

rethinking Public Policy

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Established in January 1996 the Institute for Public Policy addresses key public policy issues through major conferences and seminars as well as through the publication of research findings. The institute operates under the auspices of the School of Public Policy, which offers a master of public policy degree emphasizing the moral and historical roots of free institutions. The school uses its location in Southern California as a rich laboratory for the emerging public policy paradigms of the twenty-first century. The school's graduates will be prepared for careers as leaders in government, the private sector, and non-profit organizations.

Executive Summary

In a way not seen since the 1930s, the public realm in America faces a crisis both of confidence and definition. After nearly six decades of continued expansion, governmental institutions command increasingly little support among the public that they are designed to serve. Technologies, businesses, and workers achieve ever higher levels of efficiency while many of the institutions most connected to the public realm—schools, regulatory institutions, and the judiciary—seem ill-suited to cope with the development of the information-age economy, or with the globalization of our society.

To some extent, the problem lies in defining the nature of the public realm. In sharp contrast to both the ancient and early republican experience, where religious, ethnic, or familial institutions shouldered much of the responsibility for shaping the public arena, contemporary public policy, in study and practice, has assumed an increasingly legalistic and technocratic character, with particular emphasis on the federal apparatus. This conflicts with a strong sense among the public that Washington, through regulatory mandates as well as through the federal judiciary, has become ever more intrusive in regulating some of the most private aspects of our communal existence.

As we enter the twenty-first century, perhaps one way of addressing our uneasiness would be to reintroduce into the public sector time-tested concepts and values that grow from traditions of morality, civic community, and family. These values have underpinned most republican societies since antiquity, and they constituted core concerns for our nation's founders.

This approach does not imply an endorsement of either of the two great traditions that have dominated public philosophy throughout this century—progressive liberalism or conservatism. Each, in its origins, drew deeply from the same historic and philosophic wells, albeit with sometimes strikingly different uses for the moral and social wisdom that was found therein. Our purpose here is not to argue for one side or the other, but to re-center the argument about public policy upon those values that upheld the formation of this republic and that can today serve as beacons as we navigate the great unknown that is the future.

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Section One

Contemporary Public Policy and Its Discontents

Americans in the 1990s are enjoying one of the most buoyant economic expansions in modern history, yet their discontent with centralized government is growing. In the last days of the New Deal, a time of dramatic expansion in the scope of federal activities, only one in three Americans felt that too much power rested in the hands of the federal government. By 1964, at the onset of a massively larger central government, sentiments about Washington's relative power were evenly divided. Today, when talk of limiting government is *de rigueur* among politicians of both major parties, roughly two-thirds of Americans believe the central state possesses far too much power. Another poll found most Americans—by a three-to-one margin—agreeing to the statement that government “creates more problems than it solves.”¹

This widespread dissatisfaction is not so surprising when the actual growth of government is taken into account. In 1937, in the midst of the New Deal, total government spending accounted for well under ten percent of the nation's domestic product; today it accounts for roughly one-third. Since 1960 the proportion of the nation's economy consumed by federal taxes alone, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, has grown steadily from 18.4 percent to 20.7 percent. For the median income two-earner family, the total proportion of income paid in taxes, including those levied at the state and local level, averaged over 38 percent in 1996, up from 28 percent in 1955, essentially equaling total *combined* expenditures for food, clothing, housing, and medical expenses.²

Government's Changing Role

Discontent might be further explained by the changing focus of governmental activity. The earliest experiments with expanded federal oversight of the economy—haltingly at first under President Herbert Hoover and more decisively during the New Deal³—was widely seen to be necessitated by a real and compelling crisis.

Government-funded infrastructure projects not only brought the blessings of electricity, clean water, and decent sanitation to vast neglected regions of the nation, but also provided employment to millions of distressed individuals overwhelmed by a deep, long-lasting, worldwide economic crisis. The federal state further expanded with the rise of a vast military-industrial complex, which was initially created for the Second World War, and subsequently institutionalized and expanded during the Cold War.

But the 1960s saw an acceleration of the federal role in a host of activities—such as education, health, and welfare—that had previously been the province of states, localities, and private institutions. As local responsibility shrank, Washington's share of total tax revenues grew from one-third to two-thirds.⁴ Gradually the federal government's spending shifted away from the New Deal's focus on public investment and toward elaborate welfare programs, corporate subsidies, and income transfers. Much of the treasure was expended on interest payments and on maintaining the sprawling bureaucratic apparatus itself, with only a small percentage devoted to public investment.⁵

Between 1982 and 1993, expenditures on “other services,” largely the government's own costs of transportation, wages, and salaries, rose in constant dollars from \$140 billion to nearly \$200 billion.⁶ The growth of the regulatory regime also added billions of dollars in costs to businesses and local governments. From the Progressive Era until 1964, only one new regulatory agency was set up to protect consumers, employees, or the public from institutional malfeasance; between 1964 and 1977, an additional ten agencies were created to serve this purpose.⁷ The trend toward central control has been further accelerated by the growth of “public interest” lobbies and their widely successful use of the judiciary to implement far-ranging social reforms.⁸

This consolidation of political power in Washington, the judiciary, and the federal agencies has changed traditional notions of the relationship between the citizen and the state. Bureaucratic and judicial decision-making now determine the nature of essential elements of the public realm, as opposed to the more deliberative, representative, and democratic legislative process. The expanded state, as philosopher Robert Nisbet notes, has served to “enhance the role of the political State as a direct relationship among individuals, and both to bring its powers and its services ever more intimately into the lives of human beings.”⁹

Given the increasingly intrusive role of the central government over business and personal life, it is not surprising that nearly one-third of all Americans, according to Democratic pollster Mark Penn, simply want government “to stay out” of their lives; even among Democrats, slightly more favor this avowedly extreme anti-governmental stance than endorse the notion that government should “protect people from adversity.”¹⁰ In a poll conducted by *ABC News* and the *Washington Post*, the margin between those in favor of “smaller government and fewer services” and those who favor larger government with many services has expanded virtually every year since 1988, with the small government faction by 1996 accounting for more than 60 percent of the total electorate.¹¹

Ultimately, people feel they are paying more for government but getting less. Much of government now seems afflicted with what Jonathan Rauch has described as “demosclerosis,” a professionalized public sector concerned for little but its own self-perpetuation.¹² Many institutions associated with the public sector, notably education, are themselves widely perceived as failing to provide the levels of service they once provided at a fraction of the cost. School funding on a per student basis rose 50 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars between 1980 and 1996, and the number of educational administrators skyrocketed, but test scores continued their decades-long decline.¹³ Even massive increases in school spending, such as those mandated by court order in Kansas City, have not reversed the slide in graduation rates or in reading and math scores.¹⁴

Alienation Amidst Plenty

Not surprisingly, notes David Matthews, president of the Kettering Foundation, there is a “deteriorating relationship”¹⁵ between the public and its schools, with barely half of the parents who send their children to assigned public schools reporting that they are “very satisfied with them.”¹⁶ Indeed, a series of surveys conducted by Public Agenda in 1995 found that parents and most of the public—who tend to desire greater emphasis on basic grammar and math skills, discipline, and manners—found themselves on the opposite side of most key pedagogical issues with respect to those prevailing in the nation’s schools of education, which are responsible for training new teachers.¹⁷

Even traditional supporters of public education seem to have lost confidence in the system. Roughly half of all schoolteachers in Boston, Cleveland, Honolulu, Pittsburgh, and New Orleans send their children to private schools, as do more than two in five who teach at schools in Los Angeles and Baltimore.¹⁸ David Tokofsky, a highly successful teacher and longtime union activist, believes the real problem lies not so much in the classroom but in the bureaucratic oversight conducted by the city’s elected school board and the administrative apparatus. “My colleagues don’t intend to return to a time of teaching and educating in our city’s classrooms because it’s just too much hard work,” admitted Tokofsky, as he suffered through his own first term as a member of the Los Angeles School Board.¹⁹

The decline in education reflects a deep disenchantment shared by many Americans in the late 1990s. They feel better about their own economic prospects but worse about the overall social environment, the state of values, and the ability of government to successfully address those problems.²⁰ For the vast middle class, conditions as measured in material terms—such as the sophistication and number of televisions, VCRs, and computers, or the size of houses—have improved markedly.²¹ Yet when Americans think about the best time to raise a family, they look not to the present but to the 1950s, when the level of material prosperity was far

lower.²² One barometer of discontent is the decreasing level of political participation by common citizens over the past few decades. Growing since at least the 1950s, apathy reached new levels in 1996 when less than half of *registered* voters—and only 15 percent of those eligible from Generation X—even bothered to cast ballots, the lowest level of participation in 72 years.²³

The Technocratic Response

Against this backdrop, one might expect that policymakers, intellectuals, social scientists, and educators would question the prevailing tendencies within the public sphere. Yet in general, those most involved in the study and art of government are so committed to an expansionist central government that they are unable to question its premises. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, for example, the leading university-based voices on public policy—such as Harvard’s Robert Reich and MIT’s Lester Thurow—consistently advocated state-centered policies to combat a perceived decline of the United States relative to “success stories” such as France, Germany, and Japan. In 1983 Reich, who went on to serve as secretary of labor under President Clinton, suggested that these countries were appropriately “organized for economic adaptation” while the United States, with its more decentralized traditions, was not.²⁴

Ultimately the events of the succeeding fifteen years, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, proved this point of view almost absurdly mistaken, as the American economy vastly outperformed all these once-feared rivals.²⁵ Yet the centralizing orientation has remained the *summum bonum* among many public policy intellectuals.

The technocratic approach to public policy has roots in the broader evolution of the contemporary social sciences. The expansion of the welfare state apparatus in the 1960s and 1970s, noted the late democratic socialist thinker Michael Harrington, gave birth to a kind of “social industrial complex,” an interconnected web of governmental bureaucracies, foundations, and private social service professionals with close ties to university social science departments.²⁶ As Joseph Gusfield, president of the Pacific Sociological Association, noted in 1978:

Sociology in America has been the offspring of the Welfare State. Its position in the educational marketplace, its role in training for the professions and occupations, and the demands for its research have largely reflected the concerns of a society and a state wishing to alleviate the inadequacies of a market economy.²⁷

This same bureaucratic orientation has also prevailed within the nation’s schools of public policy, in large part because they were founded primarily to serve the needs of an expanding government. This can be seen by reviewing core curricula at the leading public policy schools—Berkeley, Duke, Georgetown, Harvard, Michigan, Princeton—where the emphasis remains on technical subjects, organizational behavior, and process studies. By way of contrast, these schools show relatively little interest in exploring the role of core values, the church, or the family in the affairs of the commonwealth. This attitude reflects what one analyst described as “the belief that if there is a problem, there is a policy that can solve it.”²⁸

The Deconstructionist Challenge

This technocratic approach is one development that has helped displace traditional notions of a public realm based on core moral and civic values with “the ideology of neutrality,” which dismisses the moral equation—the fundamental issue of “right or wrong”—from the conduct of public policy.²⁹ But the 1960s saw the rise of an even more destructive approach to public life that could be called *radical deconstructionist*. New theorists of this stripe, unlike the technocrats, did openly reject the liberal welfare state, but largely because they sought to

demolish liberal society *per se*. To influential theorists like Herbert Marcuse, the “harmony between scholarship and national purpose” simply provided an oppressive power structure with yet another weapon to control the consciousness of the individual.³⁰

In contrast to the traditional progressive notion of calling the nation to live up to its ideals, the radical intellectuals of the New Left increasingly fought not only against social injustice, but also against the republic’s cherished democratic norms and traditions. To many of them, republicanism itself represented nothing more than a clever mask for an essentially fascist system; the differences between America and Nazi Germany were more of degree than of kind. “The fact that we cannot point to an SS or an SA here,” Marcuse suggested, “simply means that they are not necessarily in this country.”³¹

Even when the radical mood began to fade everywhere else, the new ideology found fertile soil within the university culture. In 1974 Marcuse, when asked if the New Left had died with the end of the Vietnam War, suggested that it would revive, at least within the university. And as historian Arthur Herman suggests, he was right.³² With the conservative tide that culminated in the election of arch-nemesis Ronald Reagan in 1980, the remnants of the now defeated New Left redoubled their efforts to dominate those institutions where they had influence, most notably in the universities.

The triumph of market economics among Democrats and Republicans over the last two decades, suggests historian Fred Siegel, made “indulgence in campus politics into a compensatory prize,”³³ a way for academics to avoid an unpleasant unfolding of history. As a result, despite the spectacular collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the rapid marketization of China, many universities incubate a radical culture—particularly in the social sciences and humanities—wildly out of step with mainstream realities as well as traditional norms of American political philosophy. Deprived of their previous Marxist dream of revolutionizing society, notes historian Arthur Herman, the deconstructionists now engage in the practice of what one of their number called “negative dialectics,” indulging in biting, if often unintelligible, critiques for their own sake:

The only escape is the individual Nietzschean act of criticism. . . This was the intellectual's conscious decision not to subscribe to any of the values of bourgeois society, as a protest against its totalizing dream of power.³⁴

This newly devalued academic environment, notes Siegel, helped create the basis for what has become known as “political correctness.” Inside the university, hatred for bourgeois society and its institutions has turned on the traditions of the academy itself, so much so that even knowledge, once understood as the *summum bonum* of the university, has been subjugated to radical ethnic, class, or gender-based ideologies. Adherence to the Enlightenment traditions of rational inquiry, write two postmodernist academics, simply means acceptance of the prevailing “conventions of culture” that disguise new and more subtle structures of power and domination.³⁵ One feminist philosopher of science, Sandra Harding, openly dismisses Newton’s *Principia* as “Newton’s rape manual” since it reflects the male-dominated science of its time. Even the basic scientific principle can no longer be shielded from ideological deconstruction; science, she argues, is “politics by other means.”³⁶

Most disturbing of all, perhaps, is that even the long cherished, university-nurtured value of tolerance for differing beliefs has come under assault. Taking their cue from Marcuse’s notion of “repressive tolerance,” which urged intolerance for opinions considered reactionary, many university departments now operate under what historian Siegel calls “a new form of coerced consensus.”³⁷ A 1994 survey of faculty at the University of Massachusetts, for example, found that barely half considered their school a place where differences of opinion could be aired openly. Such intolerance of differing beliefs can be seen on many campuses, sometimes in the form of “speech codes.” At schools such as the University of Minnesota, notes the *Boston Globe*’s Scot Lehigh, students face punishment for such things as “callous insensitivity to the experience of women,” while at the University of Connecticut they can be disciplined for “inappropriate laughter.”³⁸ To be sure, such things would be funny, if only they were not true.

Such attempted thought control is deeply disturbing not only to resentful conservatives, but also to many more traditionally left-leaning liberals such as the *Village Voice's* Nat Hentoff.³⁹ If confined to the university, these ideologies might have only limited impact. But their prevalence among some faculties of social science and public policy, notes New York University psychologist Paul C. Vitz, could ultimately threaten the democratic values and open discussion critical to the health of a vital public arena:

Deconstructionists have powerfully argued that no written text has any fixed meaning, that all interpretation lies in the eyes of the beholder; and thus we see individual moral relativism being advocated at the highest intellectual levels. At present, this intellectual and academic irony is primarily found on the nation's campuses, but their tribalism has already begun to move out into the whole society.⁴⁰

Section Two

The Importance of the Past in Rethinking Public Policy

These recent trends have served to detach the contemporary debate over our collective future from the basic issues that have occupied public political philosophy from antiquity to the founding of this Republic. For too long, we have divided our thinking about government from a broader vision of a public arena that includes family and moral values, in addition to civic activism. For the ancients, this division would have seemed absurd. Indeed, *publicus*, the Latin root for the English word “public,” originally referred not to government but to people or community, those adult men who at the time constituted what we would now call the politically engaged “public.”⁴¹

The historic exclusion of women, slaves, and the propertyless in ancient times has led some contemporary scholars to dismiss the Greek, Roman, or even the early American experience as reactionary and irrelevant to modern concerns. Yet as the British classical historian M. I. Finley observed, “It is easy to score points over a dead society, more difficult, and more rewarding to examine what they were trying to do”⁴² Rejecting the past out of hand represents an impoverished approach to preparing for the future; a good prophet, the adage goes, also needs a good memory.⁴³

The Origins of Civic Culture and Values

Rather than denouncing the past with the vitriol of the present, it seems far more useful to revisit and cultivate once again the rich soils that initially nurtured the growth of a healthy public sphere; for example, the community of citizens, religion and its associated values, and the family. This will allow us not only to better appreciate our own past, but to better consider what we may yet hope to become, and the principles to which public officials can be held accountable.

In contrast to ancient Greece, citizens today feel largely separate from the public sphere, and have little sense of responsibility with respect to their role in it. Our emphasis, through the courts and various bureaucracies, has been weighted almost exclusively toward “rights.” In a Greek *polis* such as Athens, the citizen—admittedly restricted to, at best, several tens of thousands of male members of society—was not a separate entity from the state, but rather the essence of the government. To Aristotle, the citizens’ personal interests in peace and a modicum of leisure were naturally aligned with those of the community, much as sailors share a common interest in guiding their ship home safely to port. “The city,” Aristotle wrote in his *Politics*, “belongs among the things that exist in nature,” adding that “man is by nature a political animal.”⁴⁴

In classical Greece and Rome, an individual citizen's involvement with the affairs of the city came about not so much by choice as by custom. In Athens, citizens were selected for office by lot and restricted to one year of nonrenewable service. Public life was largely carried out "face to face" in the warm Mediterranean sun. Those who did not participate, Pericles noted in his Funeral Oration, were deemed "useless."⁴⁵ This early participatory relationship also animated life in the early Roman *res publica* or commonwealth. Cicero thus described the ideal Roman state:

The commonwealth is the wealth of a people; understanding by 'a people' not every group of human beings however brought together, but a multitude united by a common sense of right and a community of interest.⁴⁶

Greek and Roman public society rested, as does ours, on laws, but these derived their authority from what were generally understood as enduring moral, familial, and civic principles. In this, they shared characteristics with other great ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China. The notion that familial values and the cultivation of personal morality support the health of society in general was certainly central to Confucianism, a system that has retained much of its relevance from antiquity to the present day.⁴⁷

The interchange of such core values with the earliest notion of democracy and republican institutions makes the Greek and Roman cases particularly relevant to our own current public predicament. Greek and Roman systems of law, observed the nineteenth-century French classicist Fustel de Coulanges, had their origins in early religious precepts.⁴⁸ Roman law was designed to shape the behavior of the citizen, preferably through self-regulation, in the context of deeply held conceptions of personal and civic virtue. Even the Latin word *religio*, suggests historian F. E. Adcock, included within its meaning the sense of obligation that held the citizen simultaneously to his civic duty and to the gods.⁴⁹

The Role of Monotheistic Religion

The tie between morality and the public sphere was greatly strengthened both by the influence of Jewish tradition and its descendent, Christianity. The Hebrew prophets interpreted their own often troubled history not by resorting to auguries or to stories of cosmic conflicts between the gods, as many of their neighbors did, but through a process of sustained reflection upon the moral values given by a single omniscient God. "Instead of foisting history on Fate," writes historian Herbert J. Muller, "they explained it by human character and conduct."⁵⁰

Far more than the classical Greeks and Romans, the Hebrew prophets emphasized the obligations of individuals not primarily to the state, but to their fellow human beings. They not only encouraged charitable giving, but they also stressed the moral imperative dictating that individuals should work so as not to unnecessarily burden the broader community. As one prominent rabbinic commentator on the Talmud, the ancient Jewish book of interpretation of the Torah, suggests:

Man was not intended to live alone, but as a member of society. He is a unit of the body of society, and that fact creates many duties for him with respect to his relationship with his fellow men. His life is not his to do with as he pleases.⁵¹

With the rise of Christianity, the idea of universal moral obligations entered the mainstream of European thought. In the place of the parochial codes prevalent in the ancient world, Paul and the apostles sought to

create a more universal credo that knew neither the separations of race nor class. “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free,” preached Paul, “and have been all made to drink of one Spirit.”⁵²

Of course, the integrity of the Pauline message also can be deconstructed, particularly given the intolerance of Christians after their takeover of the declining Roman empire. This intolerance has been particularly acute for Jews who, over the ensuing two millennia, frequently served as objects of persecution, murderous at times, from the professed disciples of Jesus. Yet the moral vision of the apostles remains a critical, inseparable part of the traditional public consciousness of this nation.

The Ancients and the Founders

These ancient notions of civic life, religion, and morality profoundly shaped the perspectives of our nation’s founders and the American order. “Seeking for the roots of order,” Russell Kirk suggests, “we are led to four cities: Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London.” As he aptly demonstrates, the traditions associated with those cities were more profoundly embedded in the consciousness of the founders than is easily imagined in today’s highly secularized, often abysmally historical policy discussions.⁵³ America, noted G. K. Chesterton, was founded as a “nation with the soul of a church.”⁵⁴

The religious heritage derived from Judaic and Christian roots certainly wielded a powerful influence in early America, particularly among the Puritan founders of New England.⁵⁵ But apart from specifically Jewish or Christian beliefs, religious ideas, including deism, underpinned the thinking of virtually all the founders. “What was, for them, an unproblematic premise,” suggests the University of Virginia’s Joshua Dienstag, “is, today, probably a minority position and certainly a highly controversial one.”⁵⁶

Religious ideas profoundly shaped even the founders’ conception of their own historical roles. The notion of declining values in ancient Israel, Greece, and Rome were not mere historical curiosities to them, but moral and civic lessons highly relevant to their own construction of our republican institutions. Although they drew deeply on classical models, the founders endorsed the notion—found in the Old Testament and endorsed by the influential British philosopher John Locke—that the people possessed the moral right to “appeal to heaven” and overthrow the established powers, thus ultimately providing part of the justification for the American rebellion against the crown.⁵⁷

This religious perspective formed a common backdrop for the political philosophy of the founders, despite their theological diversity. But it was not a unitary perspective, by any means. Profound religious differences certainly existed between conservatives such as Adams and Hamilton, and those who were deists, such as Jefferson; but all endorsed ancient ideas concerning the central roles of morality, virtue, the family, and property in the new commonwealth. Jefferson, for example, justified freedom of thought on religious as well as rational grounds. “Almighty God,” he wrote, “hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it will remain by making it altogether insusceptible to restraint . . .”⁵⁸

This intrinsically religious approach to government constitutes one of the critical aspects of what Robert N. Bellah has described as the “American civil religion.” As Washington put it in his Farewell Address:

**Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,
Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man
claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these Great
Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and
citizens . . . Let it be simply asked where the security of property, for
reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths,
which are the instruments of investigation in the Courts of Justice?**⁵⁹

This link between “the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of liberty*” was among those things that also most impressed Alexis de Tocqueville in his famous travels through the Republic in the early 1830s.⁶⁰ These twin motivations, he noted, tied Americans both personally and ideologically to their new country. Much as in the early Greek *polis* or Roman *res publica*, the American of those times tended to identify strongly with his country, particularly when it was threatened, because, observed Tocqueville, “it is not only his country that is attacked, it is himself.”⁶¹

The Decentralist Impulse

Tocqueville linked this strong civic sensibility to the decentralized nature of the new Republic. In stark contrast with his rigidly ordered and centralized native France, American democracy flourished, he argued, because it was highly decentralized and because its many “public” functions were carried out not from the political center of power, but through a multitude of voluntary associations, churches, and local governments. Tocqueville noted:

In no other country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater number of objects than in America. Besides the permanent associations that are established by law under the names of townships, cities and counties, a vast number of others are formed and maintained by the agency of private individuals.⁶²

These early American citizens’ views of the public arena differ dramatically from today’s Washington-centered perspective. Nineteenth-century public life, argues Thomas Bender, far from being a distant abstraction sharply distinguished from the citizen’s ordinary experience of the world, was vividly “imbedded in daily social experiences”—at the town square, the church, and the local voluntary association. Government could “coerce” the population on rare occasions, such as in times of war or natural emergency, but “society was conceived in communal terms: small in scale, personal and unified.”⁶³

Even as the industrial and scientific revolution began to change these structures, concentrating power increasingly in large corporations and giant cities, many observers correctly perceived a profound threat to the traditions of American democracy. These included both conservatives, with their natural passion for preserving the past, as well as prominent progressives. John Dewey, one of the giants of American liberal thought, observed as early as the 1920s:

In its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse The Great Community, in the sense of free and full communication, is conceivable. But it can never possess all the qualities which mark a smaller community. It will do its final work in ordering the relations and enriching the experience of local associations.⁶⁴

Our Common Political Heritage

Mainstream American political thinking derives from a common heritage of deep respect for social traditions that emphasized the importance of religion, moral values, and civic participation. Liberals, conservatives, Republicans, and Democrats frequently differ on how to interpret those traditions, but on the fundamentals they share far more than they often are willing to admit.

In this respect, nothing is more pernicious to developing a morally grounded approach to public policy than the increasing tendency to claim these traditional ideals as proprietary to a specific political tendency or party. Today, for example, some associate Judeo-Christian principles in the public realm as an essentially “conservative” or even Republican partisan position; others act as if a value-based assessment can only lead to the opposite conclusion.

In actual practice, however, these fundamental values have been repeatedly invoked to support differing political positions. During the early debate over slavery, many, particularly in the South, sanctioned their “peculiar institution” with Scripture itself. The ancient Israelites, they pointed out, not only served as slaves, but when the opportunity presented itself, also owned human chattel. Christ and the apostles, one clergyman argued, “saw fit to present detailed lists of sins but made no mention of slavery.”⁶⁵

Yet the moral and religious impulse central to American public culture also inspired those who ultimately destroyed slavery. New England’s churches, in particular, served as incubators for the cause of abolitionism, a movement strengthened by the Second Great Awakening, which peaked in the late 1820s. Abolitionism, noted one nineteenth-century historian, was essentially “a moral movement—a religious movement.”⁶⁶ Abraham Lincoln, for his part, came to regard slavery in specifically religious and moral terms. Slavery was not just wrong public policy, Lincoln declared in the Second Inaugural, but also a sin for which the nation had to pay with the blood of its young men.⁶⁷

Similarly, advocates of the Social Gospel propelled the Progressive movement through the early years of this century, even as some radicals and trade unionists denounced the churches as pawns of the rich.⁶⁸ Even the reform policies of Franklin Roosevelt, vehemently opposed by conservatives as anathema to both religious and civic tradition, drew upon a profoundly moralistic sense of *noblesse oblige* derived from his own very Protestant upbringing. In contrast to the Marxist-oriented radicals of his day, noted historian Daniel Fussfeld, Roosevelt’s political creed sought not only to correct what was wrong with America, but also to preserve the Republic from “the flames of Radicalism” with his own brand of “modernized Jeffersonianism.”⁶⁹

More recently, values-based motivations played a similar role in the modern equivalent of the abolitionist struggle—the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Despite often strenuous opposition from self-proclaimed defenders of traditional values, Martin Luther King Jr. never lost his mooring in fundamental American religious, moral, and civic traditions. Speaking of the relevance of the “American dream” in 1961, King remarked:

And there is another thing we see in this dream that ultimately distinguishes democracy and our form of government from all the totalitarian regimes that emerge in history. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state. To discover where they come from, it is necessary to move back behind the dim mist of eternity, for they are God-given The American dream reminds us that every man is heir to the legacy of worthiness.⁷⁰

Section Three

The Relevance of a Values-Based Approach in the Contemporary Public Sphere

Such idealistic invocations of our civic traditions are infrequently heard today; when voiced, they are rarely taken seriously, particularly when spoken by contemporary political leaders. On the other hand, some have begun to suggest that, with the decline of Marxism, there may not even be the need for a serious debate over public policy. Francis Fukuyama first advanced this millennial thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man*, which came out shortly after the collapse of the Soviet empire. In Fukuyama’s view, “liberal democracy” has won a convincing final victory and our society is about to fulfill its promise.⁷¹

Beyond Triumphalism

Fukuyama’s work reflects what British author John Gray has called “a Western triumphalism” that touts the ultimate “final triumph of ‘democratic capitalism.’”⁷² More recently, the extraordinary success of the American

economy has given further support to this thesis, leading some popular writers to suggest that even the most deep-seated social and political problems, as well as the business cycle itself, are well along the way to solving themselves. As Peter Schwartz and Peter Leyden have recently predicted:

We are watching the beginnings of a global economic boom on a scale never experienced before. We have entered a period of sustained growth that could eventually double the world's economy every dozen years and bring increasing prosperity for—quite literally—billions of people on this planet. We are riding the early waves of a 25-year run of a greatly expanding economy that will do much to solve seemingly intractable problems like poverty and ease tensions throughout the world.⁷³

By its very fecundity, the techno-optimists suggest, the economy generates more than enough money to solve the remaining social problems. With so much money circulating in people's accounts, they envision an inevitable resurgence of "a spirit of generosity," with a vast increase in giving to charitable causes. In essence, through technology-led growth, we solve our central social problems not because our values demand it, but because we feel so good about the future that we can afford to share the wealth.⁷⁴

Such views reflect a deep-seated, and largely admirable, American tradition of optimism that, for the most part, has been all too often missing from the public policy debate. Yet at the same time, the current ebullience may well reflect more the good times of one class of people—largely well-educated "baby boomers"—than a sense of well-being among the wider public. Indeed, despite the tremendous wealth generated by the technological breakthroughs and the stock market booms of the 1990s, the current prosperity has not been as widely shared as during previous periods of national prosperity. Between 1990 and 1995 the median family income for the vast majority of wage earners actually declined slightly, while the number of people with a net worth over one million dollars more than doubled.⁷⁵

In Silicon Valley, arguably the epicenter of this new economy, wages dropped, in inflation-adjusted terms, for the bottom 20 percent of the workforce in the 1990s. Concurrently, the earnings ratio of top corporate executives to production workers rose from 41:1 to 220:1 in merely five years, from 1991 to 1996.⁷⁶ Indeed, some alarming trends—such as the fact that the wage gap between high school and college graduates doubled between 1979 and 1995—may indicate that skills necessary for survival in the new economy may serve to make inequality even more intractable than in the past.⁷⁷

The Moral Content of Our Impending Social Crisis

Even more disturbing than the widening income disparities is the fact that the impoverished urban underclass has grown significantly in the 1990s.⁷⁸ This persistence of poverty amidst a sustained boom suggests that some of the nation's most pressing public dilemmas may not be fully soluble through purely economic mechanisms.

This contrasts dramatically with the conditions Roosevelt addressed during the Depression. At that time, mass unemployment was primarily an economic, rather than social problem; the poor had few financial resources, but generally maintained a rich commitment to values, family, and communal institutions. As a result, Roosevelt and other reformers rightly expended their energy creating jobs, building the infrastructure, and expanding economic opportunities, but barely concerned themselves with a moral or value-oriented approach to reversing poverty.

But the nature of poverty took on increasingly social and moral dimensions in more contemporary times. The onset of the 1980s—a period of remarkable economic expansion—also saw a dramatic rise in crime and illegitimacy, together with a collapse of traditional values.⁷⁹ At the time, only a few political leaders, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, saw in these social dysfunctions the real root of persistent poverty, but today it is

increasingly obvious. After nearly three decades and an estimated \$5.4 trillion spent (in constant 1993 dollars) on anti-poverty programs,⁸⁰ our increasingly “demoralized society,” in the words of Gertrude Himmelfarb, has lately suffered a virtual explosion in destructive social phenomena, such as the illegitimacy rate. Himmelfarb observes that in merely three decades, the percentage of out-of-wedlock births multiplied six times over, from 5 percent in 1960 to 30 percent in 1991.⁸¹

This rapid growth in illegitimacy, with its resultant surge in single parent families, has been felt across society. Twenty-two percent of white births now occur out of wedlock, and the illegitimate birth rate in the African-American community has been absolutely devastating. When Moynihan wrote his famous treatise on the decline of the black family, the illegitimacy rate was 25 percent;⁸² today the figure has reached an almost incomprehensible 68 percent.⁸³

This pattern of social breakdown cannot simply be dismissed as the product of poverty and unemployment, as is commonly suggested; rather, it must be counted as among its primary causes.⁸⁴ By 1990, the poverty rate for female-headed households was *five times* that of married couples, and less than 2 percent of the “chronic” poor lived in traditional families.⁸⁵ Female-headed households accounted for one-quarter of poor children in 1960 but three-fifths by 1994, including over four-fifths of poor African-American youngsters.⁸⁶ The median family income for married couples with children in 1991, according to the U.S. Labor Department, is twice that of single men with children and *four times* that of single mothers.⁸⁷

These signs of social dysfunction are even more troubling when seen in the light of the changes in the economic structure. The growing emphasis on skills creates a demand for trained workers, but having children out of wedlock, particularly among teenagers, often short-circuits education. Nationwide, white teen mothers are one-third less likely to complete high school than their childless peers; African-American teens are half as likely; and Latina teens are one-tenth as likely to receive their high school diplomas.⁸⁸ Worse yet, some estimate that children raised by a single mother are three times more likely to drop out of school than their peers.⁸⁹

Many academics, politicians, and journalists trace all these morbid social realities to the “legacy of slavery” and “institutionalized racism.” But as sociologist Walter Williams has pointed out, today’s high illegitimacy rate cannot easily be blamed on slavery, because a century ago, just a generation beyond slavery, blacks had marginally lower out-of-wedlock births than whites. Moreover, despite the continued existence of racism, married black couples have continued to improve their economic status enormously. Whereas overall black median incomes have remained only 59 percent of those enjoyed by whites for the past thirty years, those of married black couples are now well more than 80 percent of those of their white counterparts.⁹⁰ Clearly single parenting, and particularly the lack of involved fathers, represents a more pressing threat to black economic progress than the continued existence of racist sentiments. As Williams suggests:

Widespread family breakdown—or what is more descriptive, families not forming in the first place—has produced the pathology that is an integral part of today’s urban landscape. No one should be the least surprised by high crime rates and the atmosphere of violence in areas where young men are raised without fathers and by often-incompetent mothers. The cultural values of many urban communities have become male adolescent values: violence, predatory sex, and instant gratification⁹¹

Devaluing the Family

The fundamental crisis in morals, values, and family structure does not exist only for those at the bottom of the social pyramid, however; the middle class is also at risk. One recent research team led by Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg found that, of some 20,000 largely middle-class teenagers, only 30 percent of their parents even knew how their children were doing in school; more than half of the teenagers reported that

their parents would not be upset with grades averaging “C” or less; and one-sixth said their parents did not care about their grades at all. Two-thirds said they cheated on tests. Looking over this and other surveys, Steinberg concluded that perhaps one in four parents could be described as essentially “disengaged” from educating, socializing, and disciplining their children.⁹² Rather than simply blaming the schools, the educational bureaucracy, or levels of funding, Steinberg notes:

Our findings suggest that the sorry state of American student achievement is due more to the conditions of students' lives outside of school than it is to what takes place within school walls. In my view, the failure of the school reform movement to reverse the decline in achievement is due to the emphasis on reforming schools and classrooms, and its general disregard of the contributing forces that, while outside the boundaries of the school, are probably more influential.⁹³

Perhaps the best evidence for the corrosive power of today's moral and social environment on typical American students comes from current research on students from immigrant communities. In his study, Steinberg notes that Asian immigrant parents in particular instill notions of the importance of hard work, discipline, and persistence far more than do most native-born American parents. Similarly, black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean are far more likely to live in traditional families, get an education, and steer clear of trouble with the law than their native-born racial counterparts. Sadly, the biggest problem, notes Harvard University's Mary Waters, comes with acculturation into American society. “In effect,” she suggests, “the immigrant ethos, and the social capital of many Caribbean families, are undermined by various forces in American society.”⁹⁴

A similar pattern has been observed among Latino immigrants as well. A recent study of 5,200 youngsters by Ruben Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes in South Florida and San Diego showed immigrant children generally outperforming their native-born counterparts.⁹⁵ These surveys, notes Pepperdine University research fellow Gregory Rodriguez, reflect the importance of social values even for immigrants who, despite their higher rates of poverty, are far more likely to be in the workforce, less likely to be on public assistance, and far less likely to get divorced than native-born Americans, including their fellow Hispanics.⁹⁶

As these and other studies suggest, the greatest problem facing the public arena are those that academics and policy intellectuals often ignore—the environment of moral values in which our children are being raised. The erosion of the “natural authority” of the family, observed Eugene Kennedy and Sara Charles in their landmark work *Authority*, has created an “unparalleled deterioration of the family as an institution” that extends well beyond the stereotypical “welfare Mom.”⁹⁷ Only 22 percent of the public, according to one 1997 survey, thinks that parents who are good role models are “very common.” Another survey by the Pew Research Center found that 56 percent of women think today's mothers are doing a worse job of mothering than their own mothers.⁹⁸

The Future of Public Policy: Devolutionary Solutions

The nature of our contemporary public policy dilemmas suggests the need for a broad reassessment of the resources and the means by which society will address its fundamental problems. The threat of family breakdown, whether in the ghetto or in suburbia, cannot be easily or effectively addressed from Washington, beyond the judicious use of the “bully pulpit” of the White House. Instead, the major focus of the policy debate needs to center on the family, the grassroots community, and the local church.

The Return to Grassroots Solutions

This reevaluation of public policy, which features a renewed concentration on local institution-building and community, can be seen in the growing interest in “civic culture.” Restoring the strength of grassroots institutions, notes the University of Chicago’s Jean Bethke Elshtain, extends beyond strictly conservative or liberal notions of the individual’s relation to society:

This densely textured social ecology was—and remains—the ideal. For civil society is a realm that is neither individualist nor collectivist. It partakes of both the ‘I’ and the ‘we.’⁹⁹

As Elshtain suggests, creating a “civic culture” does not “solve” our social problems, but seeks to create citizens and communities capable of addressing them. One hopeful sign may be a growing interest among Americans in voluntary self-help; the number of Americans participating in such efforts has grown by more than ten million since 1987, notes the Gallup poll, after falling during the recession of the early 1990s. On a related front, a 1997 Field poll found that 74 percent of adults in greater Los Angeles gave to charities, while a Gallup survey from the previous year revealed that about 69 percent of a nationwide sample did likewise.¹⁰⁰ Americans overall, according to one study, are far more likely to volunteer their time to help others than any country on the European continent, and more than twice as likely as subjects of the United Kingdom.¹⁰¹

The religiosity of Americans relative to virtually all other advanced industrial countries, notes Andrew Greeley, may account for much of this difference.¹⁰² More Americans—roughly three in five—believe that religion holds more keys to solving the nation’s problems than government.¹⁰³ Churches also provide about sixty percent of the nation’s volunteers.¹⁰⁴ With 71 percent of Americans claiming membership in the country’s roughly 350,000 churches, that represents a huge potential volunteer base.¹⁰⁵

Some long-time community activists, such as Robert Woodson, also argue that religious value-based institutions provide not only necessary service to the needy, but service that is often uniquely effective. Woodson suggests “community healers” such as Freddy Garcia, a former heroin addict turned preacher who runs the highly successful Victory Life Fellowships, a series of successful drug recovery programs in Texas, offer not only treatment but a spiritual salve to those seeking to overcome their personal anguish:

The stories of these modern day Josephs provide a paradigm and model for addressing the spiritual crisis that afflicts our society today. These Josephs have forged an effective internal, spiritual response to the spiritual and moral atrophy of our civil society which goes far beyond the limitations of the conventional remedies of professional therapy and professional assistance.¹⁰⁶

Of course, as Woodson quickly acknowledges, not all such successful grassroots efforts are religiously based. Some grow out of a neighborhood setting, where families, often led by mothers, fight against gangs and violence in areas where governmental action often has proven ineffective.¹⁰⁷ Others, like the Los Angeles Free Clinic, provide service motivated by the liberal activist tradition, providing health care, employment, and other

supports to teenage runaways, the homeless, and the poor, at a fraction of the cost of services provided by the county and other governmental agencies.¹⁰⁸

The New Logic of Devolution

In their multitudinous forms, such volunteer and nonprofit-led efforts return us to older notions of the public sphere extending far beyond government. If we are to rebuild our troubled cities and families from the bottom up, then, as philosopher Robert Nisbet has suggested, the public realm must have more “functional relevance.”¹⁰⁹ At the very least, this commends the wisdom of shifting more responsibilities to states and cities. When unburdened by federal mandates, localities have shown a remarkable propensity for innovation. Consequently, role models for handling welfare reform are likely to be found not in Washington, but in states such as Wisconsin and Michigan, where churches assist by “mentoring” former recipients of government assistance.¹¹⁰

Traditionally, much of the opposition to devolution has come from urban regions and interests. But those concerned with the future of our cities and metropolitan areas increasingly recognize that the current federal system generally serves to take taxes from the urban areas and redistribute them to rural states. It is not California or New Jersey that benefits from the federalization of government services, but less urbanized New Mexico, Mississippi, North Dakota, West Virginia, and Alabama.¹¹¹ Even the much ballyhooed 1994 Clinton administration crime bill actually steered a disproportionate share of its funding to smaller states—many with relatively low crime rates—and shortchanged the major metropolitan regions.¹¹²

Perhaps the most persuasive factor for devolutionary approaches to the public realm comes from the evolution of the economy and technology itself. The competitive conditions of the 1970s persuaded many local and state governments that they could no longer depend on federal mechanisms to assure their prosperity. After being “eclipsed” by Washington’s rapidly expanding powers since the 1930s, a wide range of states—from high-tech-oriented Massachusetts and California to heavily industrialized Michigan and rural Tennessee—all began initiating economic development programs in the 1970s and 1980s in order to develop a “competitive advantage among places” within an increasingly competitive, globalized economy. The ensuing policy initiatives covered a broad array of options, from regulatory reforms to investment in education infrastructure and the building of collaborative industrial structures.¹¹³

This growing localized focus, of course, is not restricted to the United States. Across both Europe and Asia, notes Japanese economist Kenichi Ohmae, there has been a similar flowering of what he calls “global regionalism,” where various regions jockey with rivals both domestically and abroad for capital, skilled labor, and markets.¹¹⁴ At some level the devolutionary pressures could serve to weaken, and even eliminate, some national governments around the world, in places as disparate as Scotland, Flanders, Lombardy, Catalonia, Quebec, and western Canada. The breakup of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, as well as resurgent nationalism inside China, may only be harbingers of future trends.¹¹⁵

One critical factor in this “reverse flow of sovereignty” stems from changes in information technology. As news, currency, and technologies now flow seamlessly and ever more cheaply across national borders,¹¹⁶ particularly with the advent of the Internet, states and localities, even small towns, now must struggle to position themselves within a framework of global competition.¹¹⁷ As John Eger, executive director of San Diego University’s International Center for Communications points out:

Locally based companies that once competed with firms only in their own area code, for instance, now must battle companies throughout the world for their customers’ loyalty and dollars; local governments that once had to compete for high-value residents against only nearby municipalities now must struggle to attract such residents in a world where a growing number

of people can live nearly anywhere they want and still have access to the same jobs, the same income, and the same products and services to which they have become accustomed.¹¹⁸

America's existing federal system and the nation's historic affection for decentralized structures provides potentially ideal conditions for reanimating such local communities. This notion appeals not only to many conservatives, who traditionally have favored smaller government, but also to some prominent liberals. Elaine Kamarck, shortly before assuming her post as chief domestic policy advisor to Vice President Gore, hailed "devolution" as a movement "rooted in the reaction against centralized, bureaucratic command and control structures that have been undermined all over the world by the information age."¹¹⁹ Her successor at the vice president's office, Morley Winograd, even co-authored a major book that endorsed devolutionist principles.¹²⁰

Similarly, the most effective practitioners of devolutionary principles include not only Republicans such as Indianapolis' Mayor Steven Goldsmith and San Diego's Susan Golding, but Democrats like Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist and Cleveland's Michael White.¹²¹ In the current environment, the increasingly relevant question is not whether an idea is liberal or conservative, but what works best in meeting the new economic, technological, and social challenges. As Peter Drucker suggests:

The government we need will have to transcend both groups. The megastate that this century built is bankrupt, morally as well as financially. It has not delivered. But its successor cannot be 'small government.' There are too many tasks, domestically and internationally. We need effective government—that is what the voters in all developed countries are clamoring for.¹²²

Final Thoughts Rethinking the Role of Policy Intellectuals, Universities, and Schools of Public Policy

Drucker's call for "effective government" should set the main agenda for policy intellectuals and schools of public policy. But this should not be regarded merely as a modern version of the programmatic approach adopted during the 1950s and 1960s. The essentially value-centered nature of our public policy dilemma suggests the need to integrate any reform efforts into a widely-based revaluation of the public realm.

Given the devolutionary realities of these times, a reinvigorated public policy debate will also, by necessity, focus far more on local concerns. This is particularly necessary given the demographic and cultural differences among different regions of the country. Many urban centers—such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Miami, and Houston—have as much as three to four times the percentage of foreign-born residents as other cities, not to mention small towns and suburbs. At the same time, patterns of demographic and economic growth are also shifting away from the northeast, where the governmental and public policy apparatus is concentrated, and toward the southern and western parts of the country.¹²³

Differing growth rates, ethnic constituencies, and economic structures imply the need for varied policy approaches in the diverse regions of the country. But equally important will be the spirit with which policy schools, practitioners, and intellectuals approach issues concerning the public realm. Universities, in particular, need to regard their surrounding communities not merely as objects of study or pity, but—as was widely the case in the nineteenth century—as their "moral constituency."¹²⁴

Traditions of local involvement by universities and colleges have faded over the course of this century. For one thing, as Robert Bellah and others have noted, the rise of intense specialization and turgid scholasticism in the contemporary social sciences has made working knowledge of these traditions increasingly confined to “a narrow circle of the esoterically informed.” A return to “practical social science,” he suggests, implies a shift away from the esoteric and toward a greater emphasis on more traditional intellectual disciplines involving history, values, and ethics:

Practical social science . . . is much more consciously related to ethics and social policy than is technological social science. Grounded in history and tradition, practical social science has a strong moral component in its very constitution, whereas technological social science is uneasy about ‘value judgments’ other than cognitive validity and instrumental effectiveness.¹²⁵

This notion of “practical social science,” although it can be applied to a variety of ideological tendencies, represents a major break not only with the “technological” emphasis of contemporary social science, but also with the deconstructionist tendency that has arisen to challenge the former’s supremacy. Ultimately, neither the technological nor deconstructionist option offers much in the way of improving the public sphere, from either a traditionally liberal or conservative perspective. Rejecting the past, religion, the family, and even the individuality of common people, public policy initiatives stemming from these perspectives have served only to alienate the academy even more from the surrounding community; they can only end up in a nihilistic cul-de-sac, without moral grounding, accountable only to their own logic.¹²⁶

Such approaches cannot provide the public realm with a robust and viable sense of its future, in part because it denies the past that binds our families, our communities, and the nation. In the end, the reanimation of public policy will require a reaffirmation of our shared religious, moral, and political heritage—not as the total truth, but as the foundation upon which we can rebuild the public sphere.

“America,” noted George Santayana in 1911, “is a young country with an old mentality.”¹²⁷ America has inherited a rich legacy, from Europe and from its own past, yet it faces a restless future that will demand a capacity for change. Ultimately, however, its best beacons for illuminating that future lie in those values and traditions that have faithfully guided the Republic through many storms in ages past. In the words of the poet Stephen Vincent Benet:

*Call on the great words spoken that remain
Like the great stars of evening, the fixed stars
But that is not enough.*

*The dead are mighty and are a part of us
And yet the dead are dead.
This is our world,
Our time, our choice, our anguish, our decision.¹²⁸*

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