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Has Individualism Grown Cancerous?

By Loren Lomasky

Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, by Robert N. Bellah, et al., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 355 pages, \$16.95 New York: Harper & Row, paper, forthcoming

Speaking very broadly, two prescriptions for maintaining the civil life of a polity have dominated political philosophy and practice. The historically preponderant strategy has been to structure the state as an enterprise defined by overarching goals, values, and a recognized corps of rulers who provide direction to their subjects. Virtually all

the traditions of Athens and Jerusalem, it is a distinctly modern invention.

Liberal sociality is inherently risky, and that on two fronts. On the macro-level it gambles that individuals free to disagree amongst themselves will yet retain commitment to an institutional framework adequate to maintain civil order. On the micro-level it assumes the



premodern societies take this form (subject to technological constraints on the efficacy of rule from the top). In the 20th century, the model of the state as a unified enterprise is most recognizable in Marxist "dictatorships of the proletariat" and guides almost all attempts at nation-building in fledgling Third World countries.

Opposed to the model of the state as an enterprise in which all residents are willy-nilly enrolled is a conception of the political order as a forum within which individuals, either singly or through voluntary association with their fellows, set their own agendas. No monolithic ideal of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful is accorded official (and coercive) sanction. Rather, persons are to be allowed liberty to conceive and bind themselves to ends that will afford them prospects of meaningful activity. This is the program of political liberalism, and despite roots that extend far back into

risk that, in the absence of centralized direction, individuals are competent to provide for themselves meaningful life projects.

Robert Bellah and his collaborators in the widely discussed book *Habits of the Heart* (soon to be released in paperback) do not conceive of themselves as rejecting liberal individualism, but neither do they wax enthusiastic over its manifestations in contemporary America. "Individualism," they intone, "may have grown cancerous."

Their concern does not seem at all directed toward the macro-level problem of preserving free institutions against the challenge of would-be encroachers. Americans, they report, are wedded to freedom as their most important value. Rather than being visibly cheered by that finding, they find it ominous. Negative "freedom from" is silent concerning "common conceptions of the ends of the good life," but in their absence in-

dividualism "might eventually isolate Americans one from another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom."

The authors are here quite self-consciously following the lead of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. It is from Tocqueville that they borrow the locution "habits of the heart" to characterize the mores, dispositions, opinions, and affections that provide individuals the resources to construct satisfying lives. The authors' overriding thesis, reiterated far beyond the point of diminishing returns, is that these habits of the heart provide a nurturing moral capital. That capital stock is, however, dangerously depleted and urgently stands in need of replenishment through the development of a public philosophy that explicitly aims at the discovery or invention (the authors are not clear about which) of a public good.

Support for this charge of moral impoverishment allegedly issues from interviews carried out by the authors over several years with some 250 persons. For several reasons the evidence is thin. The sample is decidedly nonrepresentative, consisting almost entirely of white middle-class Americans, almost half of whom are either left-wing activists of one ilk or another or professional therapists. But this hardly matters. The authors patently came to the interviews knowing full well the conclusion they would derive: Americans possess little in the way of resonant values and are unable successfully to justify even these.

Some fancy footwork is required to substantiate this predetermined result. The respondents often seem to display reasonably rich and coherent conceptions of what is valuable within their lives. We are told, though, that these conceptions are uniformly inadequate. Either they are insufficiently grounded in traditions of thought and practice, or they fail to link with the broader community, or they lack a base in a theory of substantive justice.

But this is too easy a game! The authors play it well, but Socrates played it better. That individuals are unable to justify or even fully to explicate the core of values that moves them does not demonstrate that the core is empty or that it is inadequate to propel lives of satisfactory citizenship, however that

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Robert Chappell is a self-made success story. He has founded and served as president of two insurance companies and is a recognized expert in legal tax avoidance. Mr. Chappell has resided in many foreign tax haven jurisdictions, is well versed in tax law, and has been the successor in many battles with the I.R.S. He possesses an unusual knowledge of tax matters, from both practical experience and training.

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slippery notion is understood. (The authors' examples of achievement in the public domain are restricted to snapshots of activists urging egalitarian redistribution of individuals' income.) Evidently the interviews function primarily to justify the authors' receipt of major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford, Guggenheim, and Rockefeller foundations.

H*abits of the Heart* is, then, less a piece of applied social science than an essay in political philosophy, a characterization that the authors themselves admit. As such it is not without merit.

The great strength of liberal theory has been its insistence on the necessity of freedom as the *sine qua non* of a productive society in which individuals can lead lives of autonomy and dignity. But liberalism does not feature a ready-made collection of values that individuals can mechanically make their own. That is not because such values are insignificant—the freedom to pursue whatever ends one will is a fearsome burden to one for whom nothing counts as a directive good—but because liberalism takes the identification and pursuit of value to be a private rather than a collective task.

There is, however, a temptation within liberal theory to concentrate so fixedly on the necessity of liberty that the question "Liberty for what?" is lost sight of. The good then becomes no more than each man's actual desires, and in the backwash of complete subjectivity, one set of desires is taken to be as worthwhile as any other. This is a philosophical blunder of the first magnitude. Liberty could not matter to us in the way that it evidently does unless the direction along which one freely sets oneself is also deemed to matter. Some choices are better than others—or so one who values his own freedom to choose must maintain. Otherwise we are playing a game whose stakes are nil.

The authors do well, then, to drive home the importance of investigating the realm of values. Concern for the genuinely good is not inimical to the spirit of liberalism but rather its counterpart. *Habits of the Heart* occasionally attains to eloquence in stressing this complementarity. But when the authors attempt to provide a framework within which value can be sought by free persons, they come up lame.

We must, they argue, work to reclaim what they call the "second languages" of the biblical and classical republican tradi-

tions that still spoke in rich cadences to Tocqueville's Americans but that subsequently have grown faint. However, the authors themselves almost entirely fail to explain what the essential vocabulary of those languages comprises, how they might be made to speak to contemporary concerns, or how they are inherently more justifiable than the brands of "utilitarian" and "expressive" individualism found wanting. The public good they prize appears embarrassingly unequal to any worthwhile task, let alone that of revivifying an allegedly moribund civic order.

In place of an illuminating vision of value to be pursued, the authors offer apocalypse and cliché. "We seem to be hovering on the very brink of disaster, not only from international conflict but from the internal incoherence of our own society. What has gone wrong? How can we reverse the slide toward the abyss? . . . The time may be approaching when we will either reform our republic or fall into the hands of despotism, as many republics have done before us." And the antidote? The best the authors can offer is a dollop of Michael Harrington's soft socialism and a spoonful of Felix Rohatyn's corporate state! The prescription fails to persuade.

Neither does the diagnosis. The authors demand establishment of a public good that is not merely the sum of various individual private goods. They are unable to provide any positive characterization of what such a public good might be. Instead we are offered

pages of confused sermonizing.

One can only infer that their distress is occasioned not by any dearth of animating ends within our culture but by the plurality of values the authors encounter. Desiring to hear one sweet melody that all can sing in harmony, they are assailed instead by a cacophony of diverse choruses; craving communion, they find only communities and competition. But if that is the hidden agenda, they profoundly misrepresent their intention when they claim to be seeking a base of mores supportive of a liberal order. Rather, it is liberal diversity that is itself the culprit. Like Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, but neither as forthrightly nor as gracefully, the authors end by plumping for an "organic" community that is thoroughly illiberal.

Free men and women set themselves to live out lives of value. Because they are at liberty to chart their own courses, they might fail. (So too, it bears remarking, might those who would don the prophetic mantle.) We can use many books that remind us that liberty is incomplete without valued and valuable objects at which it aims. But we can also require of such books a recognition that the quest for social consensus is omnivorous, devouring the conditions of liberal sociality. *Habits of the Heart* succeeds on the former count but falls dismally flat on the latter.

Loren Lomasky is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota in Duluth.

Another Round in the Gold Debate

By Murray N. Rothbard

Money and Freedom, by Hans Sennholz
Spring Mills, Penna.: Libertarian Press, 90 pages, \$4.95 paper

Money is the area of economics that most fascinates the general public but also calls forth the most confusion and befuddlement. At this moment, countless visionaries long known as "money cranks" are churning out tracts, filled with charts and occult symbols, devoted to schemes for curing all economic ills by the creation of boundless heaps of money. In this welter of mystification, there are very few economists who are sound and perceptive on the money question and also able to convey their wisdom clearly to the general public.

In this rare group, Hans Sennholz, one of the leading American students of the renowned Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, has long been outstanding. Among advocates of "hard money," Sennholz can always be trusted to be sound, knowledgeable, and free-market to the core.

In *Money and Freedom*, Sennholz provides an admirable tour of the theory, history, and politics of money. He provides an excellent explanation of our inflationary monetary and banking system. He favors not only a genuine gold standard but also competitive private minting