

Democracy at Century's End

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Democracy is on trial in America. Expert and ordinary opinion converges on a sober recognition: we live in an age of political resentment and withdrawal from civic life. What can be done to revivify American democracy? Some propose electronic solutions—technological means to register instantly the popular will—but others, myself included, see in the proposed solution a deepening of our current troubles. Why? Because democracy is not and has never been primarily a means whereby popular will is tabulated and enacted but, rather, a political world within which citizens deliberate, negotiate, compromise, engage, and hold themselves and those they choose to represent them accountable for actions taken. Have we lost this deliberative and dialogical dimension to democracy? For democracy's enduring promise is that democratic citizens can come to know a good in common that they cannot know alone.

By any standard of objective evidence, those who point to the rise of civically depleting forms of isolation, boredom, and cynicism; those who point to declining levels of involvement in politics and community, from simple acts like the vote to more demanding participation in political parties and local, civic associations; those who point to the overall

weakening of that world known as democratic civil society: these have the better case. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his classic work *Democracy in America*, argued that one reason the American democracy he surveyed was so sturdy was that citizens took an active part in public affairs. This is important because participating in public affairs means one must move from exclusive and narrowly private interests and occasionally take a look at matters that concern others. In Tocqueville's words,

As soon as common affairs are treated in common, each man notices that he is not as independent of his fellows as he used to suppose and that to get their help he must often offer his aid to them.
[Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), p. 510]

In this way civic engagement helped to underscore what Tocqueville called "self-interest properly understood," an interest that was never narrowly focused on the self

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(p. 526). If Tocqueville were among us today, he would no doubt share the concern of social scientists who have researched the sharp decline in participation. They argue that the evidence points to nothing less than a crisis in “social capital formation,” the forging of bonds of social and political trust and competence. The debilitating effects of rising mistrust, privatization, and anomie are many. For example, there is overwhelming empirical support for the popularly held view that where neighborhoods are intact, drugs and alcohol abuse, crime, teenage childbearing, and truancy among the young diminish. Because neighborhoods are less and less likely to be intact, all forms of socially and self-destructive behavior among the young are on the rise. Americans at the end of the 20th century suffer from the effects of a dramatic decline in the formation of social bonds, networks, and trust.

Children in particular have borne the brunt of these negative social trends. All one need do is look at any American newspaper any day of the week to read yet another story about the devastating effects of current social trends on the young. Widespread family breakdown generates unparented children who attend schools that increasingly resemble detention centers rather than spaces of enduring training, discipline, and education in a safe environment. Family breakdown contributes to out-of-wedlock births and juvenile violence at unprecedented levels. The family, of course, cannot deal with all of these things alone. Looking at troubles for families points us to a wider disintegration of the social ecology within which families are nested.

If you agree with the great democratic theorists that democracy relies on the formation of civically engaged citizens, trends that point to a deterioration of the web of America’s mediating institutions are deeply troubling. By mediating institutions, I refer to those informal and formal civic associations that help to forge a relationship between government and the

everyday actions and spirit of a people. That is, democracy requires laws, constitutions, and authoritative institutions but also depends on democratic dispositions, on what Tocqueville called “mores.” These include a preparedness to work with others for shared ends—here the issue of trust is key, a combination of often strong convictions coupled with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can’t always get everything one wants—and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or one small group alone. The world that nourished and sustained such democratic dispositions was a thickly interwoven social fabric—that web of mediating institutions already noted. Tocqueville, as I have already indicated, saw Americans as civically engaged, arguing that “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever constantly forming associations” (*Democracy in America*, p. 513). From this associational enthusiasm, currents of social trust and stewardship flowed. Bonds of social trust, in turn, fueled the penchant for joining and for helping. Other famous visitors to our shores spoke of the “active beneficence” that characterized the American people.

But this public-spiritedness is in jeopardy. Our social fabric is frayed. Our trust in our neighbors is low. We don’t join as much. We give less money, as an overall percentage of our gross national product, to charity. Where once rough-and-tumble yet civil politics pertained, now we see “in your face” and “you just don’t get it.” Perhaps a few words about the trust data is in order. Listen to this question: “Do you believe most people can be trusted, or can’t you be too careful?” The question was first posed in 1960 in a famous civic culture study. It has been repeated since, yearly, from 1971 on. In 1960 in America, trust stood at nearly 60 percent. Social trust waned with some up-and-down fluctuations throughout the 1960s and 1970s, did a bit of bouncing up

in the mid-1980s, but now stands at *an all-time low*—37.5 percent and declining. (The data is for 1993. Recent, similar studies are confirmatory.) When even mainstream social scientists devoted to models of consensus and functional equilibrium grow alarmed, we should perhaps pay attention.

The general, widely shared consensus now is that overall social trust is far too low to sustain consensual norms, to generate robust communal action, and to build workable coalitions. This is not good news. Interestingly, the ever-pressing Tocqueville had offered his own foreboding thoughts along these lines. He warned of a world different from the robust democracy he surveyed. He urged Americans to take to heart a possible corruption of their way of life. In Tocqueville's worst-case scenario, narrowly self-involved individualists, disarticulated from the saving constraints and nurture of overlapping associations of social life, would move to a bad and isolating egoism. Once that happened, they would require more controls from above in order to muffle the disintegrative effects of egoism. To this end, if you would forestall this moment of democratic despotism, civic spaces between citizens and the state would need to be secured and nourished. Only many small-scale civic bodies would enable citizens to cultivate the democratic virtues and to play an active role in their communities. These civic bodies would be in and of the community—*not* governmentally derived, not creatures of the state.

Tocqueville's fear, remember, was not that anarchy would result should the world of associational life weaken but, rather, that new forms of domination would arise. All social webs that once held persons intact having disintegrated, the individual would find himself or herself isolated, exposed, and unprotected. Into this power vacuum would move centralized, top-heavy forces or a top-heavy administrative state—or, in our own time, the organized force of the market might come to

mind, especially in its consumerist aspects. This would have the effect of pushing social life to the lowest common denominator.

Case in point: an article in the *New York Times* following the 1994 campaign reported that "U.S. Voters Focus on Selves, Poll Says." The article brought into question the long-range effects on the legitimacy and sustainability of liberal democratic institutions if current trends deepen. The *Times* noted a "turn inward" and a lack of any "clear direction in the public's political thinking other than frustration with the current system and an eager responsiveness to alternative political solutions and appeals" ("U.S. Voters Focus on Selves, Poll Says," *New York Times*, 21 September 1994, p. A-21). Manifestations of voter frustration included growing disidentification with either of the major parties and massive political rootlessness among the young tethered to historically high rates of pessimism about the future. Most striking was a significant decline in "public support for social welfare programs," although the level of social tolerance for minorities and homosexuals was high, so long as one did not have to bear the burden of financial support or have direct hands-on involvement in the issue.

Let's speculate further on trends that are traceable to the collapse of America's social ecology or that helped to bring about these negative developments. Remember, these are political trends. They do not exhaust the universe of plausible explanations for why we have arrived at this sorry pass. The first trend is a tendency that became routine over the past three decades of American life to remove political disputation from the political arena into the courts. A second trend, noted in my opening comments, is the emergence of calls for a new form of techno-utopia, including images of an electronic plebiscitary democracy. I will argue that this latter trend reduces voters and legislators to angry instruments articulating the

unadorned “people’s will,” thereby presenting as a cure more of what ails us.

Let’s take up the first trend. Political scientist James Q. Wilson argues that one reason Americans are more cynical and less trusting than they used to be is that government has taken on more and more issues that it is by definition ill-equipped to handle well: volatile moral questions like abortion and family values, for example, or some aspects of race relations that treat white and black Americans as if they were homogeneous groups rather than individual persons themselves divided by regional, religious, class, education, and other lines. These wedge issues, as political strategists call them, were generated in part by courts that made decisions in the 1960s and 1970s on a whole range of cultural questions without due consideration of how public support for juridically mandated outcomes might be created and sustained. Such juridical moves, in turn, deepened a *juridical model of politics*, a model first pushed by liberal activists and then embraced by their conservative counterparts. Juridical politics are winner take all, built on an adversarial model. I am not here criticizing any particular court decision, but I am pointing to the baneful effects of this as a model for politics. Juridical politics spur direct-mail and other mass membership organizations whose primary goal is to give no quarter in the matter that is of direct interest to them. By guaranteeing that forces on either side of hotly disputed issues need never debate directly with each other through deliberative processes, the juridical preemption of the past decades has only deepened citizen frustration and fueled a politics of resentment. This politics of resentment, in turn, tends to reduce legislators to agents of single-issue lobbies and mass-mail overkill, thereby deepening the social mistrust that helped to give rise to such efforts in the first place. If one were to revisit the most controversial and divisive issues of the past three to four

decades, one would probably discover a dynamic not unlike the one that I here describe.

Now to the second trend. At present, aggrieved citizens say, in effect, let’s take things back through direct rather than representative democracy. Indeed, the *Times* study concluded that the Perot phenomenon, one that speaks to widespread voter anger and resentment, goes deeper and is more persistent than experts initially believed. In the meantime, the Democratic Party is “depleted and dispirited,” and the Republican Party is divided on social and cultural issues. So it comes down to this: Juridical fiat displaces democratic debate and compromise, where things can be worked out in a rough-and-ready way over time. In turn, one proclaimed solution to our woes—a plebiscitary or direct democracy—poses a threat of another sort by promoting the illusion that the unmediated will of the people must have final say on all issues. Although we are nowhere close to an official plebiscitary system, the trend is disturbing, for plebiscitarianism is entirely compatible with, indeed often a mainstay of, antidemocratic regimes. And the emergence of a sour populism only feeds the conviction that Americans of different perspectives cannot talk to one another. If to this one adds the terrible paradox that, all too often, in the name of multiculturalism we are promoting instead competing monoculturalisms, as each group plays what political scientists call a zero-sum game—I win, you lose—you have a picture of a society starting to come apart at the seams.

And yet, recent studies show that Americans without regard for race “cite the same social problems: crime, poor education, stagnating wages, the imperiled sanctity of the home and family” (Gerald F. Seib and Joe Davidson, “Whites, Blacks Agree on Problems; the Issue Is How to Solve Them,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 September 1994, pp. A1–6). Not only does this challenge the insistence that black and white Americans are entirely

separate groups with competing interests and identities, these studies show that African-Americans are more insistent than any other group that their society faces a crisis in values beginning with the family. There is, to be sure, less agreement on what can be done to put things right, but, sadly, neither white nor black Americans express confidence in the institutions of democratic society. Both groups seem ripe for direct democracy efforts, and both seem equally susceptible to the distortion of democratic debate in the hands of scandal-mongers and demagogues.

This is a situation begging for true democratic debate, courageous leadership, wise legislation, and the rebuilding of a sturdy civil society—a culture of democratic argument. The sociologist Robert Bellah reports that Americans today brighten to tales of community, especially if the talk is soothing and doesn't appear to demand very much from them. But when the discussion turns to institutions and the need to sustain and to support authoritative civic institutions, attention withers and a certain sourness arises. This bodes ill for liberal democratic society—a political order that requires robust yet resilient institutions that embody and reflect, yet mediate and shape the urgencies of democratic passions and interests. As our mediating institutions disappear or are stripped of legitimacy, a political wilderness spreads. People roam the prairie, fixing on objects or policies or persons to excoriate or to celebrate, at least for a time, until some other enthusiasm or scandal sweeps over them. If we have lost the sturdiness and patience necessary to sustain civil society over the long haul, our democracy—as a political system, a social world, and a culture—is in trouble: its trials will continue.

How did we get to this sad impasse? I have already suggested that the answers are many and that they are complex. Let me lift up one additional item for your consideration. In part this is a critique of my own generation, the

generation that came of age in the 1960s. Many important issues got raised in that tumultuous decade, and long-overdue problems were dealt with, most especially the end of de jure segregation. But a tendency manifested itself in the 1960s that now affects our entire culture and makes it difficult to sustain institutional life. I refer to the demand that one go beyond criticizing and challenging the exercise of authority to arguing that authority must be smashed altogether. A dangerous argument flourished that equated coercion and violence on the one hand with authority on the other. This is a terrible mistake. Authority is not tyranny; indeed, authentic politics begin when the power to coerce arbitrarily is rejected. A very common mistake, then, was to presume that one could have community, happiness, and freedom without authority. But authority and community go together. Legitimate authority is required to create and to sustain institutions. And without institutions, community is an empty word, a sentimental greeting, a vague aching of the heart.

That is why there was always something suspect about a rush to create community without asking how are communities to be sustained? by whom? to what ends? To have community you must have people prepared to shoulder responsibility, to be accountable; otherwise, you have lots of feelings about wanting to do good, but these evaporate like the early morning's dew at the first sign of difficulty. To have community you must have people prepared to accept the discipline necessary to sustain cultural forms. This discipline consists in part in recognition that the world doesn't begin and end at the perimeter of *me*, as in "me, myself, and I," as my mother was fond of saying. It consists in recognition of the fact that, even as I restrain myself and expect others to restrain themselves in the interest of sustaining a way of life in common, we are all of us beholden to something bigger and beyond, to purposes not reducible to the

concatenation of our private passions and interests. And why should we do this? So that, as I noted at the outset, we can come to know a good in common that we cannot know alone.

There is an old Celtic saying: “We all warm ourselves at fires we did not build, we all drink from wells we did not dig.” It is that recognition I would leave you with, that and a reminder from our democratic foremothers and forefathers: By all means, be brutally honest about the troubles we face, but be not afraid. Democracy is an unpredictable enterprise. Our patience with its ups and downs, its debates and compromises, may wane, because we would like life to be simpler. But it is not.

Do we care enough about our world to stay thus engaged? Your devotion to the task of

social life and social service remain engaged, and we are in your debt. The challenge we face now is to urge upon our fellow citizens every day, in every way that we can, that freedom and responsibility go together. The freer you are, the more responsible you must be. You must not be sour nor gloomy. You must become responsible, prepared to enact projects of the democratic political imagination from deep seriousness of purpose yet in a mood of often playful experimentation. That is the American way at its best. For even when equality and justice seem far-off ideals, freedom preserves the human discourse necessary to work toward the realization of both.