

The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda

By Dr Amitai Etzioni

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America needs to move from *me* to *we*.

In *The Spirit of Community*, renowned professor and former White House Fellow Amitai Etzioni, the founder of the Communitarian movement, lays out a blueprint for how in the 1990s Americans can move forward—together.

The Spirit of Community calls for a reawakening of our allegiance to the shared values and institutions that sustain us—from our marriages and families to our schools and our neighborhoods, and extending to our nation itself. In proposing a new balance between our rights as individuals and our social responsibilities, this controversial, groundbreaking book articulates the emerging social attitudes of the nineties.

We have many rights as individuals, Etzioni declares, but we have responsibilities to our communities, too. The right to be tried before a jury of our peers, for instance, is connected to our willingness to serve on one. We as a nation have in recent years forgotten such basic truths of our democratic social contract. And what we need now is a revival of the idea that small sacrifices by individuals can create large benefits for all of us.

We must have the moral responsibility to respect our families and fight to preserve them, to value our children and their futures, and to be willing to espouse and teach commonly held moral values. Etzioni faces the tough issues that arise when the rights of individuals are weighed against those of the community, from free speech versus restrictions on hate speech to the right of police to conduct random checks of motorists' sobriety, from drug and HIV testing to mandatory national service.

A movement that has already attracted the attention of policymakers as varied as Al Gore, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Jack Kemp, and Henry Cisneros, Communitarianism provides a call to action and a perceptive analysis of American politics and society today. And *The Spirit of Community* is vital reading for any American who is engaged with the future of the country in the next decade.

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Bibliography

- Rank: #1037628 in eBooks
- Published on: 2013-04-03
- Released on: 2013-04-03
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Etzioni, who has acquired an international reputation for his advocacy of the "communitarian" point of view, defines communitarianism as a movement designed to "bring about the changes in values, habits, and public policies that will allow us to do for society what the environmental movement seeks to do for nature: to safeguard and enhance our future." In this book, he sets forth an agenda for correcting the "imbalance" between rights and responsibilities in American society. His agenda is focused in particular on rebuilding families and schools to instill in our citizens a sense of responsibility to the interests of the community as a whole. While many of Etzioni's recommendations are grounded in common sense, his book fails to grapple with the many important philosophical issues raised by his dual critique of liberalism and conservatism. A more satisfying study from a similar perspective is Philip Selznick's *The Moral Commonwealth* (LJ 10/1/92). Recommended for larger libraries.

- *Kent Worcester, Social Science Research Council, New York*

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From Kirkus Reviews

A primer on how to move from the "me generation" (castigated by Etzioni in *An Immodest Agenda*, 1982) to the "we generation." The text doubles as a manifesto for the Communitarian movement, which Etzioni helped found in 1991 and which he heavily promotes here as an antidote to many of the ills of the permissive 70's and 80's. Etzioni (Sociology/George Washington University) defines "communitarianism" as an "environmental movement dedicated to the betterment of our moral, social and political environment." We can, he says, reverse the breakdown of the family, rising crime rates, deteriorating schools, and political corruption by restoring those communities (family, neighborhood, professional, etc.) that uphold strong moral values--even if these values clash with the individual rights extolled by civil libertarians. Etzioni does a lot of fancy footwork to avoid charges of authoritarianism, insisting that we can "shore up" our values and institutions without becoming a church-dominated or right-wing society. Among his targets are "no fault" divorce, since it allegedly sanctions divorce and leads to one-parent families; the insatiable pursuit of careers that conflict with parenting and community service; and special-interest groups that get in the way of effective government. Throughout, Etzioni lards his argument with show-stopping rubrics (such as "McDonald's is Not Our Kind of Place," which means that teens working in fast-food restaurants are trained to become robots and senseless consumers). A lively polemic that highlights some important issues for the 90's and that seems more or less in step with the beliefs of the man at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. --

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Users Review

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