

Communitarian Observations

I often write about rather different matters, but in my mind they all deal with one core question: the guidance our shared values, especially the common good, provides to our public policies.

Shorter Pieces

"Should We Go Back to the Moon?"

"Project Apollo was oversold from the get-go. It turned out that the Moon is not full of rare minerals that we can bring by the truckload down to earth. It did not serve as a "high ground" from which to shoot missiles at the USSR, because the long travel time gave our adversary a lot of time for countermeasures. Visiting the Moon, planting a flag and a long photo op did not generate significant new knowledge; if you look at old maps of the Moon, they are not that different from those we have today. The notion that we shall "colonize" the Moon to place "excess" earthlings is ludicrous on the face of it." (Read more of "Should We Go Back to the Moon?" at [U.S. News and World Report](#) or at the [ICPS blog](#).)

"Facebook's Experiment: Trivial Pursuit"

"The recent hullabaloo about the "experiment" Facebook conducted for one week, in which it scrambled the newsfeed of some of its customers to see if the differences would make them happier, says much more about us than about Facebook. It shows that we would much rather deal with a new scandal, however trivial, rather than face deep, long-standing flaws of our whole social system." (Read more of "Facebook's Experiment: Trivial Pursuit" at [The Huffington Post](#) or at the [ICPS blog](#).)

"China and the U.S.: Whose Strategic Mistake?"

"Maj. Gen. Zhu Chenghu, a professor at China's National Defense University, said recently that "the Americans are making very, very important strategic mistakes right now" in their approach to China. His comments followed a strong statement by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who stated that "China has undertaken destabilizing, unilateral actions asserting its claims in the South China Sea." However, it is quite likely that this time it is China that is making a grave strategic mistake. ... China should realize that one can win one bout after another—and still lose the war." (Read more of "China and the U.S.: Whose Strategic Mistake?" at [The Diplomat](#) or at the [ICPS blog](#).)

"The Cantonization of Iraq"

"The public debate about the future of Iraq has locked on two options -- partition along confessional-ethnic lines or a unity government. Both proposals have problems. Partition would create several hostile mini-states that are likely to war with each other. A unity government would give Sunnis and Kurds enough of a voice -- and share of the spoils -- to satisfy their expectations, but is not likely to come about. Iraq would be better served, and those who cajole it would be wise to promote, strong autonomy for the country's 19 provinces." (Read more of "The Cantonization of Iraq" at [The Huffington Post](#) or at the [ICPS blog](#).)

"Repeated Assaults – And No Remedies"

"A recent front page *New York Times* report reveals that individuals caught by authorities and detained as illegal immigrants are being paid \$1 a day or less to work at the detention centers they are kept in while their cases are awaiting resolution. There are an estimated 135,000 people who are held in detention centers, many of which are operated by profit making corporations. ... What gets to me the most are not these abuses, and others which I read about every other day -- but the absence of a reaction. I would expect, in a society that prides itself on being law-abiding and respectful of individual rights, that when such outrages are revealed by the media, swift action would follow. Instead, most of the time I hear very little about any reforms, and often find later that the same abuses continue." (Read more of "Repeated Assaults – And No Remedies" at [The Huffington Post](#) or at the [ICPS blog](#).)

"Time to Wean Europe from American Welfare"

"The recent crisis in Ukraine reveals that Europe, again, is content to spend little on defense, can do little to defend itself, and disregards security when making economic deals in general and in matters concerning energy in particular. Now that the US has become involved in Ukraine, it cannot but continue to take the lead in seeking to prevent Putin from extending his empire-building moves. However, the US should put Europe on notice that the US expects the EU and the European members of NATO to lean much less on the US in the future and make major changes so they will be able to deal on their own (or at least, with much less US involvement) with matters that concern them most directly, and take place on their borders or in their backyard." (Read more of "Time to Wean Europe from American Welfare" at [The Huffington Post](#) or at the [ICPS blog](#).)

Longer Pieces

["Treating Rationality as a Continuous Variable."](#) *Society* 51(4). July/August 2014. *This article argues that (a) behavioral economics (BE) has produced an usually robust body of evidence about human deliberations and decision making (in short, choice behavior); that (b) this body of evidence requires a fundamental change in the ways one views and studies choice behavior; that (c) the same body of evidence is open to a major misinterpretation; and that (d) closing the door that leads to this misinterpretation—by drawing on BE's own data—provides for additional, major steps forward in the study of choice behavior.*

["Politics and Culture in an Age of Austerity."](#) *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. February 2014. *The Great Recession forced many people around to cut back on consumption and is one reason that drives the rise of right-wing forces. One response to the downturn has been a call for a return to high-level growth and consumption of goods. By contrast, this paper argues in favor of an alternative conception of the good life. To defend this thesis, it first surveys the social science literature regarding the relationship between income and happiness, noting that the growth of the former does not necessarily translate to improvements in the latter. Next, it provides a number of explanations of why greater income and consumption often do not yield greater happiness. The paper then goes on to discuss historical and theoretical alternatives to consumerism-driven life and society. Finally, it discusses how happiness can best be found in socializing with others, participating in the community, and engaging in spiritual and intellectual pursuits. The paper, thus, concludes that human contentment and flourishing is perhaps best found outside of the high-growth, high-consumption paradigm. Moreover, it finds that such a new normal is not only protective of the environment, but also enhances social justice.*

[“Liberal Communitarian Approach to Privacy and Security.”](#) *Homeland & National Security Law Review* 1(1). 2014. *This article asks which normative framework should be applied in determining whether privacy is unduly diminished in the American quest for enhanced protection against terrorist attacks; which specific criteria should be employed in determining whether the balance has tilted too far toward enhancing security or protecting privacy; and which measures can be taken to reduce the inevitable conflict between security and privacy. It also seeks to show that enhanced transparency is inferior to enhanced accountability, although there is some room for adding more of both kinds of scrutiny.*

From My Diary

In its [recent article about higher education](#), *The Economist* followed the advice a wit gave long ago to economists in noting that economics is somewhat less of a science than is hoped for. The wit stated, “Give them a figure, give them a date, but never both!” (Statements with just one of these cannot be proven wrong.)

“Were the market for higher education to perform in future as that for newspapers has done over the past decade or two, universities’ revenues would fall by more than half, employment in the industry would drop by nearly 30% and more than 700 institutions would shut their doors. The rest would need to reinvent themselves to survive,” writes *The Economist*.

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Nikolas K. Gvosdev recently wrote an article for *Society* that comprehensively discusses the liberal communitarian approach to international affairs and foreign policy both historical and contemporary. This article, “The Communitarian Foreign Policy of Amitai Etzioni,” can be [read online through Springer Link](#).

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From an [interview with Dr. Simon Dawes](#):

SD: You’re widely known for your communitarian approach, which you developed in reaction to the self-interestedness you diagnosed in American society in the 1980s. But communitarianism is about more than altruism, isn’t it?

AE: We must continue to move away from pure self-interest and toward the common good. Communitarianism refers to investing time and energy in relations with the other, including family, friends and members of one’s community. The term also encompasses service to the common good, such as volunteering, national service, and politics. Communitarian life is not centered around altruism but around mutuality, in the sense that deeper and thicker involvement with the other is rewarding to both the recipient and the giver. Indeed, numerous studies show that communitarian pursuits breed deep contentment. A study of 50-year-old men shows that those with friendships are far less likely to experience heart disease. Another shows that life satisfaction in older adults is higher for those who participate in community service.

I Read

Max Schindler. [“Can Israelis and Palestinians unite after tragic teen deaths?”](#) *The Christian Science Monitor*. July 7, 2014.

William Easterly. [*The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*](#). New York: Basic Books, 2014. (Of this book, Joseph Stiglitz writes: “William Easterly draws on a wealth of examples from history and from around the world to support his forceful call for a radical transformation in the way the world views development. Easterly shows that many of the contemporary debates about the nature of development have their roots in history and he argues that the rights of the individual and democratic values should not be trampled on by those seeking faster economic growth.”)

Nathan Alexander Sales. “[Self-Restraint and National Security](#).” *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 6(1), 2012. “Much of the caselaw and scholarship concerning national security rests on the assumption that the executive branch is institutionally prone to overreach – that, left to its own devices, it will inch ever closer to the line that separates illegal from legal, and sometimes enthusiastically leap across it. The obvious conclusion is that external, principally judicial, checks are needed to keep the Executive in line. In many cases the Executive does indeed push the envelope. But not always. The government often has powerful incentives to stay its own hand – to forbear from military and intelligence operations that it believes are perfectly legal. ... In other words, the government sometimes adopts self-restraints that limit its ability to conduct operations it regards as legally justified; it ‘fight[s] with one hand behind its back,’ to borrow Aharon Barak’s memorable phrase. This article tries to explain these restraints by consulting public choice theory – in particular, the notion that government officials are rationally self interested actors who seek to maximize their respective welfare.”

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge. [*The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race to Reinvent the State*](#). New York: The Penguin Press, 2014. (Rosa Brooks writes at [The New York Times Book Review](#) of the book’s conclusions: “Nonetheless, if we in the West can only learn to put ‘more emphasis on individual rights and less on social rights’ and thereby lighten ‘the burden [of dysfunctional government],’ we can still revive the ‘spirit of democracy’—which remains ‘the best guarantee of innovation and problem solving.’”)

Raphael Sassower. [*The Price of Public Intellectuals*](#). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. (From the book’s description: “Who are our public intellectuals? Are they needed in a democracy? Should the state underwrite their activities even if they end up, like Socrates, being gadflies? Shouldn’t they refrain from public debates so as to retain their critical vantage point? These and other questions are answered in this historically-informed survey of the role of public intellectuals in western democracies.”)

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