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E.J. Dionne on why conservatives have abandoned 'community'

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

Here's a bit of the column published today:

Conservatism today places individualism on a pedestal, but it originally arose in revolt against that idea. As the conservative thinker Robert A. Nisbet noted in 1968, conservatism represented a ?reaction to the individualistic Enlightenment.? It ?stressed the small social groups of society? and regarded such clusters of humanity ? not individuals ? as society?s ?irreducible unit.?

True, conservatives continue to preach the importance of the family as a communal unit. But for Nisbet and many other conservatives of his era, the movement was about something larger. It ?insisted upon the primacy of society to the individual ? historically, logically and ethically.?

Because of the depth of our commitment to individual liberty, Americans never fully adopted this all-encompassing view of community. But we never fully rejected it, either. And therein lies the genius of the American tradition: We were born with a divided political heart. From the beginning, we have been torn by a deep but healthy tension between individualism and community. We are communitarian individualists or individualistic communitarians, but we have rarely been comfortable with being all one or all the other.

A really valuable essay, read the entire piece here.

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