

# BEWARE THE GOSPEL OF FALSE PROPHETS

AMITAI ETZIONI is a US professor with a mission: he wants a renewal of community, to balance the individualism on which he blames so many contemporary social problems.

Fragmented families in the inner city ghettos, he claims, are the result of selfishness at the expense of community. The sense of duty and obligation has been lost and needs to be retrieved.

From whence does the malevolent influence of selfishness spring? Not from a malfunctioning economy, he insists. To blame the economic system is to resort to a vulgar marxist determinism: such an explanation won't do, in his view, because "morality drives the economy" - not the other way round.

Etzioni's communitarianism, in other words, is profoundly conservative. He frankly acknowledges that the global movement that has sprung up around his philosophy accepts the status quo - the "shared values" of the American constitution, for example, which would not be threatened by the emergence of a new morality based on communitarian ethics.

POLITICALLY, Etzioni is proving to be influential. American Republicans and British Labour leader Tony Blair are attracted by the emphasis on the need to retrieve communitarian behaviour.

Insofar as the argument develops the need to reintegrate the individual into a healthy society - building from the functional family to the stable community - this is hardly exceptional. What is alarming is the denial of the influence of some fatal systemic feature.

• Common sense tells us that when women are driven to abandon their children to go to work, so that the family can meet the mortgage payments, tensions

will arise that lead to breakdown in human relationships.

• Casual observation reveals that decay in the core of our great cities has something to do with poor housing, fragmenting communities and the social alienation that results, for example, in the fleeing of the middle classes to leafy suburbia.

• Protracted periods of unemployment even for the educated professionals suggests that anxieties stemming from economic insecurity has a corrosive effect on breadwinners, who might be tempted into escapist behaviour of the kind that undermines the primary bonds of family and community.

THESE forces are explained, in part at least, by an economic system that deprives people of the liberty to determine their moral behaviour. It suggests an oppressive economic environment over which the individual has lost control of his destiny.

In arguing this, however, we are not accepting a banal determinism: the argument that people are robots without free wills. For if determinism did rule, there would be no prospect of change in the rules of the game, such that people could begin the process of rebuilding the bombed-out communities.

On the other hand, the critique of communitarianism is equally sterile. One version, provided by Oxford don John Gray, maintains that the threat to communities is the trend to globalisation of economic life: from free trade to the electronic mobilisation of capital.\*

This is a wholly unsatisfactory reply, for it ignores a process that has been with us for two centuries. The destruction of communities has been a persistent feature

of industrial society, and is causally unrelated to free trade or the mobility of capital.

This is not to say that the threat is to be found in the industrial mode of production: it isn't. Industrial society is a distorted social system, but it was born as a spastic, nurtured in the womb of a set of property rights that prevented it from flourishing, from realising its full potential.

We need only look at the tax system to see how society, through government, inflicts a punishing regime of dispossession on those who seek to improve people's productive capacities. Why does government adopt an injurious form of public finance? Because it is not allowed to employ the most sympathetic form of revenue-raising: drawing finance from the natural fiscal base, the rent of land.

This one insight enables us to analyse just about every social problem that ought to concern the communitarian moraliser. For these social problems create a weight of prejudice against the liberty of the individual which, from time to time, explodes in the form of anti-social behaviour.

The world is currently passing through such a phase. These are dangerous times, because the social problems - when pinned on the alleged moral failings of individuals - invites simple-minded solutions that are traditionally associated with the extreme right in politics. And the morality of the extreme right, as we know from history, leads to some devastating reactions in the pursuit of a false path back to stable communities.

\* John Gray, "Hollowing out the core", *The Guardian*, London, March 8, 1995.