countrymen” (1989, 453).

This great national community would be bound together not only by unifying sentiment but also by a vast, centralizing, rationalizing federal bureaucracy. The

latter would be staffed by professionals trained in the new social sciences, which for the first time would provide objective, neutral, universally accepted techniques for efficiently managing the national community, replacing contentious local political action with manifestly nonpartisan, centralized directives.

The old, clumsy, amateurish efforts of citizens to meet their own needs locally, at the bottom, would now be replaced by the smoothly humming delivery of social services from the top, managed by scientifically trained experts who alone could master the complex social and economic forces rapidly rendering local community obsolete and unsustainable. Self-governing citizens were no longer necessary nor desirable—they only cluttered up the process. It was best that they be reduced to compliant “clients” passively and gratefully consuming the expert services now so effectively delivered by government agencies.

As Cornuelle points out, modern philanthropy was neck-deep in these developments. The first large American foundations—Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Russell Sage—were ardent converts to the enormous potential of the modern social sciences, funding the first research universities where they were developed and taught; the first think tanks, where they were systematically applied to public policy; and the first national demonstration projects, which were designed to blaze the trail for larger, federally funded replicas.

But Cornuelle insisted that denationalizing—rather than nationalizing—community was the direction we must take, thus estranging himself from the great liberal project of the twentieth century. That did in fact push him much closer to the libertarian movement of his day, especially since dissent from the national community project seemed to be limited at mid-century to a handful of struggling, obscure libertarian economists such as his teacher, von Mises.

Libertarian Anathema

Nonetheless, this estrangement from modern liberalism did not push Cornuelle all the way into the libertarian camp. For after the prescribed denationalizing, some form of community would have to be reestablished, and libertarianism didn’t seem to be entirely comfortable with the idea of community.

This was apparent early on, even before Rothbard’s reaction to “Cornuellism,” in the libertarian response to Robert Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics & Order of Freedom*, to which Cornuelle’s work was much indebted. Frank Meyer’s *In Defense of Freedom* tucked into “New Conservatives,” such as Nisbet, who accurately saw the “danger of the

aggrandizing modern state” but unhappily “react[ed] with equal vigor against the idea of a political order grounded in the freedom of individual persons” (1996 [1962], 128-129). All Nisbet had to offer was “the subtler, quieter tyranny of ‘customarily’ imposed community, in which no one can escape from the deadly environment of hereditarily or geographically imposed association” (130). Local community, for Meyer, seemed to carry only a slightly less pungent whiff of Mussolini’s fascism.

Echoes of this libertarian critique can be heard today in its conflict with social or religious conservatism. Although local religious congregations may be among the few remaining bastions of community in many neighborhoods, policies designed to preserve the moral climate surrounding them tend to make libertarians distinctly uncomfortable.

As Meyer suggests, Nisbet’s intention, like Cornuelle’s after him, was not to resurrect a vigorous, self-sufficient individualism as a counterweight to national community. Indeed, Nisbet argued that individualism actually fuels the growth of the centralized state, for humans possess an irrepressible need to overcome isolation and to be in community—a need all too readily met by Croly’s offering of the great national family.

Nisbet and Cornuelle aimed instead to satisfy the quest for community by restoring the stratum of institutions and associations that lie between modern liberalism’s all-encompassing state and libertarianism’s detached individual—family, neighborhood, religious congregation, ethnic and voluntary association, and other forms of local community. Here, once again, otherwise isolated individuals would develop into public-spirited citizens by meeting face-to-face in vigorous, stimulating, even contentious debate, formulating plans for solving the problems they themselves deemed most important, and then carrying out those plans in mutual endeavor. As Cornuelle put it, “The spirit of community will be revived as we succeed in devising ways to reinvolve people in solving the complex problems they see about them, not just in talking about them and certainly not in petitioning government to solve them” (1996, 32).

Unusual Allies

Thus the preference for “intermediate associations” or “mediating structures” seemed to put Cornuelle at odds with modern liberals and libertarians alike. But it did open up the possibility of acquiring some unusual allies, especially over on the left side of the ideological spectrum. The fact that Cornuelle welcomed and

embraced that possibility—that he was willing to proclaim himself a “closet communitarian,” considering himself honored when denounced by libertarians—set him apart not only from his natural libertarian constituency but even from his fellow “mediating structures” advocates. It is an example that the rest of us should explore and follow.

We tend to forget today, for instance, that it was on the political left that the most potent and theoretically sophisticated critique of liberalism’s national community project developed, in the early 1960s. (Libertarians and conservatives had their go at challenging the national community idea when Barry Goldwater took on LBJ’s Great Society in 1964, with notoriously unsatisfactory results.) That era’s New Left insisted that the Great Society was, in spite of its aspirations to build a national community, in fact radically anti-communitarian, characterized by (in the Port Huron Statement’s formulation) “loneliness, estrangement, [and] isolation” (1962). This was inevitable in a society governed by what they described as a massive, distant, alienating bureaucracy, linked closely with giant business concerns in that unholy alliance the New Left came to call “corporate liberalism.”

As an alternative, the New Left offered “participatory democracy.” A society organized according to that principle would devolve major political and economic decision-making to small, tightly knit local groups, within which people would “share in the social decisions determining the quality and direction of their lives.” Wini Breines observed of the New Left that “a basic if rarely articulated purpose of the movement was to create communities of equality, direct democracy and solidarity. In bold contrast to the values of competition, individualism, and efficiency, the movement yearned for and occasionally achieved the community it sought” (1989, 27). As Greg Calvert of the SDS put it, “while fighting to destroy the power of the loveless anti-community, we would ourselves create the community of love—The Beloved Community” (as quoted in Breines, 48).

Although the New Left has disappeared from the political scene, another “mediating structures” group commonly located on the left (incorrectly, they insist) is the community organizing tradition associated with Saul Alinsky. By now it will come as no surprise that Cornuelle claimed friendship with Alinsky—something that very few today would have the courage to do, now that we’ve settled on Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) as a source of President Obama’s carefully veiled socialist impulses (1978).

Nonetheless, the IAF has long been a highly effective critic of the centralized, paternalistic state and its demoralizing, dependency-creating effect on its

“clients.” The IAF takes its bearings from a Cornuellean vision of citizens genuinely engaged once again in self-governance, promising in its “Iron Law of Organizing” “never to do for somebody what they can do for themselves.” Although under Alinsky the IAF was highly skeptical toward working with local religious congregations—an essential building block of local civic culture—students of organizing such as Harry Boyte, Mark Warren, and Mike Gecan point out that it now increasingly roots its organizing efforts in churches and other faith-based institutions, incorporating religious symbols, parables, and doctrines into its teaching, and even helping congregations expand and organize their worship communities.

In an appreciative account of the growth in evangelical congregations several years ago, the IAF’s Gecan noted that the new churches thrive because they appreciate the power of building community relationships—“relationships that start with an enthusiastic recognition of the capacity of others to grow and develop, of the innate preference that most people feel to be viewed not as clients of agencies or bundles of needs desperate to be ‘served’ but as good and full beings who are agents of their own destinies” (2005).

Consider the following from the IAF manual *Organizing for Family and Congregation*. The fundamental question for citizens today, it notes, is “who will parent our children? Who will teach them, train them, nurture them? Will this parenting take place in a strictly secular setting where the system is said to be the solution, or profit is the sole standard of judgment? Or will the true teachers and prophets—parents and grandparents, pastors and rabbis and lay leaders—win this war and continue to convey the best values of the Judeo-Christian tradition” (1978, 3)? No conservative school-choice advocate could have put it better.

Other theorists on the communitarian left, such as Ivan Illich and John McKnight (another friend of Cornuelle), have long provided some of the most effective critiques of the national community’s service state and its systematic displacement of the work of everyday citizens with the therapeutic ministrations of professional experts. This professional service state ensures, in Illich’s phrase, “the disabling of the citizen through professional dominance” (1977, 27) Or as McKnight puts it, “When the capacity to define the problem becomes a professional prerogative, citizens no longer exist. The prerogative removes the citizen as problem-definer, much less problem-solver. It translates political functions into technical and technological problems” (1995, 48).

Concern Over Different “Bigs”

One cannot, of course, be naïve about the ultimate intentions of the IAF and other community organizers on the left, nor about the likelihood of their full alignment with conservative communitarianism. For Cornuelle and the rest of the “mediating structures” school, however, the resuscitation of civic associations and their organization of citizenly engagement are ends in themselves, so to speak. That is, civic groups are “doing their job” when they tackle the problems deemed most urgent by local residents, expressing the moral and political values they esteem most highly, with the expectation that a vast variety of ends and means will ultimately be pursued.

Organizing on the left begins here, with what the local community considers most important. Indeed, a great deal of time is spent establishing that through extensive “one-on-ones” throughout the neighborhood. Nonetheless, the ultimate purpose of community organizing doesn’t seem to be limited to solving the smaller, more immediate problems facing the neighborhood. It aims rather to develop in community residents a consciousness of the larger social and political forces that inexorably shape their fortunes. The hope is to build upon partial, incomplete, preexisting moral and political values a clearer picture of cosmopolitan political power structures, the imbalance of wealth, and ultimately the need for substantial systemic change.

In short, organizing on the left can tend to verge into national-community liberalism, elevating the need for an encompassing, transformative national vision over the immediate requirements of local community building. This is, of course, the source of the “stealth radicalism” charge lodged against former community organizer Barack Obama.

But this is only a manifestation of a larger problem facing the effort to build Cornuellean bridges between the advocates of community on right and left. Both of them tend to be a bit too lenient toward the “Bigs” on their own side of the ideological spectrum, and a bit too harsh toward the “Bigs” on the other side.

Specifically, the community organizing left is much more vocal about the problems created by Big Business for local neighborhoods, and much more hopeful about the good that might come about by involving Big Government in addressing those problems. But conservatives have much to answer for along these lines as well. We are quite forceful and eloquent about the problems Big Government has created for community revitalization in America. But is the left entirely wrong about the problems created by Big Business? Conservatives only rarely visit this

possibility. Some fifteen years ago, Bill Bennett maintained that “unbridled capitalism” might indeed be “a problem for that whole dimension of things we call the realm of values and human relationships” (as quoted in Bandow 1997). Don Eberly and I suggested one way this might manifest itself: a Wal-Mart going up on the edge of town might indeed make eminent sense according to market values. But it may well have a devastating effect on the small, local businesses on Main Street, which are essential pieces in the puzzle of local civil society.

Nisbet was certainly unafraid to challenge Big Business in *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics & Order of Freedom*, arguing that “not all the asserted advantages of mass production and corporate bigness will save capitalism if its purposes become impersonal and remote, separated from the symbols and relationships that have meaning in human lives. . . . Economic freedom cannot be separated from the non-individualist contexts of association and community of moral purpose” (1990, 213). Cornuelle similarly pointed out that large corporations still organized according to the impersonal, rationalist, centralist principles of “scientific management” tended to be alienating and disempowering, incapable of summoning up the sort of creative energies that could be generated within smaller, more decentralized, and communitarian modes of organization.

Just as Nisbet was denounced by Meyer, so Bennett, Eberly, and I received a thorough thrashing by libertarian Doug Bandow in the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* (reprinted at the Cato Institute website, 1997) for raising these kinds of issues. Yet are we in fact never to take seriously the possibility of grave damage conceivably done to the integrity of a local community by the grand entrances and cataclysmic exits of Big Business? Must our desire to revive local community fall silent in the presence of the marketplace’s “creative destruction?”

Another reason the left can legitimately be suspicious of the genuineness of conservatism’s “quest for community” is to be found in its use—or abuse—by conservative politicians, especially presidential candidates. Cornuelle was only the first in a long line of presidential advisors who brought to his task a strong communitarian inclination, and who must have been very pleased, if not downright thrilled, to find that it readily caught the ear of his candidate.

Yet in spite of the fact that Nixon aides promised the *Washington Post* that a “program of government-encouraged ‘voluntary action’ will be a central theme of the new Administration” (as quoted by Murray Rothbard in *The Libertarian*, 2), and in spite of the fact that Cornuelle and John McClaughry organized a transition task force to put flesh on this theme, it soon vanished from the Nixon repertoire.

Each succeeding Republican president in turn would embrace the concept of voluntary action—variously billed as private sector initiatives, points of light, and faith-based initiatives—as a supplement to or replacement for bloated, inefficient federal social service programs. And each such effort would soon founder, fade, or be tucked away discretely in some cramped office in the New Executive Office Building, relegated to dispensing plaques of appreciation to volunteers.

Hence, although some of us on the right may well wonder whether community organizing isn't just a clever way to dress up a president's secret socialism, the left may legitimately wonder whether “mediating structures” conservatism isn't just a bit of kabuki theater, staged every four years by conservative presidential candidates to evade the liberal stereotype that they care nothing for the poor and vulnerable. Once they're elected, the ruse is dropped, and the more typical Republican corporate agenda comes to the fore. Just as conservatives suspect Big Government lurks behind the left's small-community agenda, so the left is entitled to suspect that Big Business lurks behind the right's small-community agenda.

Triumph of National Community Liberalism

The beneficiary of this mutual suspicion has, of course, been national community liberalism. As it has been from the beginning, this form of liberalism is entirely comfortable with both Big Government and Big Business. Indeed, Theodore Roosevelt's progressive “New Nationalism” distinguished itself from earlier populist movements and from Woodrow Wilson's “New Freedom” precisely in its open embrace of the marriage (or at least the civil union) of the “Bigs.” The large corporations, in Roosevelt's view, helpfully nationalized and rationalized the otherwise chaotic marketplace through industry monopolies, making it that much easier for the federal government to grasp those few remaining master levers, providing it the means to manage a trans-continently integrated economy smoothly and scientifically.

In other words, what we today call “crony capitalism” was very much a part of the initial design of national community liberalism. Liberalism has so far enjoyed an opposition considerably enfeebled by the fact that it obligingly divides itself into critics of one or the other, but seldom both, sets of cronies.

Real Community Autonomy

Cornuelle seemed to understand—as should we—that the denationalization of community will require an end to this division, or at least a substantial

abatement of it. For whatever the differences between left and right communitarians, they pale into insignificance beside the chasm between these two schools, on the one hand, and national community liberalism on the other. Cornuelle and the IAF would agree that citizenship can only be renewed at the immediate, local level, with residents fully engaged in shaping their own lives, whatever the ultimate principles that might drive them.

National community liberalism views this kind of active civic engagement—with all the clamoring and scuffling, the perplexing diversity of voices expressing all sorts of half-baked and uninformed views, followed by chaotic, amateurish implementation—as a major distraction from the larger end of ensuring a smoothly humming, professionally driven social service state in which citizens humbly accept the ministrations of scientifically trained experts.

It seems foolish indeed to forego the kind of atypical alliance Cornuelle entertained with the communitarian left because we differ on what citizens will or should prefer within active local communities. For the national community idea denies altogether the validity of the notion that the views of everyday citizens, whatever they may be, should be taken seriously.

At any rate, since the goal of both schools of local community is to restore the capacity of everyday citizens to govern themselves, whatever follows from this—whether it results “only” in a stronger church or a cleaner neighborhood or flows into a larger political movement—finally isn’t up to those of us who wish to see, and are working toward, that restoration. The people themselves will decide what they want, and if we are true to our convictions, that will be more than enough for all of us.

Cornuelle, I suspect, was willing to risk aligning himself with communitarians on the left because he believed, in the final analysis, that everyday citizens, once freed from the professional ministrations of the “national community,” were indeed far more likely to confine themselves to improving the immediate, concrete realities of their own neighborhoods rather than fall for some grand, new, utopian vision of community. That’s because he came at this question with an early and thorough grounding in the virtues of the free market and the individualism it inculcated.

Yes, as Tocqueville warned us, the materialistic, commercial republic may lure citizens away from any interest in public life and leave them isolated, withdrawn, and ripe for passive acquiescence to soft tyranny. And yes, as Nisbet darkly observed, “it has been the fate of [civic] institutions and relationships to suffer almost continuous attrition during the capitalist age” (1990 [1962] 213), leaving behind a “sand heap of disconnected particles of humanity.” And indeed it is

"absurd to suppose that the rhetoric of nineteenth-century individualism will offset present tendencies in the direction of the absolute political community," as Nisbet declared (219).

Nonetheless, Tocqueville, Nisbet, and Cornuelle would not have countenanced abandoning altogether the commercial republic and its individualism, which produced unprecedented freedom and prosperity in America. Recognizing and hoping to tame possibly self-destructive impulses within capitalism is the act of a true friend of the free market, not of a revolutionary critic.

Tocqueville's insight was that we could glean the benefits of individualism while avoiding its worst tendencies through an adherence to "self-interest properly understood." This was still emphatically self-interest, but expanded slightly to include the welfare of those close by—friends, neighbors, lodge brothers, sorority sisters, fellow townspeople. It served to elevate and refine democratic individualism, but in an entirely realistic way because it didn't try to lift the sights of citizens much beyond the immediate civic horizon. Those activated by self-interest properly understood explain a good civic deed by saying, "I only did what I hope my neighbors would do for me if I needed it," rather than, "I did it because I'm caught up in the rapture of human brotherhood."

This kind of modest, limited communitarianism—the kind that Tocqueville described as peculiarly American—is always safely anchored in the immediate, the practical, the local, and the individual. It is unlikely to become untethered and drift upward into some nebulous, utopian, national or global communitarian enterprise, though of course that was the intention and, for a few decades, the faltering and uncertain achievement of national community liberalism. This means that the conservative small-community project is more in tune with the American character than the left's version, insofar as the latter may seek to elevate the expectations for civic engagement too high.

Working alliances between left and right small-community agendas carry little danger from the conservative point of view, because the quest for community is conducted within the context of an individualistic, commercial America. That context makes conservative aspirations far more realistic and achievable, the left's less so. But conservatives are well-advised not to gloat about this, not only because it would be offensive to potential allies but also because this is a question that finally cannot be settled by theorizing and speculating. It can only be settled by entrusting citizens to manage their own affairs once again in their own way, whatever that might be.

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