



BY DAVID BOAZ

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EDITORIAL

# Individualism, Community, and Coercion

Do libertarians exalt individualism over community values? And is there really a conflict between the two?

The real conflict is between voluntary and coercive actions, and that may be what the critics really mean.

In the *Washington Post* in June, E. J. Dionne Jr. wrote that Hillary Clinton’s “communal side (she wrote a book, after all, called ‘It Takes a Village’) runs through all her policy proposals, the values she lifts up (‘all of us together’ in 2008, ‘stronger together’ now) and her attitude toward her friends.”

Clinton may well be a wonderful friend. But her policy proposals and values are not so much communal (“shared by all members of a community”) as coercive. From education to manufacturing to substance addiction, her voluminous policy proposals involve taxes, spending, bans, and mandates. That’s not “all of us together,” that’s “those with political power gang up on those without.” Indeed, you can pretty well count on it: if it’s coercive, it’s not actually a value common to all.

And that’s what claims about “cooperation,” “community,” and “society” usually come down to. Individualism is disparaged as selfish, even “atomistic,” and opposed to community. Individualists are accused of forgetting the social context of modern life—“you didn’t build that,” President Obama said, along with “imagine if everybody had their own fire service. That would be a hard way to organize fighting fires.” No kidding. That’s why no individualist advocates that. No one thinks a single person could “build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs.” It takes many people, working together. But in most cases it takes *businesses, coordinated by prices and markets*, to meet our needs and generate progress (and in some cases charities, clubs, and other nonprofit associations). We are fed, clothed, sheltered, informed, and entertained by individuals, working together with other individuals, mostly in corporations, with their activities coordinated by the market process. Obama offers a stark vision of a world in which lone individuals have no way to cooperate with others except through the state.

Individuals benefit greatly from their interactions with other individuals, a point usually summed up by

traditional philosophers as “cooperation” and by modern texts in sociology and management as “synergy.” Life would indeed be nasty, brutish, and short if it were solitary. But it isn’t.

Libertarians agree with George Soros that “cooperation is as much a part of the system as competition.” In fact, we consider cooperation so essential to human flourishing that we don’t just want to talk about it; we want to create social institutions that make it possible. That’s what property rights, limited government, and the rule of law are all about.

F. A. Hayek argued that we sometimes confuse the rules appropriate for a family or small group and those that make possible life in an extended society. As Don Boudreaux wrote in *The Essential Hayek*, “the close personal connections, the on-going face-to-face communications, and the mutual affections that bind together members of families and other small groups give each member of these small groups such deep knowledge of the other members” that they can deal with one another personally.

In contrast, in the larger society, where we interact with strangers and even with people we will never meet, we need general rules to allow us to live together peacefully. Kindergarten rules like “don’t hit other people, don’t take their stuff, and keep your promises.” More formally known as rights of property and contract. Within that simple framework we can create, innovate, trade, and build. And every tax, mandate, and prohibition interferes with our ability to cooperate with others to construct our own lives as we—not our rulers—see fit. That’s the problem with appeals to community and communal values that turn out in practice to mean coercive policies and in the end a political battle to impose our own agendas on others and take other people’s resources for our own use. The end point of that process is Venezuela.

Fortunately our Constitution and the good sense of the American people have kept us from reaching such a point. So far.