The Civil Society Debate: Developments and Prospects

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SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

Civil Society: A New Vogue

A new term is emerging in America's cultural debate: civil society. In reality, the term is older than the Republic itself and is reemerging after a period of extended neglect. From across the political spectrum we now hear a chorus of concern that our social institutions, which serve as the foundations of a free and democratic society, are in urgent need of repair.

Without question, American society has been weakened to an alarming degree. It seems that on a weekly basis we hear yet another report detailing the lamentable condition of the American family. Civility and manners have given way to behavior that ranges from discourteous to brutish. Politics continues to search in vain for ways to reconnect with the basic hopes and aspirations of the American people as it staggers from polarization to trivialization, and in the minds of many, to irrelevance. Recently, we learned of a precipitous decline in civic America, with its networks of civic engagement, suggesting that in addition to being disconnected from the political process, Americans are isolated from each other.[1]

What does all this mean for the future of American ideals and democratic governance? The purpose of this essay is not to repeat the litany of America's social woes. Detailed data on the plight of our families and children are now familiar to all but the most detached citizens, and images of our corrupt culture confront us daily. Neither will an attempt be made to explain the origins of our current condition. Many factors have played a role: changing moral norms, economic dislocation, social mobility, the decline of religion, the rise of television, and the displacement of civil society's functions by government, to name just a few.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a definition of civil society, to consider why it is important, and to describe what is being said and done in an attempt to restore its vitality. The state of the debate and the significance of work now underway to renew civil society, will be analyzed, considering both the promises as well as limitations of these projects.

Civil Society: Searching for Conceptual Clarity

After near complete abandonment in American public discourse, the term civil society has made a rather sudden and dramatic reappearance, leaving many wondering what it means for American life. Some caution is appropriate regarding the many terms that are now routinely applied to describe civil society.

As used thus far in the cultural debate, the term civil society is more suggestive than precise. For many, it means little more than a collective longing for a society more civil and humane. This is an important sentiment, but it does not provide a sufficient foundation for more consequential changes in American society.

Given the tendency of our increasingly post-modern culture to empty language of any fixed meaning, rhetorical imprecision will likely produce conceptual confusion. Furthermore, the masters of political debate have proven themselves adept at appropriating all freshly-minted language in order to capture the latest public mood and to score a few quick points for one side or another.

Just as challenging as the clarification of terms, is the demarcation of boundaries separating schools of opinion and bodies of work. Many new organizations have arisen to promote various aspects of civil society, and many older institutions, from policy think tanks, to universities to charities, have enlisted the term to define and promote their work. Trying to sort out the various perspectives can be difficult. For some, civil society is virtually synonymous with "the private sector," implying that the term's major attraction is its usefulness in expanding private space, frequently as part of a larger attempt to curb the state and expand the private market. For others, civil society serves as a hopeful catchword for prescribing civility and manners as an antidote to the harsh edge of contemporary American society and public debate.

For Congressional conservatives, civil society consists of replacing public welfare with private charity, volunteerism, and service. By contrast, liberals frequently embrace civil society, not to hem government in, but to strengthen it and to restore its public acceptance. Finally, for most, civil society entails ingredients of many of the above, blended together and served up in the modest hope of restoring balance and health in what was once a vibrant, multi-sector society.

Civil society has attracted adherents from across the entire political spectrum: pro-government, anti-government; pro-market, anti-market; from neo-cons and cultural conservatives to neo-liberals and communitarians. This may be good news or bad news; it may raise our hopes or deepen our suspicions. On the one hand, this near universal embrace of civil society may signal an unprecedented search for a renewed consensus over shared ends in society. On the other hand, civil society may become so vacuous a term that it leaves the debate largely unchanged: locked within the confines of liberal individualism, whose core assumption is that society exists not primarily to serve common purposes, but to offer expanded moral or market choices to individuals.

Whether the movement toward civil society represents a Copernican shift carrying with it dramatic promise, or little more than a momentary mood swing or a minor correction of course for our cultural extravagance, or something in between, remains to be seen. Social historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, a substantial contributor to the civil society debate, is frequently heard warning that civil society risks becoming just another mantra, a trendy term expressing merely a rather superficial desire, which may pass like previous social and political fads.[2] In this regard, one recalls the instant sense of expectation raised, not

long ago, by the frequent use of the terms "empowerment," "reinventing government," "public-private partnerships" and more recently, "the new citizenship."

Nevertheless, important developments are underway and we must seek to understand them and, wherever possible, guide them toward a fruitful destination. Tools are needed to evaluate the meaning, significance and long-term promise of these loosely connected, and often completely disconnected activities.

Terms and Concepts

Any discussion of civil society draws upon a constellation of related terms including citizenship, community, civic participation, social institutions, and social capital. Though there are more, these are the descriptive terms most commonly used in public conversation and in scholarly treatment of the subject. This is not the place to offer definitions for every word, but if we are to organize important work around the renewal of something termed civil society, we must discover the conceptual foundation and historical meaning of the concept.

Civil society refers, in one use of the term, to a society that is civil. But it also denotes a distinct realm in which non-political institutions operate families, houses of worship, neighborhoods, civic groups, and just about every form of voluntary association imaginable. Some of these voluntary associations, such as the Scouts, the Salvation Army, and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), serve important civic and charitable purposes. Others, from hobby groups to choral societies, simply provide a richer social life and a sense of neighborly regard.

The central point, however, is that these associations are voluntary and serve important social purposes. They rise spontaneously from the aspirations and desires of free people. Civil society is thus an important space where we meet each other voluntarily, work toward common purposes, and learn the essential habits of collaboration and trust.

A healthy civil society yields by-products critical to the functioning of democratic society. The institutions of civil society mediate between the individual on the one hand and the state and the market on the other, tempering the negative social tendencies associated with each. Civil society also builds social ties and obligations by weaving isolated individuals into the fabric of the larger group, tying them to purposes beyond their private interests.

Through simple acts of connection made in the realm of civil society, the private individual's perspective is enlarged and he learns what it means to be a citizen. Democracy finds its source of strength in habits of the heart. As Alexis de Tocqueville saw it, the reciprocal ties nourished in civil society are the wellspring of democratic life. Through civic participation, he said, "feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed."[3]

Some will argue that civil society must include the economic market within its conceptual boundaries. The economic realm in our society is, after all, a voluntary and spontaneous order. Much like civil society, it is a sphere of human exchange that enjoys considerable freedom from government control. The market also overlaps with civil society in its function as a transmitter of ideas and intellectual goods.

While similar in some ways to the market, however, civil society runs on a different set of impulses. It operates, not like government, on the basis of compulsion, nor like the market, on the basis of competition or the profit motive. Though in many ways private, civil society self-consciously serves public purposes: it calls people beyond the minimalist obligations of the law and the narrow self-interest of the market's bottom line to a higher plane of social cooperation and generosity.

To take the argument a step further, it is important to recognize that civil society is more than merely a descriptive term for the realm of voluntary human associations, lest we be forced to include within its scope associations like the Mafia, militias, and racist enclaves. Civil society relates directly to the character qualities of being a citizen. Properly understood, Civil society, as a term, is inherently moral: it implies the existence of social and moral obligations which constrain the individual. It not only points to purposes beyond the private self; it points to specifically moral ends. Therefore, civil society unavoidably touches upon matters of philosophy, morality, culture, and even religion.

These topics arise in our discussion of civil society because each points to important facets of society which have been eroded, and which many recognize must be restored. When people reach for the language of civil society they are likely expressing a desire for greater social trust and collaboration, broader civic participation, stronger social institutions, deeper loyalties to legitimate authorities in society, and a greater willingness to yield to the claims of community for the sake of the common good.

Prospects for Progress

If the debate accurately signals new public aspirations, there is hope that some measure of renewal for our culture may well be in store in the coming decades. However, these new desires, though registered by large majorities, must be evaluated in light of many obstacles to progress, including rather profound contradictions in the public mind itself. The embrace of positive new social values often requires the sacrifice of other equally attractive social values. It remains to be seen, for example, whether citizens will be willing to restrict their own autonomy when confronting the range of moral choices that American society has made available in recent decades.

Daniel Yankelovich, drawing on survey research data, sums up the cultural changes of recent decades this way: "The quest for greater individual choice clashed directly with the obligations and social norms that held families and communities together in earlier years. People came to feel that questions of how to live and with whom to live were a matter of individual choice not to be governed by restrictive norms. As a nation, we

came to experience the bonds of marriage, family, children, job, community, and country as constraints that were no longer necessary. Commitments were loosened."[4]

Americans are in love with freedom, which, on the surface, any proponent of democracy would be inclined to cheer. Upon closer examination, however, we find that the meaning of freedom itself has changed in consequential ways. Certainly there were competing visions of freedom in America from the beginning, but it is fair to say that the notion of ordered and responsible freedom the freedom to pursue what is right and good was, until fairly recently, the widely accepted operating definition. As part of the civil society debate, we must confront the recent distortion of freedom, which is the single greatest obstacle to renewing civil society.

Fueling our worries about democratic order are very real concerns that the more libertine definitions of freedom currently holding sway in America the view of freedom as absolute may ultimately make freedom unsustainable. This holds important ramifications for the civil society debate. Without the moral consensus that comes from faith in transcendent forms of moral authority, life in society becomes a matter of continuous conflict, what Michael Sandel has termed "the procedural republic."[5] This was the society Tocqueville predicted, where "an immense and tutelary power...absolute, minute, regulate, provident, and mild [covered] the entire surface of society with a blanket of small complicated rules."[6]

We must assess the possibilities for civic renewal in light of what has come to pass. In one of the earliest and most profound treatments of community, Robert Nisbet described the trends of modernity which have played a powerful role in unraveling the moral and civic fiber of the country. From below, he said, the authority of family, church, neighborhood, and school is quietly eroded by the proliferation of individual rights and forms of self-expression which act with disregard for civil society. From above, civil institutions are pressured to surrender authority to the professional managers of the bureaucratic state. Caught between these "pincer" movements, the intermediate associations of civil society languish.[7]

These are the fruits of modernity, and social reformers have no choice but to live within their times and attempt to make improvements. Modernity can't be repealed, but we can seek to limit its harmful tendencies. This is not an easy task to begin with because few would voluntarily part with the many advances offered by modernity, and opt for life in a tradition-bound community. Many of the social convulsions of the past three decades have had as their primary objective throwing off social structures and mores thought to limit the individual, especially women and minorities. Where tightly bound communities remain, they are now invaded by technology, and the intimate world of face to face relationships what Jurgen Habermas called the "life world"--is replaced by the distant and anonymous.

Many will try to return to previous eras in the hope of finding maps and models for civic and spiritual renewal today. We look for familiar signposts, and judge current reality by our past. But the present era is, in many important respects, like no previous era. In

addition to a massive economic transition, we have highly disruptive social, technological, demographic, and cultural changes, all occurring at once. Now, with global technological and commercial integration, we are powerfully affected by forces beyond our national borders.

A final reality which may well impose difficulty is the sheer recalcitrance of secularism, itself a by-product of modernity. Even as many Americans search for spiritual meaning, the truth is that religious life rarely flourishes unless imbedded in and practiced in community. Modernity's technical and material abundance undermines the force of the mystical and moral, and feeds our faith in the secular and rational. As a result, modern social reform movements must operate without a broadly accepted, culturally-centering worldview connecting religion, politics, and social change. [8]

Religion and social change have traditionally been powerful allies. Many social reform movements have drawn their power from religious belief. Historically, the revitalization produced by awakenings follows upon repentance. A recent example of this is the early civil rights movement, inspired by Martin Luther King's appeal to moral conscience. According to some observers, the sixties ushered in a dramatic shift in social movements away from religious motivation. "The New Light of the sixties," says Hugh Heclo, brought about an inversion: the self as aggrieved rather than "repentant and surrendered before a higher law." With sin passé, "self-blame was out and system-blame was in."[9]

Accommodating this shift, modern social movements tend to tap each person's desire, even sense of right, to satisfy his or her own perceived needs for fulfillment. In the world of modern and post-modern confusion, contradictions abound: many search for answers while harboring the firm conviction that there are no answers outside of the self.

All of these factors, and more, affect how our society's values and ideas are shaped, and how society changes. What all of this means for the prospects for renewing civil society, one cannot say with certainty. The sheer speed, scale, and constancy of change reduces us to making generalizations. The information explosion produces a search for new theories of history that can accommodate chaos, discontinuity, and cultural incoherence. We strain to discern even the shadowy outlines of a new era that is struggling to take shape, and hope that it will be better.

The unfolding debate over civil society raises many important topics for discussion. These include the need for a new public philosophy, elevating the common good over private self-interest, renewing social values and institutions, encouraging wider civic participation, and cultural cleanup. This essay will explore the terrain of civil society, its themes, goals, and the major people and institutions behind the growing movement to promote its renewal.

SECTION TWO

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, CIVIC CAPACITY

Introduction

Nothing drives the debate about American culture and civil society more than a concern about our basic social health and the status of our core institutions. America, the unrivaled democratic, economic and military leader of the world, increasingly leads the globe in many categories of social dysfunction, including crime, family breakdown, and teen pregnancy. The nation's problems of child poverty and urban blight stand out as ugly scars when compared to other western industrial nations.

These internal social problems continue to grow, even in the face of astonishing successes in the areas of scientific advancement, technological innovation, and economic improvement. Our inability to generate social gains in recent years, and our need to countenance the possibility that for the first time in our history succeeding generations could do worse than those they follow, has eroded national self-confidence. Americans are a people with a high sense of purpose, who believe they have something to show the world. While other nations admire our technical and material successes, they want nothing to do with our culture and society.

Social Regression

Social regression describes the condition of our private as well as public lives and institutions. In our public debate over social decline, terms once used to describe environmental degradation are now routinely applied to the culture: phrases such as "toxic society" and "hole in the moral ozone" speak to the corrosive effect modern culture has had on our moral and social ecology. The collapse of public manners and civility has produced, in communities, a visible nervousness and a palpable fear.

Social regression reflects a real decline in our social institutions, especially the family. It finds expression in a weakening of citizenship and an erosion of the psychological and spiritual strength that a free society and democracy depend upon to function well. Moreover, social regression, like social progress, has built up momentum; it has dynamics of its own that may or may not be affected significantly by government policy, technological advances, or an expanding economy.

We are a society that, for a long time, has measured its general well-being by the Gross National Product. We would like to assume that economic progress can drag social progress along in its wake, and that prosperity will ensure strong and resilient social institutions. These assumptions are being proven false with mounting social data which proves that the most consequential social problems of our time have become, like uncoupled freight train cars, disconnected from the engine of economic improvement. Researchers at Fordham University have found a startling twenty-year long trend which

shows economic and social progress moving in inverse directions the former up, the latter down like "a crocodile's jaw opening."[10]

The Limits of Social Policy

This growing realization may eventually shake our conventional approaches to social problem solving, and move us in important new directions. For much of the twentieth century, social analysts and planners placed their faith in the application of technical expertise, public program refinements, and improved economic incentives to solve public problems. As we are learning, renewing society is not as simple as reforming impersonal systems and structures.

Our social problems may have grown more complex and interconnected, as we are often reminded, but they are also more directly linked than ever to the collapse of character-forming institutions, to the weakening of social norms, and increasingly to psychological wounds. For example, we are beginning to realize how the behavior of the young is influenced by personal, not merely economic or social factors: Many adolescent girls have sex early, and often with older men, because they lack a father's love. They have babies while they are still children because it's the only form of companionship they know. Young men turn to violence and predatory behavior because of a subconscious rage against the father who was never there to show them how to be a man.

What government does, does differently, or stops doing may produce only minor changes at the margins of such fundamental and intractable social problems as adolescent crime, drug abuse, and educational decline. Signs of this awareness are beginning to appear in the debate. On the political left, one detects a greater willingness to accept the limitations of government activism to raise individuals out of poverty and despair, led by the President himself who boldly proclaimed that the era of big government is over. On the political Right, more are coming to doubt the adequacy of simply eliminating government or freeing up the market.

A leading advocate of this viewpoint, Boston University Professor Glenn Loury, recently articulated the limits of social policy in testimony before the U.S. Congress: People are not automata; their behavior in matters sexual may not be easily manipulated by changing their marginal tax rates or their recipiency status under welfare programs. It is my conviction that the problem of illegitimacy and family breakdown are, at base, cultural and moral problems, which require broad societal action in addition to legislative change.[11]

This breakthrough presents the strong possibility of forging new alliances around fresh strategies for the revitalization of communities, where the real solutions are to be found. New social reform movements are taking root, seeking to identify community solutions. As Loury says, "in every community there are agencies of moral and cultural development which seek to shape the ways in which individuals conceive of their duties to themselves, of their obligations to each other, and of their responsibilities before God.

These mainly, though not exclusively, religious institutions are the natural sources of legitimate moral teaching indeed, the only sources."[12]

Community: The Roots of Social Capital

Those seeking democratic renewal and continued economic prosperity would be wise to consider how the values necessary to the success of both flower in the subsoil of vibrant communities and functional families. These institutions work together to temper individual interests, and to forge allegiance among separate individuals to the well-being of the larger group.

Recent research by Robert Putnam of Harvard University and Francis Fukuyama of the Rand Corporation points to the unbreakable link that exists between strong social institutions and the healthy functioning of both democratic government and the market economy. Putnam, whose research focuses on the relationship of regional governments in Italy to robust civic life, finds that democratic government is far more effective when surrounded by strong civic communities.[13]

Citizens in civic community, Putnam says, "are helpful, respectful and trustful toward one another." In effect, they take upon themselves much of the work of democratic deliberation and consensus-building. Individuals in civic communities are bound together, not by rigidly enforced rules or "vertical relations of authority and dependency, says Putnam, but by "horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation."[14]

Francis Fukuyama has looked at the role that trust and collaboration now play in empowering individuals to compete in a rapidly changing, interconnected global marketplace. Economic life, he says, is maintained on moral bonds of social trust," which he describes as an "unspoken, unwritten bond between fellow citizens that facilitates transactions, empowers individual creativity, and justifies collective action."[15] Fukuyama concludes that societies with strong bonds of social trust and collaboration will increasingly gain important advantages over those characterized by individual isolation and social fragmentation.

The absence of trust in society leads to huge transaction costs in the economy as elaborate efforts must be made by individuals and corporations to protect against fraud and deceit. When private transactions are no longer regulated by morality, a regulatory state much like Tocqueville predicted "absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild" inevitably emerges to fill the void.[16]

To succeed, market capitalism must be more than an arena of crass self advancement by utility-maximizing individuals. Durable prosperity depends upon a vibrant moral and social order, not simply upon unfettered markets. Like the success of democracy, the success of Capitalism depends on a rich supply of social capital, consisting of knowledge, aptitude, skills, and positive social habits. This is even more true in a post-industrial age where softer forms of human capital become dramatically more important than hard capital assets such as factories, tools, and machines. Tragically, at the very time when

individuals need plentiful social capital in order to compete in an unregulated, rapidly changing, global information economy, that capital has been severely depleted.

A nation's reserves of social capital, like its more tangible stock, of economic capital, can be drawn down. The phrase "living on borrowed capital" refers to the failure of one generation to renew and pass on to the next the social endowments it has inherited. The result is a decline in what Fukuyama calls "spontaneous sociability," rooted in the loss of social trust, all of which portends worrisome consequences for a democratic society.

Family Ties and the Bonds of Social Trust

The central task, in view of the above, is for older generations to devote themselves to socializing infants into adults, a process that transforms self-interested private individuals into public-spirited citizens. Democracy is heavily dependent for its success upon those institutions that socialize infant individuals into adult citizens.

Is it possible to discuss social institutions without focusing heavily on the family? Alexis de Tocqueville, the foremost observer of American democracy, believed that the maintenance of our democratic regime falls largely to this basic institution. He observed that the prerequisites of democracy the habits of the heart, as he put it would be nourished and transmitted from generation to generation through the family. Mediating associations are important, but he recognized that even they drew important resources from the family.

If this is true, the continuing collapse of the American family represents as great a threat to our society as we have ever confronted. If we fail to reverse the current abandonment of marriage and family, any discussion of civil society will prove to be mostly academic.

Those who wish to see civil society prosper must recognize as paramount the unique socializing role of parents, both mothers and fathers. The capacity to collaborate in trustful and helpful ways with one's associates is clearly affected by patterns of trust and interdependency learned within the family structure. Families cultivate a spirit of reasonableness and compromise, a capacity to trust and to be trustworthy, a willingness to be helpful and empathetic, and a capacity to act with self-restraint and respect toward others.

At a time of social disintegration, greater care must be given to understanding how human development takes place and what is required for individuals to flourish and function in society. The good society requires good institutions, starting with good parents, pursuing good ends. The late sociologist James Coleman, who popularized the term "social capital," utilized the term to describe a range of personal strengths that are cultivated in the family, especially the ability to form ties of cooperation to work toward common purposes.[17]

Social capital has many intangible qualities. As inherently social and meaning-seeking creatures, human beings possess a need for membership in human community, a need for connection and coherence. When these needs are not met, society atrophies and

individuals experience painful isolation and acute unease the experience Emile Durkheim called "anomie". In modern America, anomie has many causes. People feel distant from each other in part because society has simply become more uprooted, fast-paced and anonymous. Increasing fear and distrust is also a common and one might add quite rational response to the growing likelihood of being offended or even assaulted in America's public spaces.

Perhaps the principal culprit in the erosion of trust in American society is the failure of a growing number of parents to preserve the bonds of trust with their own children. The family is the most indispensable institution of civil society because it is an incubator of trust. The capacity of the human infant to grow into a caring citizen, capable of self-control and empathy toward others, is largely supplied through the child's early attachment to caring and competent parents. In bonding with the child, the parent puts in place the rudiments of trust: a process which, according to Urie Bronfenbrenner, conveys "a strong, mutual, irrational, emotional attachment" between the child and the one who is "committed to the child's well-being and development, preferably for life."[18]

For years now, we have been reminded again and again that large majorities are distrustful of their public institutions. More recently, we are informed of the unsurprising fact that American citizens are more and more distrustful and suspicious of each other. Contrary to convenient myth, our discontents are not confined to governmental malfeasance and feckless politicians. Some of our cynicism is a by-product of the rupture of primary relationships within the family, and beyond to extended kin and community. Who can doubt that a child will be less trusting and cooperative as an adult if he has experienced a painful loss of trust in the person in whom he thought he could surely place his trust, his own parent? Sadly, for many children growing up today in America, this betrayal occurs not once, but several times before they enter adulthood.

The State of the Family Debate

Family structure has been the focus of intense interest and sharp debate in political and intellectual circles for decades now. In many respects the current debate was sparked initially by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 study for the Johnson Administration, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which issued dire warnings regarding the deterioration of the black family and its impact on the African-American community.

Moynihan warned that "a community that allows a large number of men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder most particularly the furious, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure that is not only to be expected; it is very near inevitable."[19] Moynihan's fiery eloquence generated controversy that would continue well into the nineties, but his analysis supplied the wellspring for a stream of debate which continues to link social order to core social institutions, especially those which socialize young males.

Other major milestones included Charles Murray's 1984 book, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*; Bill Moyer's 1986 television documentary on family breakdown; William Galston's 1990 essay, "A Liberal-Democratic Case for the Two-Parent Family"; the 1991 National Commission on Children, chaired by Jay D. Rockefeller IV; Dan Quayle's "Murphy Brown" Speech in 1992; Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's 1993 *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* essay, "Dan Quayle Was Right"; Charles Murray's 1993 newspaper column, "The Coming White Underclass; and David Blankenhorn's 1995 book, *Fatherless America*.[20]

Politics has not always served the family well. For many years, the family debate was regarded by many as more polarizing than constructive. Although the family has had strong intellectual and political support from across partisan lines, in the minds of many the family has too frequently been used as an ideological club in a broader cultural debate,
setting back the serious work of forging a new national consensus. Irving Kristol, for example, wrote in the fall of 1992 that family values are not a political issue; they are predominantly a religious and cultural issue. He even added that many of the changes in family structure are side effects of affluence, not simply flawed policies.[21] Efforts to strengthen the family, in other words, should not be cast in narrowly partisan terms.

Fortunately, the public debate over the family appears to have matured in recent years. Though still occasionally rancorous, the question of the family's preeminence in society, and the inescapable importance of parents, seems to be largely settled, at least within mainstream debate. Whatever else the notion of family presently means for the political left or right, its irreducible components increasingly include parents--more frequently fathers and mothers--committed to the care and nurture of their children.

Surely, conflicting visions of the family will continue to generate important debate, especially over public policies, but one now senses that we are debating means, not ends. The proposition around which policy and social science experts are slowly coalescing in support is the argument that family fragmentation is the chief contributor to many forms of maladjustment among children.

The scale of single-parent households, mostly father-absent households, is now routinely cited by scholars and commentators as a prime explanation for numerous negative outcomes among children. The maturation of this debate has enabled us to pinpoint and acknowledge the relationship of father absence to specific pathologies in society, such as crime, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy.

Only now is there beginning to emerge an attempt to show how stable families not only prevent social pathologies, but generate social health, as measured by such things as trust, cooperation and social generosity among citizens, conditions that are commonly discussed in connection with civil society. Families are just as critical in shaping these equally important, though perhaps less quantifiable, social conditions.

Indeed, in many important ways, it appears that the renewed interest in civil society has

helped to enlighten the family debate. The framework of civil society offers an opportunity to examine the institutions of marriage and family in a new light and with a new urgency. The family becomes linked to social regeneration, not merely to ideological arguments or religious creed, with which many in our secular, pluralistic society have difficulties.

An example of this elevated debate is an essay offered by Jean Bethke Elshtain which links the health of civil society to marriage. In the relationship between families and communities, says Elshtain, we see a powerful reciprocal effect at work. The family is nested in "a wider network of social institutions," and thus "civil society surrounds the family in a way that either helps to sustain, or helps to undermine, parental commitment and accomplishment." Elshtain states: "marriage and family are the most fundamental forms of civic association. We know that mothers and fathers are essential to the life of the child, the community, and the wider civil society. And we know that strong and perduring marriages strong family stories if you will preserve and protect some of our own most cherished democratic ideals: pluralism, plurality, our distinctiveness."[22]

The State of Action

Interest in the family has always run high among family policy advocates like social conservatives, and some right-leaning think tanks. It took the arrival of new institutional players, however, to achieve progress both in the debate and in new forms of organizing cultural support for a pro-family agenda. Most notable is the Institute for American Values, which has produced numerous books, publications, and conferences on marriage and the family, and their connection to civil society. The Institute and its allies have sought to cast the debate in non-partisan terms and to move beyond rhetoric into solutions.

The Institute's Council on Families, co-chaired by Jean Bethke Elshtain and David Blankenhorn, has drawn together a diverse collection of family scholars from the Left and Right, and has sought to inform the debate through the firm evidence of social sciences, especially sociological and cultural perspectives. Facts and arguments produced by this group have reached the far corners of America through extensive media coverage, and have had a strong influence on the debate.

Marriage

Credit for the heightened awareness of the importance of marriage goes especially to the Council on Families, which has published a number of books and critical reports on the subject, including a report on marriage, entitled *Marriage in America*, which received broad coverage in the popular press. In the report, the Council declared that the divorce revolution, and the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood, has failed. The report detailed the many negative effects on child well-being abuse, neglect, psychological and behavioral disturbances, poverty, crime and declining educational achievement and stated that unless we reverse the decline of marriage, no other achievements will be powerful enough to reverse the trend of declining

child well-being. The report warned that marriage was losing its social meaning because, as an institution, it no longer embodied commitment and obligation to others. Marriage was being reduced, instead, to a vehicle for the emotional fulfillment of adults. If we fail to reverse the culture of divorce, the report warned, we may face "cultural suicide."[23]

Recent years have witnessed a dramatic rise in academic research focusing on the many benefits of marriage to adult health and well-being, and to children. Space simply does not permit a listing of the many scholarly contributions. Public intellectuals, including David Poponoe, Maggie Gallagher, and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, can regularly be seen and heard making pro-marriage arguments before public audiences.

Numerous policy and advocacy groups seem to have taken encouragement from improvements in the popular debate, and can now be heard promoting the renewal of marriage with greater confidence. Literature and data on marriage and divorce now receive wide circulation, and an explosion of motivational books on building stronger marriages supply evidence that popular interest in the subject of marriage may be on the upswing.

The *Marriage in America* report included five pages of recommendations, focusing on the need to reclaim marital permanence, with applications suggested for the many sectors which influence values: religion, social work, employers, civic leaders, attorneys and judges involved in family law, entertainers, and of course, lawmakers.

Today, a growing number of family scholars and sympathetic public policy advocates are in the early stages of building a national network to recover marriage. Marriage has been made a greater priority at a number of important institutions, such as the American Enterprise Institute, which long focused exclusively on economic policy concerns. The May/June 1996 edition of their magazine, The American Enterprise--bearing the title "It takes a Marriage"--was almost completely dedicated to the subject of renewing marriage and featured many of the most recognized voices on the issue.

The cultural influences which have eroded the strength of marriage, beginning in the sixties, gained enormous momentum during the seventies when most states passed laws to make the marriage contract less binding. The no-fault divorce revolution has essentially enabled either spouse to break up the marriage without the other partner's consent.

A new network of state-based family advocacy groups, known as state-family policy councils, are seeking to reverse the no-fault revolution by adopting marriage law reforms. A no-fault reform bill is making headway in Michigan, and similar initiatives are beginning to generate interest in several other states, including Georgia, Kentucky, Illinois, and Washington.[24]

Working in tandem with this policy reform movement are similar movements, operating predominantly within the faith community, to both strengthen existing marriages and to prepare partners for future marriage. A leading figure in the marriage renewal movement

is Michael McManus, columnist and author of the book *Marriage Savers*.[25] McManus argues that with 90 percent of all marriages still taking place in our churches and synagogues, these religious institutions can and must do more to improve the success rate of the marriages they bless. He also believes that within every house of worship there are many securely married and experienced couples who can be matched with those less experienced or troubled.

Promise Keepers, an evangelical men's movement has also given marriage a major boost. Seeking to shape their millions of attendees at football stadium rallies into "men of integrity," preachers can regularly be heard admonishing men to honor and be faithful to their wives. This movement, together with other evangelical groups and publishing houses such Focus on the Family, are spreading self-help marriage enrichment literature far and wide.

Fatherhood

One of the most active and promising areas of cultural renewal is the growing movement to renew the institution of fatherhood in America. Few things could be more consequential to civil society, for as anthropologist Margaret Mead has said, "the supreme test of any civilization is whether or not it can teach men to be good fathers."

Father absence, like no other factor, contributes to a range of negative outcomes in children, including teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and adolescent violence and crime. As columnist William Raspberry, a prominent journalist and advocate of fatherhood, stated: "there's as strong an association between fatherlessness and anti-social behavior as there is between cigarettes and lung cancer."[26]

Fathers perform important functions in the socialization of children. Dr. Wade Horn, Director of the National Fatherhood Initiative, points out that proper socialization requires
development of the ability to delay or inhibit impulse gratification. According to Horn, "well-socialized children have learned not to strike out at others to get what they want; under-socialized children have not. Well socialized children have learned to listen to and obey the directions of legitimate authority figures, such as parents and teachers; under-socialized children have not."[27] He notes that studies which demonstrate the differences between the parenting styles of fathers and mothers indicate that fathers are essential in helping the young develop impulse control.

While good fathers strengthen civil society, fatherhood is also an example of a social institution that is held together in large part by the positive influences of civil society. Fathering, unlike the more biologically determined role of motherhood, is strongly affected by cultural influences. Social norms, symbols, mores, and other cultural factors exert a strong influence over the attitudes and behavior of fathers.

The leaders of this emerging social movement advance the basic proposition that the decline in fathering, whether through an increase in physical absence or merely an

emotional disengagement by fathers, results in psychologically underdeveloped children, who frequently engage in destructive behavior, and creates socially underdeveloped citizens, who often lack the necessary dispositions for healthy participation in society. Fathers, in other words, are powerfully positive agents in improving child well-being and making better citizens.

The National Fatherhood Initiative, in particular, has worked to place the reality of father absence and its social consequences on the public agenda, and to arouse a response from within the many social sectors that affect male attitudes and behavior, including religious, civic, educational, and community groups. The Fatherhood Initiative has influenced public debate like few other groups by contributing to thousands of media stories, and radio and television broadcasts, by public message campaigns, and by organizing local land state-wide projects.

A host of other national and local groups have emerged to strengthen the skills of individual fathers and to strengthen community support for them. Organizations like the National Center for Fathering and the National Institute for Responsible Fatherhood provide outreach, training, and educational literature to individual fathers. And, of course, Promise Keepers has reached tens of millions with a strong message of responsible fatherhood and moral responsibility.

Books on fatherhood have become so plentiful that many book stores have opened new sections featuring books on this subject and other men's issues. Several very prominent books, including David Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America*,[28] and David Poponoe's *Life Without Father*,[29] have received extensive reviews and wide circulation among social and political analysts.

Dozens of major philanthropies are now pouring sizable contributions into a range of projects, including academic research, practitioners networks, and educational and public awareness initiatives.

Conclusion

As indicated, the atmosphere for discussing the family and its importance to society has improved. Already, life for many children is improving as parents, including fathers, have increased their effort to protect and nurture their children.

Still, many trends continue to work against a sweeping restoration of the family. Illegitimacy rates continue their steady climb, and separated, divorced, and blended families continue to grow as a percentage of households in America. This undoubtedly deepens public acceptance of these arrangements. The young have doubts and hesitations about marriage, even questioning its necessity for child-bearing. In short, prospects for the family are very much linked to broader trends in American culture and moral values.

SECTION THREE

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL WELFARE

Introduction

Debate about civil society, if it is to serve the purpose of society-wide renewal, must consider the well-being of entire communities, including those wracked by poverty and dysfunction. The prospect of a restored civil society must do more than alleviate the anxiety and alienation of the middle class; it must reverse much of the disorder and despair of poor communities. The civil society debate is thus unavoidably linked to conflicting visions and assumptions over social welfare policies.

Occupying a major place in the civil society debate is a drive to reform and devolve major elements of the American welfare state. As pointed out in the introduction, many recent advocates of civil society tend to view the task of recovering civil society as predominantly one of replacing a costly and ineffective federal system with state, local, and community-based programs. The argument is now familiar: the federal war on poverty has spent trillions of dollars on welfare and the number of poor has either remained the same or increased. As generally stated, this basic thrust has won large public majorities to its side.

This stream of discussion argues that civil society has atrophied primarily because government has supplanted many of its functions. Conservatives want to reinvigorate community by returning many current functions of the welfare state to non-profit charities which deliver personalized compassion with a heavy focus on character development. These alternative programs are often not only local and private, but also religious in nature.

Such charity, it is believed, will be more effective because it is personal and challenging, requiring more of all citizens than do distant and impersonal welfare bureaucracies. Arguments for turning to non-governmental agencies to do the job of caring for people focuses on the traits which account for the successes of these programs. In addition to being personal and challenging, private and community-based programs are said to be flexible, demanding, enterprising, innovative, community centered, results-driven, and often spiritually based. Government programs, by contrast, are said to be undemanding, rule-bound, distant, unaccountable, impersonal, and hyper-secular.[30]

Private charity programs are also considered to be more efficient. Proponents cite examples of charities which have shown long-term success rates well in excess of government run programs. Teen Challenge, for example, a network of faith-oriented drug treatment programs, keeps minimal paper work, hires staff frequently lacking professional degrees, and operates facilities which fall short of government standards (all of which has brought them trouble with social agencies). Yet, studies show the program achieves long-term cure rates of 67 percent to 85 percent, compared to government programs which rarely break out of the single digit range.[31]

Conservatives want many more programs like Teen Challenge to fill in the mosaic of American charity. Hoping to revive local and personal charity, U.S. Senator Dan Coates (R-Ind.) and former Education Secretary William Bennett have formed a "Project for American Renewal" to promote a legislative package centering on community based charity. The proposal includes 18 separate initiatives to reform public housing, promote the two-parent family, support religious charities through welfare-set asides and deductions, and experiment with a host of minor projects to boost character and responsibility.[32]

Intellectual and Institutional Foundations

The move to revitalize civic community while replacing costly and ineffective welfare programs has received powerful intellectual and institutional backing. A number of major Washington-based policy groups have turned to developing civil society agendas. The Heritage Foundation, the oldest and largest conservative think tank in the nation, has produced a noticeable shift in its social policy emphasis toward citizenship and institution building. Its main policy journal, *Policy Review*, has recently been reconfigured and subtitled "The Journal of American Citizenship." Its stated objective is to "illuminate the families, communities, voluntary associations, churches and other religious organizations, business enterprises, public and private schools, and local governments that are solving problems more effectively than large, centralized, bureaucratic government." Its pages are dedicated to promoting a "new citizenship movement" by chronicling success stories, exposing obstacles and opportunities, and debating the policies that will best invigorate civil society."[33]

Conservatives are by no means newcomers to this intellectual tradition, which is deeply rooted in the classical and western traditions. Indeed, its twentieth century revival, which seems to be reaching its peak in the mid-1990s, received its initial spark in the late 1970s when Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus published *To Empower People*, in which they urged that the intermediary institutions and associations of civil society be recognized in policy reforms. Their work argued that public policy should, above all else, protect and foster these mediating structures. This small booklet, now virtually a classic, was recently republished by the American Enterprise Institute, another influential think tank contributing to issues of culture and civil society.[34]

Berger and Neuhaus undoubtedly drew some of their insight from another towering figure who wrote largely within the conservative intellectual tradition, Robert Nisbet. Nisbet's 1953 book, *The Quest for Community*, also a classic in many circles, suggested that the greatest challenge of modern society is "protecting, reinforcing, and nurturing where necessary, the varied groups and associations which form the true building blocks of the social order."[35]

Another milestone in the emerging movement to renew civil society was a speech delivered by philanthropist Michael Joyce, a keen civil society intellectual, first before the Heritage Foundation, and later before many influential policy and civic groups. The speech was a bold call to recover the American citizen, to roll back the incursion of the

helping and caring professions, and to restore a robust, vigorous civil society and its rich, vital web of civic life. For Joyce, civil society is the expansive field of human endeavor, encompassing all of the institutions through which individuals express their interests and values, including our places of employment, families, schools, churches, neighborhood associations, clubs, fraternal and sororal lodges, and ethnic and voluntary associations of all sorts.[36]

Other institutional players and intellectuals contributing to the social policy debate include, on the Right, the Capital Research Center, a program specializing in the reform of philanthropies; The Acton Institute, which promotes the recovery of moral culture and especially religiously-grounded charity; The National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, a self-help action group which trains local entrepreneurs in neighborhood reclamation; and The Center for Effective Compassion, chaired by political columnist and philanthropist Arriana Huffington. Each of these programs contributes intellectual, policy, and practical tools to the movement to recover private charity. On the Center-Left, a similar movement toward reform has been organized by the Progressive Policy Institute.

Space limitations unfairly eliminate all but the most prominent intellectual contributors to the debate over civil society and private charity. Standing well above his contemporary peers, and promoted by all of them, is historian Marvin Olasky, who has contributed numerous books on social history topics, but is best known for *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, which examines effective charity in nineteenth century America. Olasky shows how charity workers in earlier times understood that the problems of idleness, drunkenness, crime, and promiscuity were related to issues of moral culture and private character. Charity campaigns, accordingly, sought to provide moral reformation and self-discipline. In exchange for society's help, the poor were expected to bear some obligation to better themselves.

More than any other critique of the welfare state, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* has had broad circulation and major impact, especially among Congressional policymakers. Olasky argues strenuously that the issue with modern welfare is not its cost, but its tragic results for many people who have turned to it for help. His prescription reverting to nineteenth-century-style discipline has generated intense controversy.

The nineteenth century offers important lessons, and we would do well to heed Olasky's core principles. However, as even Olasky acknowledges, the circumstances of the late twentieth century are radically different from those of the nineteenth century. Modern values and systems, with their emphasis on secularism, compartmentalization and professional specialization, will not be easily or rapidly cast off.

The Ideology of Welfare

The move to reform welfare draws impetus from more powerful sources than simple concern over the current system's inefficiency and ineffectiveness. It is located in a larger critique of the entire twentieth century experiment in centralized government, which many of its most ardent critics believe was consciously hostile to local civic institutions

and networks. Major publications by the Hudson Institute, a leading conservative think tank, place the blame for the collapse of civic community at the feet of early twentieth century progressives such as Herbert Croly, Walter Lippman, and John Dewey.[37] The accusation holds that these progressives promoted a vision, not for strong and diverse local communities, but for a "national community" which was grandiose, artificial, and ultimately destructive of real community.

Critics of the welfare state argue that the rise of national government was fueled by a conscious and well-articulated distrust for most things local. For those who were progressive, local civic networks and charities conjured up images of corrupt inefficiency presided over by unenlightened non-professionals harboring retrograde social attitudes. Bill Schambra, another important conservative voice in the civil society debate, says the approach of progressives toward civic community was one of disdain for what they viewed as a vast "chaotic jumble of divergent civic institutions and local loyalties" which the state would proceed "ruthlessly to extirpate or absorb."[38] Replacing ignorant and untrained local care-givers would be a cadre of qualified professionals trained in the most advanced theories at elite policy schools.

However grand the intent of these progressive visionaries, and however justified their concerns about the inadequacies of local programs, the progressive movement, critics argue, gave birth to the "governmental assumption," which became the "ubiquitous unchallenged *modus operandi* of the twentieth century." This assumption increasingly meant that only national solutions were adequate to confront local problems. If people fell below the official poverty level, federal programs would end their poverty; if there were gangs, Congress would eliminate them through a new program; if the nation's schools fell into mediocrity, a federal bureau with a well-funded staff of professionals would produce a turn around. Enlightened managers steadily became trustees over the provision of social services, badly weakening the old civic order with its private, voluntary, and decentralized approach to collection action.[39]

These accounts of alleged hostility toward civil society point to the powerful role that history and ideology play in the welfare debate. The debate becomes an arena for settling older and larger philosophical scores. Liberals and conservatives distrust each other in the welfare state argument, and for good reason. If liberals suspect conservatives of wanting to do away with the welfare state, they are generally right. Conservative suspicion of recent liberal interest in civil society is rooted in their claim of a century long progressive fondness for "national community" and governmentalism.

Suspicion of Bill Clinton's embrace of civil society was voiced this way: for Clinton, civil society merely offers "a facile rhetorical bridge" over the chasm between those of his supporters who do genuinely yearn for a revitalization of civil, communitarian structures, and those who prefer the further expansion of government's reach. It permits him to speak the language of civic renewal, while pursuing the policy of government revival.[40]

When Washington conservatives are praising the "little platoons" of neighborhood associations and civic fraternities, it is almost always in the hope of re-engaging these

local arrangements in performing these welfare functions the state has displaced. The case for government rollbacks in areas of regulation, student loans, middle class entitlements, and a host of other functions is usually presented in terms of reform; when the subject turns to welfare, the prescription often ranges from replacement to outright elimination.

Problems with the Debate

The idea that an intrusive government has weakened neighborhoods and turned citizens into self-interested and idle clients of the state must be taken seriously, as most would acknowledge. But standing by itself, it has clear limitations. For one, by focusing single-mindedly and exclusively on welfare, it often presents a vision of society no larger or more complete than the vision of those who erected the welfare state in the first place. Civil society consists of much more than simply an alternative administrative system for the delivery of social services.

Secondly, it assumes that government programs are always the cause and rarely, if ever, the effect of declining civil society. Blaming wrong-headed politicians and flawed policies for what has come to pass is a tempting and convenient way to dismiss other causes which may be more troubling, including middle class culpability. It feeds the assumption that civic dysfunction in America is largely confined to poor neighborhoods, even though family fragmentation, illegitimacy, incivility, crime, and a host of other social ills are now common in many middle class enclaves.

It is hard to summon evidence for the notion that ill-conceived policies are capable, by themselves, of producing the scale of general criminality and family abandonment we are now witnessing Certainly, costly and ineffective policies have compounded in many ways such social problems as teen pregnancy, adolescent crime, drug abuse, and educational decline, and these untreated problems tear deeper into the fabric of civil society. But these social ills also flow at least in part from a weakening of the character forming institutions of civil society. As discussed earlier, there has been a reciprocal dynamic.

Those who believe the welfare state is the sole culprit for the condition of society will also then argue, with some logic, that eliminating government can indeed must precede the creation of alternative civic capacity. Not surprisingly, schemes to replace welfare and "end dependency" are sold in terms similar to the utopian rhetoric of the progressives who originally convinced Americans of the need for the system. As this author observed: "The mistake of the Democratic majority was believing it could create the good society by merely building government up; the danger for the Republican majority may be believing it can recreate the good society by merely tearing government down." Civil society is about a human order larger and richer than the state, and once weakened it can't be magically restored by simply getting government out.[41]

A final and important issue that arises increasingly in the debate is the question of private sector capacity. Private charity is often presented as a great untapped source by those

who favor it. Estimates differ widely regarding the actual state of private charity in America, but many involved directly in these programs can frequently be heard worrying, not about being untapped, but overtapped. They assert that charitable time and money is waning,[42] causing many of the primary institutional sources of private charity to turn to the government for help. Of the Catholic Charities' $1.9 billion budget, for example, $1.2 billion, or 65 percent now comes from government sources. Many other major charitable organizations receive similar percentages of their revenues from government.[43] None of these charities, they will quickly add, provide income support for poor families: their services consist mostly of providing food, shelter and other forms of in-kind assistance.

The appeal to local charity is often linked to a call for greater non-institutional care by private individuals in the form of voluntarism. Personal engagement is, according to civil society proponents, the key to success in these efforts. From this perspective, the solution to the welfare crisis, in addition to expanding private programs, is to dramatically expand personal involvement by volunteers. But this poses a problem. While it is true that large percentages of Americans volunteer, there is also some validity to the popular portrait of Americans that presently currently itself: many are stressed out, overworked, underpaid, and mostly concerned about getting by on two paychecks.

The point here is not to cast doubt on the importance of private charity, and certainly not on the vitally important role of religion. As research repeatedly shows, religious faith has a positive impact, like no other force, on a host of pathologies such as drug abuse, alcoholism, and crime,[44] and those touched by faith-based programs show remarkable results, even though their actual numbers remain comparatively small. For that reason alone the fact that these programs change people and improve their lives they will play a large role in emerging debates.

This is but a brief overview of a debate which is highly significant and increasingly visible. If we are to proceed reasonably in seeking to resolve the welfare crisis, important questions must be addressed, such as: how much private sector capacity is in place now?; how long will it take to create additional capacity?; are private groups and individuals really capable of treating the tangle of pathologies that often mark the lives of the long-term poor?; and, what if in our haste to reform, none of this produces the expected result? The most important consideration may be how to regenerate a vibrant and caring civic sector, especially in the most blighted neighborhoods where it has largely disappeared and where poverty is most concentrated. These are issues which civil society advocates will eventually need to address if their vision of social renewal is to be taken seriously.

Conclusion

In America, the social debate often quickly becomes a political debate, generating new ideas, new assumptions, and new directions for society. Civil society has become the goal of many welfare reformers, and they have succeeded at setting in motion a long-term trend toward decentralized programming designed to strengthen local civic capacity.

What has come out of this debate already is that government displacement is real; that local charities do important and unique work and must be supported in our policies; that the poor require personal engagement, which means they need something from all of us; and that we must now experiment with approaches to restore the traditional role of communities in providing care for their members.

These experiments, though promising, are untested. Many issues will have to be evaluated as policy-makers move to empower local civic associations and faith-based charities. Some involve rather simple questions of administration and finance. Others involve complex and thorny questions relating to church-state separation. Even issues of local zoning are already surfacing as some churches become busy places of week-day social activity and service.[45]

What remains especially unclear is how far volunteerism and private charity can go. The debate, in contrast to the optimistic rhetoric coming from some conservatives regarding the boundless potential of the American people to care for their own, should be undergirded by an abiding realism about the human condition, which is, after all perhaps conservatism's core assumption. Major leaders such as William Bennett and Senator Dan Coates are up front about these issues and ask the questions that are on many minds: how can we revivify social institutions?; how can we reverse the civic atrophy that has occurred over the past 30 years? Civil society, they note, "is organic, not mechanical. It can be coaxed and nurtured, not engineered." When it comes to public policy, they suggest humility and realism: "Even if government directly undermined civil society, it cannot directly reconstruct it. Getting government out of our lives will not *ipso facto* lead to a rebirth of republican virtue."[46]

Many of the more serious minds acknowledge that a larger cultural and religious rebirth will be required, something far deeper than structural reforms. One of the most enthusiastic proponents of sweeping welfare reform, the Hudson Institute, interrupts its report with a stark word of caution, "Without a genuine and widespread revival of the habits and attitudes that Tocqueville observed on these shores," the reforms will prove insignificant.[47]

The kind of moral and civic renaissance hoped for by these reformers will, of course, have to come from the moralizing centers of culture and society itself. It will require the renewal of many sectors of society, led by citizens and leaders from all walks of life.

SECTION FOUR

COMMUNITY BUILDING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

The characteristic of Americans that Tocqueville admired the most was their penchant to form groups. Nothing deserved more attention, Tocqueville said, than these associations. The tendency to join and participate in voluntary associations may be the distinguishing element of our unique democratic heritage, what some have termed American exceptionalism. In the rich soil of America's civic arena the habits of mind and heart necessary for democratic life are cultivated.

This section will cover the movement of ideas, institutions and people who focus their attention primarily on the health of our communities and civic associations. The terms civic association and community are not one and the same, but they are grouped together here because the people and organizations focusing on civic community have more in common with each other than with those focusing on other aspects civil society. Their writings reflect similar assumptions and concerns.

Some civic projects, as we will see in Section five, seek to tackle problems of public life: They seek to address problems of citizen participation and public discourse by promoting such things as "national conversations" and civic journalism. Although they overlap, the cluster of organizations and initiatives discussed here represent a generally different category, one which is interested in seeing individuals cooperate in building stronger communities through involvement in public service and volunteer projects.

Another distinguishing characteristic of this category of groups is that they show little concern for the displacement of civic community by government, the issue raised consistently by conservatives. As in the case of the Americorp project, which seeks to expand civic values among youth through government sponsored volunteerism, the government is often presented as a possible source of help. In Putnam's analysis of regional governments in Italy, strong civic community enabled governments to work better and do more.

Yet another distinction is seen in their concept of "social capital," which takes on a more restrictive definition. For the civic restorationists, social capital as a term is largely interchangeable with civic participation. The key words are social "connectedness," membership, and participation. Says Robert Putnam, "By social capital, I mean features of social life networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives."[48]

This group tends to put all human groups which connect and nourish people from the family to choral societies on the same moral plane. Although they can be heard voicing concerns -- specifically about children, and more generally about families -- primary institutions such as family and marriage are usually not made a priority.

Bowling Alone

Tocqueville's greatest long-term worry was the age-old vice he called egoism, which causes each person to live apart, "a stranger to the fate of the rest." The retreat of the individual into private life apart from community, Tocqueville predicted, would spawn "a multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives."[49]

In many ways, we are confirming Tocqueville's fears. Today, much of the discussion of civil society has focused on the steep decline of membership in civic groups, especially mainline civic associations. Raising this issue to national awareness has been Harvard Professor Robert Putnam, who attracted widespread attention with his essay "Bowling Alone: Democracy in America at the End of the Twentieth Century," published in January, 1995, which noted as its central point that even in so basic an activity as bowling, Americans were doing it alone rather than in groups.

In his many writings, Putnam has sounded the alarm over the slumping membership of such common social groups as Garden Clubs, Boy Scouts, and the Elks. Citing data from the General Social Survey, which has tracked civic membership for over two decades, Putnam found that, at all levels of education and among men and women, "in all sorts of groups," membership has declined by one quarter since 1974. He found that measurements of social trust individual trust in political authorities and social institutions registered a decline of one-third during the same period, although it is not yet clear whether this is a cause or effect of declining civic membership.[50]

The arena of action for this category is "civic," meaning structures and spaces where people gather. It does not include what Putnam calls "mailing list organizations" because members of these organizations are tied to common symbols and ideologies, not so much to each other; they are not "connected". Nor does it include the so-called "third-sector" not-for-profit organizations which exist to perform functions other than connecting people.[51]

Causes of Civic Decline

Declining civic engagement is a somewhat puzzling phenomenon, and we can only speculate on its causes. There are the obvious explanations: people are busier, often having to resort to two incomes to make ends meet; women, who have long been the primary volunteer pool, are now directing their energies toward career and financial objectives, etc.

Civic life may simply be another casualty of peace and prosperity. The most civilly engaged generation was the one that was shaped by war and depression. With the absence of national crisis, and the growing involvement by government agencies in confronting natural disasters with financial aid and clean up assistance, one can assume

the possibility of some civic displacement by government. The spontaneous outpouring of relief efforts in response to floods, hurricanes, and disasters like the Oklahoma City bombing remains strong, however, even in the midst of government involvement.

Putnam attempts to answer his own question of why Americans are bowling alone with a series of explanations. One explanation is simply the passing of the "civic generation," that generation most influenced by crisis and most civilly engaged. Others include time and financial pressures, mobility, suburbanization, public cynicism dating back to Vietnam and Watergate, and the movement of women into the paid labor force.[52]

In his search for incriminating evidence, Putnam settles on a prime target. He claims to have found a suspect against whom some "directly incriminating evidence has turned up." The culprit, says Putnam, is television. The sheer amount of time spent before the tube on average four hours per day rules a lot of other activity out. What's worse, TV viewing, adds Putnam, is associated with "low social capital," and it is not difficult to understand why. Chances are, the citizens are awash in the "petty and paltry pleasures" of which Tocqueville wrote, instead of being alive to the interests of others.

But there may be other factors, which require a closer look at the nature of these declining civic structures themselves. For example, many suspect that the membership decline in mainline Protestant denominations and the shift of parishioner loyalties toward other Evangelical churches may have been caused by a softening of mainline church teachings and demands on its members. Perhaps the price of admission for many mainline churches has become too low. Higher standards and costs for membership often confer a greater sense of belonging.

Similarly, it is possible that those civic groups facing declining participation have refused to adapt to changing expectations among their members. They may have been slow at detecting important generational shifts and thus simply failed to replace older members with younger ones. In some cases, the task a civic institution set out to accomplish was either finished, superseded by more urgent concerns, or no longer inspired the same response in its followers.

The PTA, for example, may have been effective in mediation and problem-solving during a time when public schools enjoyed broader consensus and parental support. The job of the PTA in maintaining trust and loyalty becomes more difficult when schools become just another cultural battleground. In conflict-ridden institutions, all stakeholders are often forced to take sides, which means mediation and service is replaced with advocacy, which in turn, pleases some and displeases others.

A more complete evaluation of civic engagement needs to take into account certain countertrends. A weakness in Putnam's methodology may be that it was simply tracking the wrong things; the model is too stagnant to catch the dynamic changes that often occur in America. By focusing strictly on membership patterns of large organizations that have been around for decades, even centuries, it may have failed to detect the arrival of new civic movements, large or small. Putnam's tracing system, for example, may not have

even heard about Promise Keepers, a movement that has already reached tens of millions of men.

The significant decline of major civic institutions may also have something to do with their size. It may be that large civic associations in America have succumbed to the same forces of professionalization and bureaucratization that have undermined the effectiveness and legitimacy of public agencies. Occasional management scandals at charities such as the United Way serve as reminders to people of just how large, administratively cumbersome, and prone toward mismanagement many major civic groups are.

In many ways, these civic megastructures symbolize the kind of distant and impersonal institutions that many would like to see replaced by local organizations. Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton sociology professor, maintains that Americans are eschewing large bureaucratic organizations in favor of smaller local ones. Civic participation, he says, "has become more diverse and loosely structured so people can move in and out of issues and organizations."[53] Many of the civic categories that are experiencing growth are local and highly participatory, crime watch groups, local book clubs, Bible study groups, and mentoring activity, are just a few examples.

A final factor that has received too little notice is the continued trend toward secularization within mainstream civic organizations. As discussed elsewhere, civic renewal often runs in tandem with renewed spiritual interest. In the 19th century, for example, society witnessed an explosion of voluntary associations and organizations aimed at social reform and moral uplift. Spiritual awakenings, temperance movements, private charity campaigns, and children's aid societies were formed to instill virtue and self-restraint. There were Sunday school movements, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and vigorous character education programs in the public schools.

Like earlier periods, there appears to be a widespread search among Americans today for a spiritual dimension in their lives, including their public lives. Many Americans have a strong desire to reconnect themselves, their institutions, and their culture to a moral and religious core. The inability of contemporary civil society to provide this connection might well explain both its decline, and the rise of new expectations and civic arrangements.

Today, many new groups are forming to confront the challenge of firming up character and moral fortitude in society. The remarkable success of the Promise Keepers movement may be explained in part by the inability of the secularized YMCA to meet today's deeper need for spiritual and moral uplift. Other groups and movements such as the teen abstinence campaign, True Love Waits, have attracted millions of members, sidestepping in many ways the more value-neutral approach to human sexuality promoted by numerous secular groups. Habitat for Humanity, another new charity that has seen dramatic growth, brings a strong orientation toward religious faith.

We may be in the early stages of a period of civic reform and replacement. If transformations can shake business, governmental and educational structures, there would appear to be no reason to expect civic institutions to remain unshaken. Institutions, whatever their nature, wax and wane. Says Richard Stengle, "the principle flaw in the civic-decline argument is that it misses a new and different direction in American life. There hasn't been a disappearance of civic activism in America so much as a reinvention of it. It is not dissolving, but evolving."[54]

Institutional Players

The movement to renew civic America has benefited from much intellectual ferment and institutional support. Only several of the major institutional players can be identified here, and some of them do not fit neatly into this category.

One example is The Communitarian Network, a Washington D.C.-based organization established by Amitai Etzioni, which seeks to promote communitarian ideas in the arenas of scholarly research, public policy, and community organization. There is no perfect place to locate the communitarians in this analysis, nor would there be enough space for the movement to be adequately treated. The central claim of the communitarian is that human problems cannot be solved through autonomous individuals operating alone in either the market or the procedural state. The human person is a social creature requiring an ethical community in order to flourish.

While the communitarians are concerned, as the name suggests, about the status and place of community in the life of our society and democracy, their interests and intellectual contributions reach far beyond to topics of morality, political philosophy, and the need to find balance in our political culture between rights and responsibilities. Etzioni, has been their most prolific writer, contributing numerous books and articles, and producing his own journal. He is widely regarded as the leading and original theoretician for a new national, and increasingly international, communitarian movement.

Also making significant theoretical and practical contributions is John McKnight, who works out of the Center for Urban Affairs at Northwestern University; he is the author of *Building Communities from the Inside Out*. McKnight emphasizes strategies for distressed communities which he calls "asset-based community development" He believes that effective community building must be organized around the assets that are already in the neighborhood, even if they have been significantly diminished. The wrong approach is to focus on a community's needs, deficiencies, and problems, an approach, he believes, is most frequently followed by government and private groups. The better path, according to McNight, is to inventory a community's strengths, then build on them and replicate them.[55]

The Points of Light Foundation, a national organization promoting volunteer service has developed a nationwide project, Connect America, that seeks to build a movement around shared values and common ground. The project was designed to confront the fragmentation of communities and the isolation of individuals within communities.

Connect America is sponsoring events designed to inspire greater community dialogue and collaboration around organized volunteer projects.[56]

The Alliance for National Renewal is an alliance of over 100 organizations led by the century-old National Civic League. The group is dedicated to telling the stories of how communities solve problems from within, and then trying to replicate positive innovations in other communities. The Civic League publishes *The Civic Index* to help communities evaluate the size and strength of their "civic infrastructure." The index assesses the strength of such things as citizen participation, community leadership, government performance, civic education, and inter-group relations.[57]

Major philanthropies have stepped up their involvement in civic improvement, in some cases providing resources and in other cases developing their own programming. For example, the Pew Charitable Trusts launched their own Pew Partnership for Civic Change, which has spearheaded a number of projects including a Community of the Future Network which is attempting to replace "old paradigms" for community problem solving. The network tries to help communities understand future trends affecting their well-being and then put in place a process for community dialogue, leadership development and broad public education.[58]

Another philanthropy, the Johnson Foundation of Racine Wisconsin, has developed programming and a magazine, The Wingspread Journal, which is devoted to "reweaving our social fabric" through stronger communities. By means of conferences, projects and publishing, the foundation promotes community empowerment, civility, and service.[59]

Conclusion

The movements to recover civic America and restore community are contributing much to the renewal of civil society in America. Their greatest weakness is that they give too little attention to questions of the source of individual civic character the capacity of the individual to empathize and experience genuine social concern. The notions of community advanced by these organizations tend to be secular and abstract, without seriously asking how communities form. Their weaknesses and limitations, which were addressed briefly above, will require greater attention by those spearheading this work, if their labors are to produce lasting fruit.

SECTION FIVE

RENEWING THE PUBLIC REALM: PUBLIC SPACE, DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION

Introduction

Americans are very much caught up in a public debate about their own public debate. The indicators of discontent over the quality of public life in America are many. Concerns over declining trust and confidence in public institutions have become so heightened that some worry about the continued success of democracy itself. A 1991 Kettering Foundation report issued the grave warning that "the legitimacy of our political institutions is more at issue than our leaders imagine." "Politics is like leprosy," the report said, "people don't want to be around it."[60]

The state of American democracy, by broad agreement, is not good. The linkage between citizen participation and decision-making, which is indispensable to preserving democratic legitimacy and vitality, is badly weakened. In America, that sacred connection between elections and what government does is an ever more tenuous one. The role of the citizen is mostly one of following, not affecting, the formation of major decisions.

Little about politics today seeks to fortify public-spirited citizenship. As this author has described the process elsewhere: "Politics reinforces a vision of society inhabited by unencumbered private individuals, pampered with promises, fortified with multiplying legal rights, and awash in consumer choices, yet paradoxically, more subject than citizen."[61] Political debates, which once entertained public reflection on the higher ends of life in a just and good society, are now variously described as shrill, polarizing and degrading to politics itself.

This section will review the work of those whose purpose is to improve public life for Americans. The desire of this movement is not simply to connect individual Americans for civic purposes. Nor is it to engage them more deeply in today's existing process. The purpose of the public reform movement is to strengthen democratic values by drawing Americans into the pursuit of public purposes as fully developed citizens.

Their concern is the deplorable state of democratic life in America the loss of citizenship, the weakening of public institutions, and especially the declining quality of public debate. Leaders can frequently be heard addressing the litany of problems confronting modern American democracy: gridlock, public cynicism, negative journalism, manipulation of the process by political professionals, declining voter participation, uncivil debate, special interest power, and more.

The overriding concern is recovering the "public realm." This movement's worry is that public space, where citizens can meet to engage in public activity, is shrinking. In recent decades American society has dramatically expanded the range of choices made available

to private individuals, often isolating them from their neighbors, and shrinking that space in society where citizens come together to discuss their common values and lives.

This public reform movement believes that democratic values must be cultivated through cooperative activity in the public sphere. Richard C. Harwood, a leading voice for the recovery of public life, sees "a profound disconnect between citizens and the very institutions intended to help them understand and deal with the dilemmas they face." The problem, he says, "is that public institutions have become separated from the public realm the very arena they were created to serve."[62]

It is not just government that suffers from disconnect, according to Harwood, but the many intermediary institutions that should serve public purposes and strengthen government in a democratic society: "newspapers, foundations, corporations, non-profit groups, and even the smallest neighborhood association."[63]

According to the public restorationists, there are attitudes and behaviors that are conducive to improving life in the public realm, and we have lost them. Too frequently, the institutional players in public debate "dumb down" issues on the assumption that uninformed and unmotivated citizens can then comprehend them and respond. The antidote to democracy's many diseases, according to this school, is a newly empowered, educated, and involved citizenship that demands more both of itself and its representatives. It doesn't merely demand to have its way, it demands that democracy work for everyone.

Projects and Institutional Players

The popular and academic literature on the problems of democracy is simply too voluminous to consider here, and space permits attention to only a few of the organizations and public leaders who are seeking to give new birth to democratic citizenship.

The American Civic Forum, led by Harry Boyte of the University of Minnesota, has issued a national call for renewed citizenship. This Civic Declaration-- which was coordinated by Mr. Boyte, political scientist Benjamin Barber, and Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute-- attracted signatories from across the political spectrum. The Forum's Call for a New Citizenship seeks "a return to government of and by as well as for the people, a democracy whose politics is our common public work: where citizens are as prudent in deliberation as we expect our representatives to be; where public problem solving takes the place of private complaint; where all give life to liberty, and rights are complimented by the responsibilities that make them real. A citizen democracy, the declaration reads, "turns blame of others into self-reliance" and transforms passive clients and consumers into active agents of change in our communities."[64]
This group seeks to strengthen the role of the third sector, consisting of a vibrant array of voluntary associations, in promoting civic activism and innovation for the betterment of democratic life. Those institutions which mediate on behalf of the individual the civil servant, the press, civic enterprises, charitable organizations and community organizers

should rediscover the "civic dimension" of their work to help recover a fuller citizenship.[65]

Public Conversation

America's founders had in mind a system of government in which opinions and passions would be refined and enlarged through public debate and practical compromise. Divided government was created, in effect, to bring divided people together around workable solutions. John Adams described this process of expanded public participation combined with institutional checks and balances as "the ripening of public judgment."

Many have concluded that few opportunities exist anymore for ordinary citizens to participate in forming sound public judgment on pressing issues. Some have stepped forward to offer new arrangements and forms of deliberation so that individuals with diverse background and opinions can actually meet face to face, deliberate, agree or disagree, but at least develop a common regard for each other and respect their differences.

Political technology has been geared, more and more, to drive poorly informed voters toward one or another partisan position, as quickly as possible, often by whatever negative means are necessary. Such methods of public debate as talk radio and public opinion polls often fall short of cultivating citizenship. They produce outlets for the venting of opinions but not opportunities for participation and education.

The sheer speed of action in today's media-driven politics eliminates opportunities for unhurried and respectful discussions in relaxed settings. Jeane Elshtaine, author of *Democracy on Trial*, worries that this technology is skewing democracy itself. Technology, she says, has brought us to the brink of a politics based on instant plebiscite. Who needs debate with one's fellow citizens when opinion can be instantly captured and acted upon?[66]

Even attempts to reconnect individuals to public deliberation often fail because those attempts refuse to take seriously the need for an informed and involved citizenship. Says Harwood, "We dump information on people to 'educate' them, but instead it leaves them overwhelmed and confused. We implore citizens to get involved through public relations campaigns as if slick TV ads are enough to create a sense of common purpose and motivation."[67] Harwood maintains that if professionals want to engender a more thoughtful public, "people need time to learn from one another. People must have room for ambivalence time and space to test ideas, explore and listen so they can sort out what they believe."[68]

The presumption behind the public conversation agenda is that there are few easy answers or convenient solutions to America's vexing problems, whether local development conflicts or national policy disputes over affirmative action, welfare, or health care. If public action is to enjoy broad support among citizens, the people themselves need more time and opportunity to find paths for action on public problems.[69]

Several groups have advanced projects to encourage broad public deliberation over American values and policies. A National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity, initiated by the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a vehicle designed to foster conversations among citizens of all ethnic and racial backgrounds on the values they hold in common as Americans. The initiative was created by Endowment Chairman, Sheldon Hackney, "to promote the examination of what unites us as a country, what we share as common American values in a nation comprised of so many divergent groups and beliefs."[70]

The Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda are sponsoring a National Issues Forum with hundreds of cooperating community groups. The Forum describes its purpose as deepening public judgment, rather than advancing private interests, and helping people to make hard choices among competing alternatives. The Kettering Foundation also publishes a journal, *Kettering Review*, which is dedicated to "improving the quality of public life in the American democracy." The journal, always substantive and intellectually serious, focuses heavily on learning how to deliberate in a democracy.[71]

Public Journalism

A movement has emerged to recover a form of journalism that aims to bring citizens directly and actively into public discussion of politics and public policy. It hopes to improve public deliberation, and reconnect journalists with the real lives and issues in the communities they serve. A Kettering Foundation report describes the public's "anger and dismay with a press that emphasizes the negative, polarized conflicts and trivial pursuits, rather than the strengths and stories that show ways to solve our common problems."[72]

The Pew Center for Civic Journalism focuses on media-based strategies for encouraging broader citizen involvement in public life by creating partnerships that involve local newspapers and radio and TV stations. Pew Trust President, Rebecca Rimel, sees civic journalism as "a way to get the public reconnected, reinvigorated, recommitted to democratic values."[73]

The Knight Foundation funds a clearinghouse called the Project on Public Life and the Press, offering information on the theory and practical applications of civic journalism. Their desire is to move beyond conflict, prevent cynicism, and raise public understanding of emerging issues, and to make sure information is made available on differing approaches and attitudes toward public problems. This project also emphasizes the

importance of journalists belonging to, and preferably living in, the communities they cover and serve.

Problems and Limitations

The widespread search for connection, civility, and citizenship, serves as a reminder of the gaping hole in our democratic life, and also reminds us of how badly people would like to see a wider embrace of citizenship, a greater respect for public space, and a willingness to engage political opponents with elevating speech. Much of the work described above deserves credit for diagnosing and seeking to treat our many democratic deficiencies. The call to citizenship advanced by the Civic Forum deserves special attention primarily because it places some of the blame at the feet of citizens themselves, who demand too much of politicians and too little of themselves. These works, however, have a long way to go, and in many ways may simply be treating symptoms of a far deeper discontent and disorder.

The civic journalist faces internal pressures having to do with the prosecutorial aspects of journalism itself. Just how high-minded and public-spirited the media is capable of becoming, outside of a small group of reformers, remains doubtful. Attempts to cleanse democracy of its impurities are likely to fall prey to the very jaded attitudes they seek to confront.

Unfortunately, not all attempts at improving public life have taken the difficulty of the challenge seriously enough. For example, Hackney's national conversation continues to search for a following among serious people. The conversation project has generated ridicule, even from many who would like to see it succeed. One conversation of 200 "citizens" in Philadelphia broke into a discussion that compared the current decline in some workers' wages to slavery, leaving the panelists little to resort to except evasive tactics. Another heated debate arose to determine whether race, class, or gender consciousness was the greatest imperative in implementing urgently needed social change. Some felt diversity could not be achieved in the conversation without applying a quota system to guarantee that all ethnic identities and points of view were represented.[74]

Hackney has failed to comprehend that a good many people have lost touch with democracy itself: in fact, they think and behave in ways that make a real conversation virtually impossible. Moreover, democracy is rooted in a basic moral system which enables us to debate ideas in the context of shared moral principles. Hackney implicitly rejects this view by refusing to exclude any group or any ideas from his project. His conversation will be a failure, he says, "if it doesn't include everyone."[75]

When confronted with some core social issues which might encourage the very incivility he seeks to avoid, he either changes the subject or offers his own controversial views, in a manner inconsistent with the requirements of constructive dialogue. For example, in a discussion with columnist George Will, Hackney maintains that America's deepest problems reflect confusion over values. Yet when the subject of the family comes up as a central moral concern, according to Will, "Hackney the moralist becomes a materialist,"

ascribing the problem to economic factors and to the economic policies of two Republican administrations.[76] These are hardly tactics that are conducive to conversation-building.

SECTION SIX

CULTURAL CLEANUP: CIVILITY, MANNERS, AND RE-MORALIZATION

Introduction

It is hard to imagine a society in which social institutions can remain unaffected by the kind of cultural influences that are now dominant in America today. Culture and civil institutions are highly influential in shaping the direction of a society and its members.

At its deepest level, culture consists of the basic ideas, beliefs, and habits by which individuals define and order their lives. Culture is shaped in numerous fields, such as philosophy, art, education, science, and government, and it is reflected through daily life in our speech, myths, rites, rituals, and beliefs.

There is little doubt that profound cultural shifts have occurred during the past thirty years. Many of the gatekeepers of popular culture seemingly have concluded that their job is to debase, not elevate and ennoble. At the level of mass culture, the entertainment industry now floods American homes with programming of mind-numbing banality, trivializing life and desensitizing Americans to their deepening cultural disorder. Many observers argue that America's cultural elite have undertaken a determined effort to free the individual from the bonds of social conventions and moral restraint.

The proliferation of moral relativism and cultural coarseness could have potentially grave consequences. Journalist Paul Greenberg claims that while many are debating whether ours is a modern or post-modern, industrial or post-industrial society, he is increasingly forced to conclude that we are post-civilized. Whereas before we witnessed the dehumanization of art, now, he says, "we witness the dehumanization of culture in general."[77]

Charles Krauthammer argues that the single greatest shaper of wants and values "is not government, but culture." Mass culture, which is a fairly recent phenomenon, has been "vastly underappreciated" as an engine of social breakdown. "Never before in history have the purveyors of a degraded, almost totally uncensored, culture had direct, unmediated access to the minds of a society's young. An adolescent plugged into a Walkman playing ‘gangsta rap’ represents a revolutionary social phenomenon: youthful consciousness almost literally hardwired to the most extreme and corrupting cultural influences."[78]

No longer a matter of purely partisan interest, the cheapening of culture and human worth has produced sounds of alarm from almost every quarter of society. Voices ranging from that of Pope John Paul II to holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel sound forth with a common message: a society that celebrates debauchery and treats human beings in utilitarian fashion, as objects of material and sexual gratification, is a society disintegrating.
This section is dedicated to covering those groups and leaders who believe that to renew a civil and humane society, we must, above all else, confront our cultural corruption. For

this cultural recovery movement, the central issue isn't government. It isn't economics. It isn't even civil society. It is the culture.

Social Capital as Moral Capital

For this group, social capital is essentially moral capital. "The solution to the trials of our time depends upon replenishing America's moral capital," says Bill Bennett, the dominant voice in this movement.[79] The erosion of social capital and the collapse of social institutions has been caused by the rise of a form of untrammeled freedom that has eroded the influence of moral authority.

Leaders and institutions in this movement believe that the loss of community, the erosion of trust in authority, the increased abuse of power, and a host of other phenomena are all explained by society being severed from its moral and religious underpinnings. The decline of civility, according to these leaders, is a function of a culture which no longer nourishes the soul but rather feeds human appetites and passions. Christopher Beem, director of the Council on Civil Society, doubts that, absent the recovery of moral ideals, civil society can live up to its billing. "It's the absence of commonly held values, not the decline of community groups, that should concern us," says Beem.[80]

Of all the contributors to the civil society debate, the cultural recovery advocates have the least confidence that our social problems can be solved through public policy reforms. Politics achieves few results because our cultural disorder has produced problems that lie largely beyond the capacity of government to solve. Campaigns to boost civic life centering on gentle appeals for participation and civility are far too superficial to cope with the coarsening of culture. Moreover, the explosion of social pathologies such as drugs, crime, and illegitimacy so crippling of our social institutions are not susceptible to civic endeavors aimed at merely reconnecting people.

The other distinguishing feature of the cultural revivalist school is that, among civil society advocates, it is the least reluctant to embrace religion as a source of cultural renewal. Says Bill Bennett, The real crisis of our time is spiritual. It is a spiritual acedia which, properly understood, is an aversion to and negation of spiritual things. [81]

Culture will not make its recovery without being linked once more to the nation's religious heritage. The loss of transcendence produces results for every sphere of human activity: law, politics, economics, and society. Without transcendence, morality becomes contingent upon personal choice, causing the social contract to be based, not on moral principle, but an extreme rights-based individualism. The law, as will be discussed later, becomes arbitrary, intrusive, and burdened down with conflicting and irreconcilable demands.

The solution for the culturalists is the recovery of institutions, of course, but especially those that gird up our moral capacities, like churches and synagogues, religious schools, and faith-based charities. Spiritual transformation operating through strong families and moral communities turns self-absorbed individuals into morally fit citizens. Observing

the growing confidence that many have in spiritually-based projects, Columnist William Raspberry observes: "Show me a program that helps people to change their lives and I'll show you a program with a strong element of the spiritual."[82]

Spheres of Cultural Debate and Action

Culture is difficult to reform because it is not merely about institutions; it is about basic ideas, assumptions, and moral precepts which become imbedded in those institutions.

This focus on culture serves as a reminder that the work of renewing civil society involves re-moralizing and reordering society, which will be done mostly outside of the coercive realm of government. There is an understandable worry in many quarters today regarding the enthusiasm with which some believe that vice can be eradicated through legal-political means. A proper understanding of the western tradition would counsel realism and caution, not confidence, in this pursuit. Government should not harm social institutions or moral traditions, and in reality, it harms both. Still, most civil society theoreticians acknowledge that cultural problems require cultural solutions.

Re-moralization

The call to virtue has been sounded by public leaders and academics from across a fairly broad spectrum of opinion. A brief listing would include leading academics such as neoconservative James Q. Wilson, author of *The Moral Sense*,[83] and Gertrude Himmelfarb author of *The De-Moralization of Society*;[84] communitarian Amitai Etzioni, author of *The Moral Dimension*,[85] and liberal Stephen Carter. Carter, who wrote the widely reviewed *Culture of Disbelief*, recently published a book by the simple name *Integrity*. We act with integrity, Carter says, when we discern through moral reflection what is right and wrong, and then behave consistently on that basis.[86]

Leading the call for re-moralization is Gertrude Himmelfarb. Himmelfarb has little confidence that civil society is the answer to America's cultural problems because civil society itself "has been infected by some of the same viruses that produced these problems" in the first place.[87] According to Himmelfarb, many of the experiments and theories that have given rise to social pathologies are "still being promoted by some of the most influential institutions in our civil society universities, philanthropies, foundations, learned societies." Himmelfarb is thus skeptical about the possibilities of devolving much of society's governance outward toward the institutions of civil society.[88]

Though this critique of America's cultural elite is often associated with intellectuals and

spokesmen operating on the political right, the same arguments have come from other quarters as well. The late Christopher Lasch, author of *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, describes an "aristocracy of brains" a broad group that ranges from lawyers to journalists to investment brokers that worships their own technological expertise, science, and rationality, harboring disdain for the traditional habits of people linked to community, family, religion, and country. This elite, according to Lasch is "in

revolt" against "middle America" and its values.[89] Others, such as communitarian Robert Bellah, frequently describe a transformation of American life so complete that ordinary people now speak in a different "voice" from the institutional leaders around them.[90]

Though not closely aligned, these writers all lament the loss of moral consensus that is now so pervasive, both within our political institutions and throughout many of the institutions of civil society. University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter, author of *Culture Wars*, argues that Americans are now locked in a heated contest over "different systems of moral understanding." Our conflicts go beyond single divisive issues to the deeper meaning of moral and philosophical concepts. America, he says, "is in the midst of a culture war that has had and will continue to have reverberations not only within public policy but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere."[91]

The views held by many institutional elites are "progressive," meaning secular, abstract, and non-traditional. The "progressive" cultural coalition described by Hunter does not look favorably upon re-moralization, with its commitment to recovering moral categories. Progressive discussion frequently focuses on such notions as diversity, inclusion, and tolerance, terms which are meant, among other things, to guard against exercising moral judgment against anything or anyone.

Because of this corruption of concepts, Himmelfarb prefers the term "moral pathology" a term more directly linked to "the language of theology" to social pathology because it is more descriptive of the social phenomena that concerns us.[92] She believes that good values precede social reforms and that the humanitarian values preferred by progressives are not possible without "moral reformation."[93]

Civility

Pollster George Gallup, who has long tracked American attitudes about values, describes having "a sinking feeling" when he looks over current computer printouts. A recent Gallup poll revealed that large majorities of the American people see around them a world of despair: "There is a harsh and mean edge to society," Gallup says, noting that American has become "a society in which the very notion of a good person is often ridiculed," in which "retribution is the operative word."[94]

Over seventy-five years ago, John Moulton, a noted English judge, spoke on the subject of "law and manners." Judge Moulton divided human action into three domains. One, the domain of law, essentially compelled people to obey. At the other end of the spectrum was the domain of free choice, which granted the individual unconstrained freedoms. In between was a third domain which was neither regulated by the law nor free from constraint, but "the domain of obedience to the unenforceable." The domain between law and free choice he called manners. Manners was about proper behavior, of course. But it also entailed moral duty and social responsibility. It involved cases of "doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself."[95]

Manners

As manners lapse, the burden on the law becomes greater. Individuals today have come to believe that if the law does not forbid certain behavior, the right to individual freedom makes it acceptable. Though it is common for individuals to want the freedom to act with disrespect toward others, few have relinquished their expectation that they be treated respectfully themselves. Thus, when conflicts arise, their reactions can quickly escalate to violence, so that whether on the highway or on the school playground, conflict must be resolved by external authorities.

The importance of society's members doing what is right, "to obey the unenforceable," is a subject that has attracted renewed interest. Modern day manners philosopher, Judith Martin, has written extensively on the subject. According to Martin, manners are defined as that "part of our fundamental beliefs or wants that include such notions as communal harmony, dignity of the person, a need for cultural coherence, and an aesthetic sense."[96] Etiquette is the set of rules that emerges from these fundamental beliefs.

While some see manners as confined mostly to table etiquette, Martin sees manners fulfilling a "regulative" function, similar to that of the law. Where manners are functioning, the conscience is informed and behavior is constrained without the need for police and courts. Martin says that manners work to soften personal antagonisms, and thus to avert conflicts, so that the law may be restricted to serious violations of morality.[97] These social "rules" bring respect and harmony to bear on daily situations. Without a solid foundation of restraint on behavior from within the individual, through unwritten laws reinforced by the community, civilization begins to unravel.

In 1530, the philosopher Erasmus wrote in his etiquette book, *de Civiltate*, that a young person's training should consist of four important areas: religion, study, duty, and manners. Four hundred years later, manners are making a comeback with the support of scholars as well as neighborhood advocates who see them as the route to social harmony.

Associate professor of government at the University of Texas, J. Budziszewski, bemoans the habit of many, whether college students or radio talk show hosts, of saying or doing as they please, regardless of the harmful effects on others. Budziszewski believes that practicing courtesy will not only take the edge off some of society's coarseness, it will begin to fundamentally change people. He calls courtesy a "mask" of the unpleasant things one might feel, but defends this mask against charges of hypocrisy because it has a high purpose: "Masks, of course, can be used to deceive, but in courtesy that is not the aim."[98]

"As C. S. Lewis, Gilbert Meilaender, and others have explained, we wear masks partly in the hope that our true faces will gradually grow to fit them, and partly in the hope of not setting a bad example in the meantime. "If you please," "thank you," and "the pleasure is mine" may be mere formulae, says Budziszewski, but "they rehearse the humility, gratitude, and charity that I know I ought to feel and cannot yet." Courtesy, according to Budziszewski, finds its place in a world where people "would like to be better than they are."[99]

A survey by *U.S. News and World Report* and Bozell Worldwide indicates that many people believe that behavior ought to be better than it is. "A vast majority of Americans feel their country has reached an ill-mannered watershed. Nine out of 10 Americans think incivility is a serious problem, and nearly half think it is extremely serious. Seventy-eight percent say the problem has worsened in the past 10 years, and their concern goes beyond annoyance at rudeness. Respondents see in incivility evidence of a profound social breakdown. More than 90 percent of those polled believe it contributes to the increase of violence in the country; 85 percent believe it divides the national community, and the same number see it eroding healthy values like respect for others."[100]

Americans do seem to be willing to work on their courtesy when the bottom line is money. New York City civic leaders launched a campaign to encourage its citizens to be nicer, especially to the 25 million visitors who visit the city each year. "Instead of Making a Wise Crack, Smile" the campaign encourages, and "Turn your Back on Tourists and They'll Turn Their Backs on New York."[101] So cabbies get a new supply of air fresheners, while cops, airport personnel, and subway workers get sensitivity training.

Corporate America is also realizing that manners affect the bottom line, as business etiquette training companies dot the country and enjoy great demand for their services. Letitia Baldrige, former chief of staff to First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and protocol expert, says this wasn't always the case. In the early 1980's, when Baldrige first offered training to CEO's, she was told things were just fine and "if anything needed to be said it should be done in secret or shareholders would hoot them out of office."[102]

Although manners may be what one etiquette trainer calls the new status symbol "pricier than a Rolex, more portable than a Day-Timer, and shinier than handmade shoes" they have lost considerable ground with school children.[103] Teachers see children coming to school with fewer social skills and little respect for authority. To bring back civility, schools are joining the character education movement and making manners their theme. Organizations such as The National Parents Association in Indiana and Distinctions, directed by Sheryl Eberly in Pennsylvania, provide manners curricula to equip schools to do the job. Eberly's curriculum, entitled "Good Manners Open Doors," provides lessons and activities to teach respect. Eberly, a former White House aide, takes inspiration for her curriculum from America's first president whose first rule in a list of 110 *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation* declared that "Every Action Done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present."[104]

Shame

Without the aid of morality, the law is paralyzed by trying to deal with the infinite conflicts which occur in daily human interaction. In contemporary society, the law has become weighted down in this way with burdens and conflicts that should be mediated in the realm of society -- regulated by social constraints, not government. It's hard to remember now, says Bill Bennett, but there was once a time when personal or marital

failure, subliminal desires and perverse taste were accompanied by guilt and embarrassment. [105]

If realms of life are to be recovered from the arbitrary rule of law, and governed instead by mores and manners, what other tools are available to a society to impose social constraints on human behavior? For one, shame.

A front page Newsweek story announces "The Return of Shame" with a subtitle that reads, "Intolerance has gotten a bad rap in recent years, but there should be a way to condemn behavior that's socially destructive."[106] We need to "restore a sense of shame in our society," states Colin Powell. "Those who cultivate moral confusion for profit should understand this," says Bob Dole. "We will name their names and shame them as they deserve to be shamed." "About Shame: Morals, Manners and Today's Pop Culture," reads the name of a panel at Renaissance weekend, attended and popularized by the Clintons.[107]

Television

Until very recently, society made a concerted effort to protect childhood from premature exposure to negative influences. That was before the rise of an entertainment and media culture in which the mentality of the market and consumer choice reign supreme. Parents, to remain the guardians of their children, must maintain constant vigilance over their televisions.

This is not the place to discuss the generally deplorable condition of television programming, which is now so widely recognized that it requires little further description. Nor is television, as a technological device, the issue. Television will continue to play an ever larger and more vital educational and commercial role in our information society. This is inevitable, irreversible and in some important ways, socially beneficial.

The real issue is the omnipresence of the entertainment and information media. So dominant is entertainment and media in American culture that, according to Henry Johnson, we are becoming "a society created by the media."[108] It has altered our understanding of the public sphere, and how we view and talk about our public problems. Television has become the chief conveyor of culture, and some would say the primary instrument of socialization. No strategy to restore moral character to American life is likely to succeed if it fails to heighten the sense of responsibility among the national entertainment industry, provide parents with important new safeguards, or both.

The invasiveness of today's information technology has opened the door for vice to flow as freely and widely as virtue. "There are few things more dangerous for a civilization than allowing the deviant and the criminal to become part of the mainstream," says columnist and author Arianna Huffington. "Every society has had its red-light districts, but going there involved danger, stigmatization, and often legal sanction. Now the red-light districts can invade our homes and our children's minds."[109] Parents, sensing this

danger, are left with a sense of powerlessness and in growing numbers are simply disconnecting TV altogether.[110]

Bill Bennett accuses television executives of "practicing philosophy without reflection," which results in broad damage to society. The "*summum bonum*" of life for the TV philosophers, says Bennett, is "self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement, instant gratification; the good life is synonymous with license and freedom from all inhibitions; other people are to be used as a means to an end; and self-fulfillment is achieved by breaking rules."[111]

Any discussion of television is likely to provoke arguments over whether entertainment shapes or simply mirrors culture. Whatever one concludes on that matter, amoral advertisers can certainly be counted on to appeal to culturally corrupted, self-absorbed consumers. *U.S. News and World Report* columnist John Leo reports that, "Advertisers are focusing more and more on the emerging market of people who do what they want to do, that is people who yearn to be completely free of all restraint, expectations, and responsibilities." Themes such as "relax, no rules here" and "peel off inhibitions, find your own road" appeal to "the classic infantile wish for an infinite self, free of all restraint."[112]

Conclusion and Prospects

Assessing prospects for the recovery of moral values and the restoration of culture is difficult. Culture, after all, is basically about ideas, attitudes and values which take root in our lives and institutions. Culturally imbedded ideas are the most basic of influences, and the most difficult to alter.

Few observers of cultural developments today dare to predict what path, or paths, American culture is about to follow, but many recognize the stakes for civil society. Boston University Professor Thomas Lickona describes "a growing sense that we stand at a cultural crossroads." "Either we reverse the current trends," Lickona says, "or we continue the slide and go down the tubes."[113]

On the positive side of the ledger, many signs point to a greater willingness by Americans to come to terms with the excesses of recent decades. The baby boom generation, so self-conscious over its alleged role in the deterioration of social values, appears ready to replace the "do-your-own-thing" ethic of the 1960s and 1970s with greater personal discipline and social stability in the 1990s.[114] If best-selling books are any guide to what we are feeling, Americans are discarding the fads of self-indulgence and self-esteem for greater self-control.

What concerns people today is behavior, not merely feelings. Says Case Western Reserve University Professor Roy Baumeister, "if we could cross out self-esteem and put in self-control, kids would be better off and society in general would be much better off." Simply liking yourself is not enough, says Baumeister, citing studies that show a weak link between good feelings and improved behavior.[115]

By wide margins, Americans are concerned about the rate of out-of wedlock childbearing, teen sexual activity, family decline, and exposure to violence and sex.[116] This data is repeatedly cited by traditionalists in the hope of showing that Americans are ready to right a lot of cultural wrongs.

A closer look at American attitudes, however, suggests that the American mind is riddled with deep contradictions, ambivalence and even resignation. For one, few seem prepared to accept culpability for social decline. A *Los Angeles Times* poll suggested that, while 57 percent felt that "too many people have lifestyles and beliefs that are harmful to themselves and society," only 11 percent of Americans believe their own moral behavior has contributed to the nation's problems, contradicting what we know from other surveys regarding personal behaviors. In America, 96 percent believe they are doing an excellent or good job teaching their children about morals and values.[117]

Moreover, concern over culture does not translate automatically into a mandate to moderate it. If few people blame themselves for social breakdown, they are not likely to embrace interventions which may curb their own freedom. Americans are deeply ambivalent about attempts to establish greater social control through public action. The *Los Angeles Times* poll asked people to identify which annoyed them more: government intrusion into citizens' private lives or government's protecting activities that flout traditional values. A majority found government intrusion to be the greater source of irritation.[118]

It is also becoming clear that many are fatalistic about changing people's behavior. Almost half (49 percent) of baby boom parents experimented with drugs themselves in their youth, and are neither convinced that it was a serious mistake nor believe that their own kids can resist the temptation. Two-thirds of these parents expect their own kids to do the same and are not deeply troubled by it. "What is infuriating," says former Health and Human Services Secretary Joseph Califano, is "the resignation of so many parents."[119]

Parents also are not convinced that their children CAN be protected from cultural values. Americans have starkly negative views of popular culture, and by a large margin blame television more than any other single factor for teen-age sex and violence, according to a recent *New York Times* survey. But by as large a margin, people don't believe that the measures that are currently being proposed to protect children will make any difference.[120]

Similarly, evidence suggests that knowledge of a problem does not necessary lead to a change in individual behavior. On a range of destructive personal behaviors, from unprotected sex to drugs, the mere existence of cognitive awareness of the dangers does not convert to altered lifestyles. On the AIDS epidemic, for example, government officials are discovering that knowledge by itself is not adequate to change behavior.[121]

So, the move toward cultural recovery is both difficult to predict, and daunting to accomplish. Francis Fukuyama argues that the social capital of shared moral values has been largely depleted and "may take centuries to replenish, if it can be replenished at all."[122]

Charles Krauthammer cautions that, absent a broad spiritual reawakening, the arrest of social decay and the revitalization of civil society becomes a far more difficult and uncertain proposition. Which raises a final concern: the dangers of our failure to succeed. Krauthammer warns that if deep moral renewal fails to occur, "it must then depend upon the more coercive and less reliable agency of politics a politics crucially capable of articulating cultural with structural reform."[123]

What the cultural reform movement lacks, above all, is thoughtful and skillful leadership. Politicians have found cultural territory deeply problematic and, except for William Bennett, have largely steered clear of it. Most politicians abandon the subject because they are not certain what can be done about it and lack the philosophical understanding and rhetorical skills to use "the bully pulpit." Nevertheless, as Amitai Etzioni states, the country is yearning for a figure "who will eloquently speak about social values even when there is little that the government can or should do about them."[124]

It remains to be seen whether the nation will receive that kind of leadership. Our basic divisions over philosophical concepts and moral precepts run deep, and many are repelled from confronting so difficult a challenge.

SECTION SEVEN

RECOVERING INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER AND ETHICS

Introduction

Character was regarded by many of the nation's founders as central to citizenship and indispensable to the maintenance of a healthy, free and civil society. Character was at the core of what G. K. Chesterton described as America's creed. It was understood that the less individuals practiced self-regulation the more they could expect external controls to expand in the form of costly and meddlesome government.

For most of America's history, it was taken for granted that citizens and leaders everywhere would embrace character and do their part to help maintain it. In recent decades, however, the work of fostering character has ceased to be a preeminent concern, yielding instead to competing appeals which focused on individual self-esteem and self-fulfillment. Philosophical and cultural influences have also steadily undermined society's consensus over moral values, and weakened society's character-shaping institutions.

One of the most dynamic movements to strengthen civil society in America is a rapidly growing attempt to recover the teaching of character in schools and community groups. This section will include a brief overview of the groups and projects which tie the recovery of civil society to the renewal of personal character. Distinguishing this group from each other is their strong emphasis on the need to impart specific character traits to young and old alike, especially at school. As we will see, the character movement is making substantial inroads in public education and in related civic programming.

The Collapse of Character

Many of our costliest and most consequential social problems, including those discussed in this essay, have at least partial origins in the erosion of personal character. The signs of this erosion can be found everywhere, but especially among the young. Author and character education expert Tom Lickona has surveyed the ethical condition of youth and has identified ten trends that run entirely contrary to the requirements of democratic character: rising youth violence; increasing dishonesty (lying, cheating and stealing); growing disrespect for authority; peer cruelty; a resurgence of bigotry on school campuses, from preschool to higher education; a decline in the work ethic; sexual precocity; a growing self-centeredness and declining civic responsibility; an increase in self-destructive behavior; and ethical illiteracy.[125]

Lickona's ten troubling trends are substantiated through extensive social data and scientific surveys. The fact that the U.S. leads developed nations in its rates of juvenile crime, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse, and that her schools must cope with assaults and weapons possession among high school students, reflects the wide collapse of character.[126]

This collapse has many explanations, from changing patterns of work, family, and social life, to the rise of a highly materialistic society what Daniel Yankelovich calls the affluence factor, [127] to moral relativism, and many other factors. Philosophical influences such as Logical Positivism, which separates values from objective facts and thereby relegates values to the subjective realm of preferences, feelings, and tastes, have also played an important role. The result, says Tom Lickona, was that morality was relativized and privatized made to seem a matter of personal 'value judgment,' not a subject for public debate and transmission. [128]

As noted previously, talk about civil society unavoidably makes reference to the good. For example, the concept of citizenship is about certain character traits or it is about nothing at all. Yet the relativism of recent years has produced a fear among many educators that moral instruction is nothing less than unwarranted indoctrination. For the relativist, the right answer to ethical questions is determined by the individual in particular situations.

In losing a consensus over the centrality of character, the capacity to judge good behavior from bad was also lost. According to ethics professor Jean Elshtain, the practice of judging the conduct and content of character of others is now considered to be in bad odor. It is equated, she says with being punitive or with insensitivity, or with various phobias or isms .[129] When issues of moral principle and character are made private and subjective, it becomes nearly impossible for a society to develop a common moral story. The notion of a good person loses meaning.

The most compelling explanation for the decline of character may be the loss of influence by those institutions in society which have traditionally been responsible for inculcating character parents, schools, churches, and public authorities to other cultural influences such as the entertainment industry.

The Character Recovery Movement

Interest in character seems to follow a cyclical pattern in history. As character declines, new groups typically emerge, focusing on the urgency of renewing character, the need to confront existing obstacles to progress, and the importance of building public consensus around moral norms.

The evidence suggests that we are once again witnessing a fresh outburst of interest in character, and that a new character movement is helping citizens understand the place of moral instruction in contemporary culture. The values debate has often been presented as requiring a choice between extremes: either secularism or sectarianism, relativism or some form of absolutism. Framing the debate in this way implies that there is no common ground to be found across cultural and religious boundaries. As an alternative to such fragmented and unproductive debate, the character movement offers new assumptions and a new approach designed to establish common ground.
One group which exemplifies this new approach is the Character Counts Coalition. By seeking to avoid polarization and gridlock, the Coalition has attracted support from across

the political spectrum. The organization's stated objective is to replace situation ethics and moral relativism with the advancement of character in a common language. [130] This goal is achieved by promoting the six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

The quest for character, as members of this new movement emphasize, is not primarily about solving vexing moral dilemmas or staking out positions on issues of social policy. The character movement recognizes that there is far greater agreement over the core principles of character than there is over divisive social issues. Consequently, before aspiring to transform society along ethical lines, the person of character is encouraged to cultivate his own integrity and moral understanding. For character advocates, the inculcation of civilized moral habits precedes discussion of social dilemmas and moral controversies.

Aside from controversial side issues, the recovery of moral education is also impeded by doubts relating to whether common values even exist. Many wonder whether a society as pluralistic as ours can construct and impart a system of values without favoring one religion or culture over another. The response to this is to emphasize how ethnic and religious diversity can only exist so long as common ground is found in society. By placing our emphasis on demonstrable external displays of virtue things like honor, duty, sacrifice, trustworthiness, etc. we avoid both balkanization and the soft, relativized realm of values.

Character advocates focus on teaching the basic principles of character and virtue, principles on which there is broad agreement. According to polls, substantial majorities believe it is possible to find common agreement on the core principles and values that should be imparted to youth. Pollster George Gallup has found that surprisingly high levels of agreement exist on the proposition that key moral qualities should be taught (69 percent believe that community agreement can be found), and even higher support for what should be taught. Ninety-seven percent believe honesty should be taught; 93 percent, belief in democracy; 91 percent, the golden rule; 93 percent, acceptance of people of different political and social views; and 73 percent, believe sexual abstinence outside of marriage should be taught.[131]

Unlike the values debate, character is guided by a set of theories defining knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. [132] In other words, character has cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive side supplies the knowledge of right and wrong. The emotional side includes the capacity to feel empathy, which supplies the sense of obligation to do what one knows to be right. Doing the good is about learning the habits of sound character through practice.

Character education represents a return to a classical notion of moral education, in two ways. First, it holds that there are universal moral virtues that can be found in successful civilizations from the beginning of time. Second, it applies the Aristotelian notion that good character comes through practice, through the repetition of good and heroic deeds.

Character is not compartmentalized. It is not so much taught as it is caught in the daily routines of ordinary life.

Sound character, according to character advocates, is acquired through the development of sound habit, or through habituation, to use James Q. Wilson's familiar term. Family habituation in particular, according to Wilson, is the chief method by which every society induces its members to exercise a modicum of self-control and to assign a reasonable value to the preference of others. [133] Moral conduct occurs when right actions are regularly, promptly, and consistently followed by approval and rewards and when wrong actions are regularly, promptly, and consistently followed by disapproval. [134]

At this point, individual character and character-shaping institutions become interdependent. In a free and democratic society, the individual and the society influence each other. Character development is not just an individual process, nor is it simply a function of pedagogy. Strategies for renewing character must focus on multiple sectors, and especially the primary sources of family and kin. Developmental research shows fairly conclusively that empathy, which is the ability to assume another person's point of view, develops-- or fails adequately to develop-- in the first years of life.[135]

Just as civil society depends upon individuals who are strong in character, individual character finds its source in strong community institutions which can establish and assert social norms. The root meaning of the Greek word for ethics (ethikos) signifies an ethos that is rooted in community and transmitted through customs.

Restoring character requires rebuilding character-shaping institutions, not just engaging in moral admonition. Character is not simply something to be taught through moral instruction; it must be caught as our young are raised among moral exemplars. Parents, pastors, and pedagogues, display and impart character in the daily routines of life.

Restoring character requires a sociology of character. The problem with many efforts to guide moral reform, according to communitarian Amitai Etzioni, is that they are asociological, which is to say that they address moral life as though it is simply a matter of individual development. In the process, says Etzioni, [M]any Americans disregard the crucial role of the community in reinforcing the individual's moral commitments. [136] Individuals are powerfully affected by the approbation and censure of others, especially those with whom they have close relations, such as family and neighbors. A society that wishes to preserve character, then, will encourage these voices in the community to speak in unison and with clarity in a way that strengthens individual judgments about right and wrong.[137]

Applications

Character can be promoted in a variety of contexts, including sports, entertainment, public discourse, charity, and official conduct, to name a few. In Colorado, one of the oldest United Way agencies in America is undertaking a year-long character project to recover rules of civic conduct in public space. In Dallas, Texas, the mayor has organized

the business and civic community to develop a city-wide strategy to recover character.[138] Dozens of major universities are moving to restore programs in ethics that were abandoned years ago.

The Jefferson Center for Character Education, directed by David Brooks, trains law enforcement officers and consults with cities and social agencies to find out where to apply character education to confront gangs, violence, and vandalism.[139] The nation's media frequently reports on this growing campaign to revive character.

As the above discussion implies, there is no single institution that bears exclusive responsibility for imparting character, although, next to parents, schools play a vital role. Several states have moved in recent years to explore or adopt character education programs. In Georgia, the state Board of Education adopted a rule requiring all local school districts to provide educational opportunities in certain values focusing on citizenship, responsibility, and respect toward others. The state leaves the details to local communities, but recommends resources and strategies for implementation.[140] New Hampshire has established a program of values training for teachers. In Michigan, the state education board is beginning to debate a statement of principles which focuses on character and the duties of citizenship. Hundreds of local school districts are moving forward on their own to develop character programs with the assistance of several national character organizations.

Playing a central role in the promulgation of information and assistance is the Character Counts Coalition, mentioned earlier, which is a project of the Josephson Institute of Ethics. The Coalition provides a range of services to interested parents, schools, and civic organizations, including guidance on how to develop community support for character education programs. The Coalition's advisory board boasts a list of top public figures ranging from Marian Wright Edelman to Bill Bennett, and charter members include the American Red Cross, Boy and Girls Clubs of America, 4-H, the YMCA of America, and other leading civic organizations.

Also promoting civic virtue and moral character, predominantly in America's schools, is the Character Education Partnership. The Partnership organizes forums, media campaigns and national awards, and offers a clearinghouse designed to promote its Eleven Principles of Character Education, authored by Tom Lickona.[141]

Conclusion

The growing movement to recover character in our schools and communities is one of the more dynamic features of America's newfound interest in civil society, and because of its many practical applications, it may prove to be the most durable. By transcending existing divisions over moral values, and finding a new synthesis focusing on personal character, this movement has attracted thousands of new recruits to the effort to improve personal character and civic virtue.

SECTION EIGHT

TOWARD A NEW PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY: COMMON GROUND AND THE COMMON GOOD

Introduction

Many have concluded that the philosophy that has guided modern parties and political movements in America, from Left to Right, is stagnant and deeply inadequate to the challenges of our time. Section Four looked at the many attempts to strengthen democratic structures and practice in order to enhance citizen ownership of the public process. This section considers the possibility that explanations for the decline in citizenship and public-spiritedness go well beyond the structural factors and surface excesses of modern politics to the philosophical content of our democracy.

After all, the structures of democracy are no more than an empty vessel into which we pour the contents of our minds and hearts. As Abraham Lincoln observed, a country can be said to consist of its people, it laws, and its territory, and only its territory can be assured of durability. In democracy, little is assured, and only those things which are valued by the people themselves remain durable.

If we are to rebuild a society that nourishes character and community we must recover a public philosophy adequate to the task. We must replace the current public philosophy, which consists of a flawed and unsustainable liberal individualism whose focus on unbounded individual interests and rights is unable to provide an enduring foundation for democracy. American democratic capitalism rests upon a supply of virtue, which it has been spending down while doing little to sustain and replenish. As Kenneth Anderson put it, liberalism exists by scavenging off of older, traditional forms of social life. Because liberalism does nothing to conserve these traditional sources of democratic order, they can disappear in a historical flash. [142]

If liberty depends upon our capacity to place voluntary constraints upon our own passion and vice, then the greatest defense of liberty comes from those who seek voluntary restraints. Yet public life in America gets little help from our sensate culture, with its emphasis on self-indulgence and impulse gratification, nor is public life helped by politics itself, which with rare exceptions gives scant recognition to the republican virtue once thought to be so central to American success.

A revitalized public philosophy must center on the need to cultivate character and virtue among citizens by moderating our current preoccupation with rights and by promoting responsibility and social obligation.

This section will examine the search for a new public philosophy centering on the need to curb the fragmenting influence of extreme individualism and to promote the common good. It will briefly examine the intellectual movement which believes that our current

political assumptions and ideologies are themselves contributing to the impoverishment of public life and debate.

Democracy's Fragility

Democracy, we are frequently reminded, is an experiment. The continued use of the term experiment after two centuries of practical success implies persistent doubts over democracy's basic durability. Those who supplied the philosophical foundations of American democracy recognized that our republican system of government was fragile. Because mankind is morally frail it is, as Madison put it, "chimerical" to assume the rebublic would endure without a rich supply of virtue. Public well-being flows from the private wellspring of virtue.

In our system of government whether one prefers much more or much less of it responsibility is always left to individual citizens to maintain communities that are safe, civil and humane. As discussed earlier, Liberal democracy cannot survive without a large endowment of human capital and individual competence. From the beginning, the American experiment presupposed the existence of individuals possessing democratic habits and dispositions.

Much of the analysis of democratic disorder in America centers on alleged process flaws, while ignoring society's deeper failure to maintain positive democratic habits. In our public conversation, we frequently speak the language of the technical and procedural aspects of public life: the language of lawmaking, elections, appropriations, and fiscal projections. Only rarely do we hear serious talk about the importance of character to the well-being of society.

There is such a thing as democratic character, and it flows not from formal constitutions and Congressional acts, but from vital, character-shaping institutions in society. According to Harvard Professor Mary Ann Glendon, "Governments must have an adequate supply of citizens who are skilled in the arts of self-government." What do these arts consist of? According to Professor Glendon, "deliberation, compromise, consensus-building, civility, and reason-giving."[143]

Free people need written constitutions and representative institutions, of course. But they also need unwritten social bonds which make the work of deliberation and compromise in democracy possible. Countries that are moving successfully toward democracy, such as the recently liberated nations of Eastern Europe, are recognizing the need to rebuild the social institutions which supply these democratic habits and skills. Because many of these fledgling democracies have badly weakened institutions of civil society, they are being crippled by a range of social diseases, from pervasive public corruption and crime to private greed and distrust among citizens.

For a strong civil society, the people must have confidence in their institutions, and in each other. Throughout this series we have referred to the importance of trust in binding isolated individuals together in common pursuits. This is especially true for our

democratic life. The replacement of the traditional handshake with bureaucratic regulations, contracts and litigation, represents a major departure from America's celebrated tradition of trustful association.

This distrust has many causes, some of which are endemic to the modern bureaucratic state. The work of democracy has been delegated all too frequently to interest groups, specialists, and power brokers, who make their livelihood by producing clout for competing factions and interests. Distrust surely has at least some origins with the uprooting effects of modernity itself. Robert Nisbet described modern people as "uprooted, alone, without secure status, cut off from community or any system of clear moral purpose." Because of the fragmenting effects of modern life, man is "estranged from others, from work, from place, from self."[144]

Declining satisfaction, it must be said, may also have something to do with the many contradictions that exist within the public mind itself. For example, many resent the intrusive and costly nature of government, and yet are attracted to the great advances in human health, safety and environmental protection that government helps make possible. In other words, we may be unprepared to live with tradeoffs that now confront us--we at the same time want the government to protect us against risks and guarantee us the rewards of unencumbered risktaking. Whatever government does under these circumstances, it fails to meet expectations.

The Economic Man

Another influence that frustrates progress toward a common public philosophy is the fact that public debate frequently centers not on our concerns, hopes and values as a people, but on mundane issues of programs, appropriations, and the technical workings of government. It no longer molds and shapes private aspirations into a vision for the common good.

The entire public debate grinds forward along a rather sterile and predictable grid of either governmentalism and market incentivism -- the idea that our lives and communities will be made better by simply getting government policies right or in liberating the market place. Each argument draws from the same strain of liberal individualism -- one emphasizing the empowering possibilities of the state in the form of rights and entitlements, the other exalting the unlimited possibilities of the market in the form of expanded personal freedom to create and consume wealth.

This essay has not considered the role of economics, but some attention must be given to its wide influence in the social sciences and in public policy-making. The supremacy of economics and an economic rationale for every human activity has deeply affected our public lives. Economics makes things quantifiable, and if something can be quantified, it can be predicted, even controlled. Chiseled in stone over the entrance to the Social Science Building at the University of Chicago, which gave America so many winners of the Nobel Prize in Economics, is a statement which captures the quantification of

economics and American life: "When you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind."

Francis Fukuyama maintains that this approach offers a very limited picture of how society works, and an even worse portrait of how it should work. Many of the most important things in society can't be captured in numbers, or predicted by economic formulae. To understand the true functioning of democratic society, factors such as religion, tradition, honor and loyalty must be taken into account. These "arational" factors supply the necessary trust for communal life, which in turn enhances economic interaction.[145]

In other words, self-interest alone does not even preserve prosperity, much less a stable democracy. Peter Drucker, the world renowned business consultant and advocate of capitalism has himself become critical of modern economic thinking. "We are learning fast that the belief that a free market is all it takes to have a functioning society--or even a functioning economy -- is pure delusion."[146]

Markets, says Alan Wolfe, "flourish in a moral order defined by noneconomic ties of trust and solidarity; markets are necessary for modernity, but they tend to destroy what makes them work." Similarly, he says, "the liberal theory of the state was neither purely liberal, for its originators relied on preexisting moral ties to temper the bleakness of the social contract, nor purely statist, because it assumed a strong society.[147]

In essence, the entire debate has focused on but two instruments for social and democratic progress --the state and the marketplace, both placed in service to the autonomous individual. The "liberalism" of the left and right both rely on either the market or the state, says Alan Wolfe, to organize our "codes of moral obligation."[148] Ironically, civil society has been completely neglected, despite the fact that those who conceived of the American system never thought democracy possible without it.

Michael Sandel, a leading theoretician in an emerging movement to revitalize America's public philosophy, strongly criticizes the dominant liberal paradigm, which views citizens as "freely choosing, independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties antecedent to choice,"[149] Under the liberal vision of society, "government should not affirm, through its policies or laws, any particular conception of the good life; instead it should provide a neutral framework of rights within which people can choose their own values and ends."[150]

Individualism

To most observers of American culture, individualism emerges as one of our society's most dominant and enduring features. American individualism is mostly recognized as a source of strength, contributing as it does to self-reliance, entrepreneurial initiative and even civic enterprise. But American individualism has changed over time, in ways that are often detrimental to civil society.

Historically, American individualism was tempered by the gentling influence of our corporate life -- time spent together in our places of worship, in our neighborhoods, and in voluntary associations. Contemporary American individualism, however, has assumed an entirely different form. Casting aside traditional restraints, it has embraced an ideal of absolute autonomy for the individual, leaving community institutions with little vitality or voice, and almost no authority over the individual.

The individualism of yesteryear understood that the individual was governed by moral constraints and social obligations that transcended the self. This individualism was held in check in the past by a Protestant religion which demanded that the public good be valued over the rights of individuals. According to Barry Shain, "The notion that the self could be the grounding of its own being" was viewed by Protestants as "a devilish temptation, exhibiting the sins of self-worship and pridefulness. [151]

Tocqueville understood the critical difference between a well-moderated individualism and the more extreme form that he worried would emerge in America. The well-regulated individualism was based upon self-interest "rightly understood," i.e., self-interest that was alive to the interests of others. Tocqueville believed that individualism was good and necessary, but that it had to be tethered. Rather than harnessing individualism to serve constructive purposes, society has instead succumbed to it. Today's unenlightened individualism has succeeded in turning many spheres of human activity into a battleground for personal advancement at the expense of cooperative endeavor.

Today's individualism presents the self as the only sovereign--autonomous, empowered and dangerously detached from transcendent morality or social restraints. Michael Sandel, speaks of an earlier conception of the individual as "the situated self," where the individual was bounded in a web of social relations and activities, in contrast to the current view of the individual which is that of the "unbounded self."[152]

The Politically Organized Society

Talking about civil society seriously cuts against the grain of contemporary secular culture. Implicit in the idea of civil society is a commitment to pursuing what we once unabashedly called the common good. Respect for civil society also implies an embrace of social forms and arrangements--the "little platoons" of family, kin and fraternal association, and religious belief--which often serve as important sources of moral meaning and action. As discussed elsewhere, many of these human associations and activities have been repudiated by today's secular liberals as retrograde and oppressive.
The individualism that is mirrored back to us via our own public culture produces a painful image of atomized individuals in retreat form the very idea of society. It is a portrait of isolated and self-absorbed individuals pursuing mostly private interests and governed by an ideology of me-ism. The result is that we live in distrust and fear, we watch our communities lose their cohesion and order, and we see the democratic process yield to tribalist politics of resentment and retaliation. Worst of all, and paradoxically for the individualist, we feel powerless as individuals to change the situation.

Many from across the political spectrum see a profound threat to democracy rooted in this isolation of the individual. Liberal scholar John Gardner states starkly: "Without the continuity of shared values that community provides, freedom cannot survive. Undifferentiated masses never have and never will preserve freedom against usurping powers."[153]

One result of such isolation is the politically organized society in which the pursuit of happiness is advanced through power, interest group privilege, and litigation. In a politically organized society, we essentially agitate against each other, creating what Richard Harwood describes as a permanent form of "civic dissonance." A society in which individuals continually organize to use the state against each other is a society in which the individual and the state are advancing, but civil society -- a place of peaceful, consensual and voluntary action--is in rapid retreat.

Defenders of individualism, including both economic and moral libertarians, typically present the autonomous individual as the one true bulwark against the intrusive state. A closer examination, however, presents the opposite possibility: an unbounded individualism is itself a cause of the state's rapid advancement. As the range of voluntary associations wither under the influence of the atomized but politically empowered individual, the state moves in to take up the slack, which frequently exacerbates the problem of social disintegration.

This has profound consequences for law, politics, economics and society. As the state expands and individual restraint wanes, all of public life is reduced to what Michael Sandel calls "proceduralism," which leaves no purpose to be served in the public realm except maximizing private opportunity. If politics is to recover its civic voice, according to Sandel, it must once more ask questions we have forgotten how to ask, questions having to do with ends beyond rational self-interest, and economic and political advantage-seeking.

"Proceduralism" places an impossible burden on the state, which is intended to serve a subordinate, not a dominant role, in relationship to other sectors of society, and is often ill-suited to mediate disputes. The state consumes but rarely supplies the social glue generated by voluntary cooperative endeavor, the trademark of civil society. In fact, it is precisely such efforts which the expanding state hinders or displaces, resulting in a vicious cycle of state expansion and societal enervation. As Bill Schambra observes, "when government moves aggressively into the civic realm to take up the slack where mediating structures may be faltering, their authority is thereby only further undermined."[154]

When the law is forced to compensate for the absence of social restraint and manners, as discussed earlier, it becomes the catalyst for a rights-based individualism, and degenerates into an arbitrary tool of the politically organized. When only law and politics arbitrate human affairs, everything becomes political, even the most basic and intimate human relations, and the spirit of consensual problem-solving is replaced with the raw

assertion of power. Life in democratic society becomes a zero-sum struggle of all against all. A right conferred upon one group becomes an obligation imposed on another. The pursuit of the good and just society is reduced to a dehumanizing struggle over rules. Democracy, a thing of the heart, degenerates into cold proceduralism, and becomes "exhausted" from overload

Today. we are forced to confront the fact that democracy is losing its internal cohesion, its spiritual dynamism and its universal appeal. Jean Elshtaine, author of *Democracy on Trial*, boldly states that "our democracy is faltering," it is succumbing to "exhaustion, cynicism, opportunism." Elshtain admits to having joined the "ranks of the nervous." The democratic social covenant rests on the assumption that one's fellow citizens are people of good will who yearn for the opportunity to work together, rather than to continue to glare at one another across racial, class and ideological divides."[155]

Elshtain and others have identified several troubling developments that result from the rise of the private self and the collapse of the public good. When civic space declines, what emerges is a politics of displacement: "a complete collapse of a distinction between public and private," which is "anathema to democratic thinking," says Elshtain. The politics of displacement follows two trajectories. "In the first, everything private--from one's sexual practice to blaming one's parents for one's lack of self-esteem--becomes grist for the public mill. In the second, everything public, from the grounds on which politicians are judged to health politics to gun regulations, is privatized and played out in a psychodrama on a grand scale."[156]

The public arena becomes a place where "me and my fleeting angers, resentments, sentiments and impulses," unmediated by local institutions, become important public business. Not only is society politicized, the "personal is political." Nothing personal remains exempt from "political definition, direction and manipulation."[157] When distinctions between public and private collapse and there are no "clearly established institutions to focus dissent and concern," the center does not hold, and private identities take over.[158]

A related and equally troubling trend is the rise of "identity politics," which flows from an embrace of what Elshtaine calls "politicized ontology." This phenomenon requires that persons are to be judged "not by what they do or say but by what they ARE." Racial or sexual identity becomes "the sole ground of politics, the sole determinant of political good and evil." Those who disagree with my politics are "enemies of my identity."[159]

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. worries about the growing difficulty of assimilating citizens into a common framework of values, or "a unifying American identity," because of identity politics. He says "the militants of ethnicity" now view the main objective of society not as assimilation, but "the protection, strengthening, celebration, and perpetuation of ethnic origins and identities." This separatism only "[n]ourishes prejudices, magnifies differences, and stirs antagonisms."[160]

The answer is the recovery of the individual, not the individual captured in identity

politics or ethnic tribalism, but in civil society, where the intermediary institutions of family and community can close the gap between the individual and the state.

Beyond Politicized Society to Civil Society

Democracy is a thing of the heart. The widest possible distribution of the democratic franchise guarantees little by itself, not even that people will feel enfranchised. Democracy is not simply about procedures, parties, politicians and ballot participation, although it certainly involves such things. These procedural features only assure us that our political system will be generally responsive to our wants and aspirations. It does little to shape those aspirations, or to curb self-interest.

Democracy depends for survival on the presence of a democratic disposition, habit and outlook among the members of society, something which must be carefully nourished. Tocqueville captured this when he said: "Without ideas in common, there is no common action. There may still exist human beings, but not a social entity. In order for society to exist and, even more, to prosper, it is necessary that the spirits of all citizens be held together by certain leading ideas."[161]

The job before us, then, may be to revive the spiritual and moral dimensions of democracy. Sandel calls for the replacement of rights-based individualism with the "classical republican tradition" in which private interests are "subordinated to the public good and in which community life takes precedence over individual pursuits."[162]

The classical republican tradition offers a vision of the individual operating, not in competition with others or in conflict with the state, but in cooperation with others in civil society. The central concern of civic republicanism as a public philosophy is the renewal of a substantive and vigorous democracy by expanding the role of the mediating institutions of civil society.

In turning our attention to civil society, we are actually returning to a rich but long neglected feature of Western moral and political thought. The concept of civil society finds its roots largely, though certainly not exclusively, in the Christian natural law tradition. The emphasis within this tradition upon civil society as a realm largely independent of the state was critical to the development of a philosophy of limited government and ordered liberty. Government would remain limited to the extent that other non-governmental institutions were playing a vital offsetting role.

Conclusion and Outlook

The question that lies before us is: if man was made for civil society, and civil society is to be the centerpiece of a new public philosophy, what must be done to revitalize it? How do we replace old civic forms and institutions with new ones that more directly respond to today's need for connection? How can we moderate the worst excesses of the sensate culture? How can we harness social and technological change to strengthen voluntary human association?

And to what do we turn to organize this effort? Public policy certainly plays a role. Devolution of power to state, local and community-based institutions can continue to move decision-making authority downward and outward to citizens. Much can be done to direct government support and resources toward "protecting, reinforcing and nurturing the varied groups," as Nisbet put it.

Just as policy will play a part, so will dynamic new social movements. James Q. Wilson and others have traced various social reform movements that have arisen in American history aiming to uplift moral standards. These movements had a common desire to instill character, which meant once again treating the individual as capable and responsible for exercising self-control. Social ills were confronted by recovering "a self-activating, self-regulating, all-purpose inner control."

The institutions which have effectively socialized people are private and local, and thus we ought to "identify, evaluate and encourage those local, private efforts that seem to do the best job at reducing drug abuse, inducing people to marry, persuading parents, especially fathers, to take responsibility for their children, and exercising informal social controls over neighborhood streets."[163] The movements that we ought to "identify, evaluate, and encourage" today include the fatherhood movement, the marriage movement, the character movement, the teen abstinence movement, and many of the public reform movements discussed in this essay.

The most urgent work of all consists in pursuing moral and cultural reformation. Civil society is, after all, a moral and social order that transcends each of us, and to which we must all yield some of our cherished personal autonomy if community institutions are to possess any legitimacy. As Bill Schambra puts it, the problems of society "are above all moral and cultural phenomena," which in a free society necessarily involve questions of right and wrong personal behavior, of decent and indecent individual behavior -- in short, the questions that are so troubling to us today."[164]

Modernity has placed the sovereign, autonomous self at the center of all things, which has made decisions of right and wrong strictly contingent upon human choice. Those who brought us ethical relativism were convinced that education, technology, and professional expertise could preserve social order and harmony without the aid of morality.

Needless to say, experience has proven this utopian vision deficient. Fortunately, more and more people know it. The challenge that lies before us as Americans as we approach a new century is not merely one of reforming or reconfiguring the administrative systems of government, nor does it consist primarily of revving up our economy or carrying our technological-scientific genius to new heights. Our central challenge as Americans is to build a civil and humane society.

There is much to cheer in current talk about community and civil society. But the difficulty of the challenge makes the outcome highly uncertain. Vaclav Havel Czech, the well-known poet-turned-politician, sees an age of profound change upon us as we enter

the new millennium, but what change this will produce remains highly uncertain. He foresees a new 'post-modern phase' where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain."[165]

Nothing short of a new spiritual vision of global dimensions, says Havel, will save human civilization. Strengthening families, neighborhoods, and civic associations will not be possible unless enough of us recognize how essential these institutions are to a civil and humane society, and find the courage and moral strength necessary to restore them.

The struggle underway in America is literally to revive the soul of a nation, to effect broad-based moral, civic, and democratic renewal. Undergirding the movement toward civil society must be a fresh embrace of a moral order centered upon transcendent reality, the basic moral worth of the human person, and the inherently moral nature of human community.

And this work must be inspired by hope. Few people knew more about our society's tendencies than Tocqueville himself. He wrote with an awareness of the impending storm, and predicted in some detail the unraveling of communities, the rise of atomized individualism, and our cultural absorption in "paltry pleasures." Yet, he was an optimist. He believed Americans were capable of assessing their condition and mustering the resources to confront it.

Let us hope he was right.

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