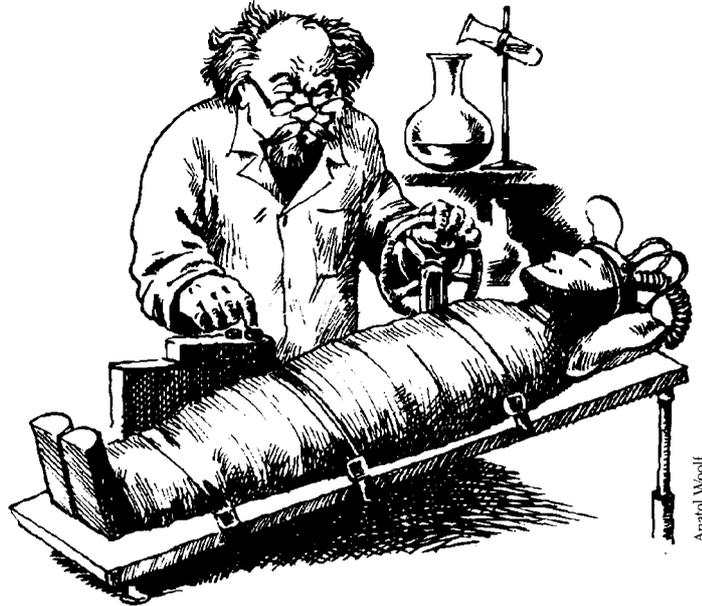


A Good Communitarian Is Hard to Find

by George W. Carey

"Never say No when the world says Aye."

—E.B. Browning



The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism

by Bruce Frohnen

Lawrence: University Press of Kansas; 271 pp., \$29.95



This thoughtful and provocative analysis of the new communitarianism can profitably be viewed as a case study in how liberalism, not unlike scheming alien forces in sci-fi movies, assumes new and attractive forms to beguile the unwary. Put otherwise, the liberalism of the New Deal or of the Great Society was simple and straightforward with regard to both its purposes and methods: a meat-and-potatoes liberalism unconcerned with “authenticity,” “cultural awareness,” “multilogues,” or any of the various adornments of new communitarian thought that mask its agenda.

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Frohnen’s unmasking is important, and long overdue. A traditional, more sensible understanding of community, one that takes its bearings from Tocqueville, has long been central to conservatism. As a consequence, certain of the newer communitarians, by simply calling themselves communitarians, have found a receptive audience in certain conservative circles. (Amitai Etzioni, for instance, has found his way into *National Review* and *The Economist*.) Even the rhetoric of acknowledged conservative leaders is unmistakably inspired by the writings of Mary Ann Gordon, William Galston, and Robert Bellah. But, as Frohnen’s analysis makes abundantly clear, the substance and approach of new communitarian thought contrasts sharply with the traditional conservative communitarianism expounded by such stalwarts as Robert Nisbet and Russell Kirk.

What are these differences? The most obvious is that the new communitarians are no friends of decentralized authority or relatively autonomous local communities. On the contrary, their goals require the centralization of au-

thority. As Frohnen points out, for instance, the local communities may well “fail to teach us universal benevolence.” Worse still, they may lead us “to focus attention and affection on those closest to us,” possibly even undermining a belief in “the essential equality of all human beings,” the most fundamental tenet of the new communitarian creed. Hence the need for an independent, central authority to curb such tendencies.

Frohnen points to even more profound differences. The new communitarians, unwilling to recognize any universal standards of right and wrong, must operate in the context of core values consistent with this relativism, namely, equality and toleration. Indeed, taken together these values provide the “golden rule” of new communitarianism: we must tolerate others, as they must tolerate us, since we both have equally valid grounds for our beliefs or ways of life. Their primary end is a nebulous kind of self-fulfillment. As Frohnen shows, Charles Taylor regards “Individual autonomy—following one’s authentic or spontaneously generated desires and

goals” as the “good for which all other putative goods must serve as mere tools.” Although Charles Taylor believes this fulfillment involves “something” that “has significance independent of our desires,” like other communitarians his relativism compels him to “reject any formulation of” that “something” or of “the goals of life that transcend development of our individual talents and capacities.” In his scheme, then, transcendent loyalties “to one’s family, class, or God” are, as Frohnen argues, valued only “when and to the extent that they help individuals flourish.”

The equality and toleration of the new communitarians, however, have their limits. Here their “golden rule” comes into play. As Frohnen writes: “Communitarians wish us to believe without question that all individuals are equal, save those bad ones who presume to judge the personal conduct of others or who oppose pursuit of social justice through government redistribution of wealth.” In other words, the new communitarians realize full well that the “healthy liberal democratic community” they envision requires “the right kinds of citizens possessing” the appropriate virtues such as a heartfelt commitment to equality and toleration. Thus, one of the critical problems they confront is how to secure and maintain the “right kind” of citizenry.

New communitarians deal with this problem in various ways. Because they regard human nature as malleable, they place great faith in institutions to produce individuals with an appropriate morality. Frohnen stresses the role of education and of the “intellectual classes who control the school curriculum” in this process. In his view, these classes “constitut[e] a vanguard” charged not only with shaping character, but with reshaping social institutions to facilitate “progress toward utopia or a more self-fulfilling life.” There are also what he calls the “facilitators” and “interpreters”—the elites in the academy, the media, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary—who shape the world about us to ease the path to individual fulfillment. On Frohnen’s showing, their mission involves reinterpreting “not merely our laws but also our customs and even our forms of spirituality.”

The new communitarians, however, see a “civil religion” with appropriate beliefs, practices, and values as crucial for securing citizens of the “right kind.”

They understand, as Frohnen puts it, that civil religion is not only the glue that “holds the political society together,” it also renders “our fundamental political ideals” sacred. Thus they are concerned that the civil religion—or “functional traditionalism” as William Galston appropriately calls it—embody the teachings and values conducive to their goals. But this, as Frohnen illustrates, poses problems. Our tradition does not readily yield what the communitarians would like by way of a civil religion, and “revising” the tradition to secure the desired results—the route Bellah takes—is vulnerable to attack and refutation. Garry Wills’ approach to civil religion, as Frohnen emphasizes, ingeniously overcomes the obstacles posed by history. As Wills would have it, a civil religion embracing new communitarian values need not rely on historical fact or practice, but on “the myths constructed by the skilled rhetorician.” Such is the case, he holds, with Lincoln’s powerful rhetoric at Gettysburg that “shaped the mind of the people and so made it *the* authority on the American spirit and our proper commitment to equality.”

If education, civil religion, facilitators, and interpreters fail to produce citizens of the “right kind,” communitarians have other means in their arsenals. As Frohnen notes, “Etzioni endorses a plethora of mandatory workshops,” programs that expose students “to the ideology of multiculturalism,” “sensitivity training” requirements for all students, and “arbitration seminars” in which those guilty of making “insensitive remarks” are informed by “students, faculty, and administrators that their views are offensive, harmful, and un-American.” (These, not surprisingly, are the preferred techniques in the academy where liberalism still reigns supreme.)

Frohnen is convinced that we once possessed a genuine tradition that rested “ultimately on religious belief and practice.” Americans, he contends, from the colonial period throughout the early decades of the republic, “felt they owed duties to God, country, and particular groups.” But, he observes, by the 1930’s only vestiges of this early tradition remained; initially weakened by the secularism of the do-good Social Gospelers, it was almost totally washed away with the emergence of a virtually omnipotent central government. The private and voluntary associations that once provid-

ed individuals with order and meaning were decimated as well, leaving us with a “massive social breakdown and the crumbling of our way of life in the face of illegitimacy, crime, and a general loss of moral bearings.” But, Frohnen asserts, to follow the path marked out by the new communitarians will only compound these problems. Their relativism and secularism blind them to religion and its transcendent Truths that form the foundations for a genuine community.

While recognizing the difficulties involved, Frohnen suggests that we “look to our past,” to the older tradition that we have abandoned, as a way out of our present plight. His analysis of our decline, and his suggested path to restoration, point to questions that we should ponder. Does it make sense any more to speak, as the new communitarians are wont to do, of a “national community”? Shouldn’t our aim be the restoration, wherever possible, of smaller communities or little “platoons,” whose dimensions do not dwarf the individual? And isn’t a prerequisite for such restorations political decentralization of a nature and scope well beyond what our politicians even dare to contemplate?

In short, the chances for restoration along the lines suggested by Frohnen are, at best, exceedingly slim. To make matters worse, the odds are that the new communitarians will continue to thrive by advancing those doctrines that have contributed substantially to the degeneration of our moral and social fiber—a sorry state of affairs, to be sure, but also a tribute to the powers and ingenuity of the liberal intelligentsia. ◊

LIBERAL ARTS

Turning Tides: Modern Dutch & Flemish Verse in English Versions by Irish Poets.

Edited by Peter van de Kamp
(Story Line Press, 1994).

And What Isn't . . .
by Paul Gottfried

What's Right: The New Conservative Majority and the Remaking of America
by David Frum
New York: Basic Books;
208 pp., \$23.00



In this collection of his occasional papers, David Frum once again demonstrates his worthiness to the harmless persuasion. Having agonized over his uneven prose, I finally concluded that Frum's intellectual weaknesses are his practical strengths. His writing never offends anyone in the political mainstream, or upon whom his career as a publicist may depend. It is entirely consistent with his comments delivered to Tim Russert during an interview on CNN on July 13, when Frum urged Republicans to conduct an "exciting" campaign with "exciting" personalities like Cheney, Gramm, and Kemp. But he also warned Dole, with the smiling approval of his interviewer, to keep the "extremist" Pat Buchanan from capturing attention at the Republican convention. Frum's notion of "exciting" would translate as "don't make waves!" or "let the

political class have its way!" There is nothing he says about contemporary politics, nor about anyone whose spear he seems to be carrying, capable of generating excitement. That is precisely what commends him to the liberal-neoconservative nomenclatura.

As in his earlier publication *Dead Right*, Frum in this book makes occasional libertarian noises. He wishes to cut taxes, deregulate some things, eliminate Aid to Dependent Children, and create a better climate for business investment. In a flight of hyperbole, he refers to the Kemp-Roth cut in marginal tax rates as the "most important single piece of conservative domestic legislation of the 1970's." Since that legislation resulted neither in stopping federal overreach nor in reversing the growth of taxes, it is hard to see it as a conservative landmark. Frum also exaggerates the effects of the "tax cuts" introduced during the Reagan administration. By focusing on (and exaggerating) the slight reduction in middle-class income tax rates, he ignores the hike in payroll deductions that took place at the same time, as happened with Social Security.

Most of the silliness in this collection of essays seems packed into the section on Pat Buchanan, which appears to be recycled from *Dead Right* and from Frum's earlier polemic against Buchanan published in the *American Spectator*. This litany of denunciation is followed, in the manner of the format of *Dead Right*, by a saccharine tribute to the heroic Jack Kemp. Though Kemp could not cut the mustard as a presidential candidate, Frum is still impressed by this "captain with the mighty heart." He stresses the fight "that exemplified all that is best in him," meaning Kemp's and Bill Bennett's fight against Proposition 187. Though a libertarian, Frum has no scruples about fighting to preserve social services for those illegally in the United States. Like Bennett and Kemp, he apparently considers those services to be a "human right." He also lists as an achievement of Kemp's "important conservative legislation" a "50 percent increase in personal income tax collection" by 1981. If that was indeed the case, Kemp-Roth was a disguised godsend for the managerial state.

Frum does note the ineffectiveness of Kemp and Reagan in changing the courses of American government. While repeatedly praising both men, he also indicates that neither had any lasting impact on the American welfare state. Frum perceives no contradiction in what he takes to be the twin missions of American conservatism, "smaller government and global leadership." Unfortunately, there is no way that one can have both, as the history of most empires reveals. And the American case, as voluminously demonstrated by Robert Higgs, confirms this generalization: every major foreign entanglement has had a ratcheting effect on the expansion of the state at home. This causal relation is quite clear to me, though, unlike Frum, I do not describe myself as a libertarian.

It seems equally clear that Frum hypocritically accuses Buchanan (and "his friend and fellow-columnist whose ideas Buchanan has increasingly echoed," Sam Francis) of turning conservatism away from its roots and towards greater statism. Both Reaganism and its Kempian variation, however, accomplished this long before Buchanan came on the presidential scene. Buchanan may be at least intermittently a "big-government conservative," but he is not the first to fit that description: the 1980's were full of them, and *Commentary*, to which Frum contributes, keeps that tradition alive and well. Indeed, Frum himself amply subscribes to it, given his views on civil rights, foreign policy, and social services to illegal aliens. Not surprisingly (to use one of his favorite expressions), his commentary on Buchanan and the paleoconservatives is the most factually distorted part of his anthology. Buchanan mentioned Goldman Sachs in his indictment of the Mexican bailout not because of his "habit of using Jewish names to personify things he dislikes," but because it was the investment firm that Clinton's Treasury Secretary had long represented and which stood to profit heavily from the bailout. Frum also accuses Buchanan of taking on a false litmus test "borrowed from Gottfried, Rothbard, and *Chronicles* to distinguish good, true conservatives from bad neo-conservatives." In fact, he never states

LIBERAL ARTS

VICTIMS, UNITE!

The Casper (Wyoming) *Star-Tribune* reported on October 17 that the city council of Albuquerque, New Mexico, was preparing to vote on a new "hate crimes" bill that would treat crimes motivated by "hate" as more serious than identical crimes which have a different motive. Introduced by City Councilor Sam Bregman, the bill has drawn protests from the Christian Coalition of New Mexico. Bregman insists that "We are not setting up a protected class; we are punishing people for improper conduct. . . . Everybody can be a victim under this bill."