

BY SEAN SAYERS

COMMUNITARIANISM AND ITS CRITICS

BY DANIEL BELL

Clarendon Press, **256pp, £30.00**

ISBN 0 19 827877 2

published 23 September 1993

Whether the policies of the Thatcher years brought any economic benefits is doubtful; that they have had high social costs is increasingly evident. Promoting the unfettered pursuit of self-interest has accelerated the process of social fragmentation and weakened communal attachments. Arguably some of the current alienation from established politics and even the rising rates of crime and divorce can be traced to this source. These views form the starting point for a critique of liberalism and an alternative communitarian philosophy which has been developed recently by writers such as Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer.

This book gives an excellent account of this body of work. It is written in the form of a dialogue. Anne has just completed a thesis on 'What Communitarianism Is'. In a Paris cafe she explains and defends her ideas in response to the sceptical and critical questioning of Philip, a defender of a Rawlsian sort of liberalism. She begins by criticising the liberal idea of the autonomous self. Drawing mainly on Taylor's work but also, interestingly, from Heidegger, she argues that we are essentially social beings whose very identities are constituted only in and through our relations to others in a community. She then goes on to question the idea that there are universal values to which we can appeal in political argument. She defends Walzer's view that our values articulate the 'shared understandings' of the community of which we are members. On this basis, she then outlines some ideas for a communitarian politics, including measures to protect threatened communities and groups, compulsory civilian national service on community projects, harder divorce laws to protect

the family (she even flirts with the idea of arranged marriages). The book ends with a couple of brief additional pieces, also in dialogue form: a critical response by Will Kymlicka (originally his publishers report) and the author's reply.

The result is a clear and very readable – indeed enjoyable – piece of writing. The dialogue form is used skilfully to bring the communitarian position to life and to give an overview of the debate between it and liberalism which is central to current social philosophy.

Moreover, lurking off stage so to speak there is another participant: the author *in propria persona* who keeps up a running commentary on the proceedings via a stream of lengthy scholarly notes. Unfortunately these are not integrated with the dialogue but located at the ends of the chapters or 'Acts', necessitating a continual toing and froing as one reads.

The main strength of the communitarian outlook lies in its insistence that, *pace* Thatcher, there is such a thing as society. Communal attachment is a human need which cannot be weakened without harm. However, it is also the case that communities can have harmful and damaging effects. We can and must at times oppose and criticise them in ways that communitarianism (particularly in Walzer's version) seems to exclude. Philip makes these points well and Anne, like Walzer, has difficulty answering them.

More serious doubts are raised by the book's practical proposals. The attempt to justify them in terms of supposedly 'shared understandings' which are being undermined by modern conditions is particularly questionable. One is reminded of the current clamour for a return to 'basic values'. Was 'the community' ever thus united? Even if it was, can that unity be recreated? – or are diversity and difference now essential aspects of modern social life which must be acknowledged and accepted rather than deplored and condemned? A great virtue of this book is that one need not agree with all the ideas it advocates in order to welcome it as an engaging and stimulating discussion of these issues.

Dr Sean Sayers

Reader in Philosophy, University of Kent

Reviews Editor, *Radical Philosophy*

6 January, 1994