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Books in Review

The Good Society

A Communitarian Lament

The Good Society. By Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Stephen M. Tipton. *Knopf. 333 pp. $25.*

Reviewed by Stanley Hauerwas

The Good Society is a sequel to these authors' celebrated book, *Habits of the Heart*. *Habits* was a cultural event–an "academic" book that became a best–seller. It did so, I think, because the book gave voice to the dis–ease many feel about their lives in today's world. Robert Bellah and his coauthors helped people see how their private hurts are often the result of publicly determined harms.

In *Habits of the Heart* the authors focused on individuals in order to exhibit what they regard as the corrosive individualism that is destroying our lives. The power of that book derived from interviews with people telling their stories and revealing their pains. *The Good Society*, in contrast, focuses on institutions and patterned ways of social life. Bellah et al. focus on government, education, and religion. This focus makes *The Good Society* a good deal less lively than *Habits of the Heart* precisely because institutions are not so readily narrated as are individual lives.

The authors' argument remains much the same as in *Habits of the Heart*. Noting that we live through institutions, they suggest that the institutions through which we currently live are antithetical to our deepest moral commitments. They focus on particular individuals in government, education, and religion in an attempt to make their contentions concrete. The argument of *The Good Society* is that Americans are people determined by a Lockean political culture–that is, one which emphasizes individual freedom and pursuit of individual influence–yet we are determined by a most un–Lockean economy and government. We have the illusion we can control our fate through individual economic opportunity, but we are in fact controlled by the very institutions that allegedly made our "freedom" possible. The institutions through which we sought freedom have ironically become our fate.

Bellah and his colleagues contend that the Lockean ideal of the autonomous individual was originally embedded in a complex moral ecology that included the family and the church on the one hand, and on the other a vigorous public sphere in which economic initiative was expected to engender public spirit. In the eighteenth century this synthesis produced a society that still operated on a humanly intelligible scale. At that time we still had the possibility of creating a politics of cultivation, a politics that would engender community, but over time we have instead developed a politics of exploitation. We have developed, that is, a world in which individual accumulation, measured in monetary terms, became disengaged from other social goods and as a result has become an all–consuming passion. Accordingly, institutions had to be created to secure cooperation between people who shared nothing in common except the presumption that we ought to pursue our own interests.

The Authors provide many examples of the sense of helplessness generated among individuals in a bureaucratically formed world. Government is increasingly shaped by criteria of efficiency established by the great high priest of that value, the modern social scientist. It seldom occurs to those so trained that there might be social goods other than what is calculable. Thus an economist at the Environmental Protection Agency, when asked "What about the theory that human life is priceless?" answered, "We have no data to support that."

Government presumably by and for the people ends up a government by experts because a government formed by people as excessively individualistic as contemporary Americans are would seem to be ungovernable. We are left each appealing to this right or that right with no way to resolve conflicts between competing rights. Indeed rights language is more an indication of our problem than a path to its solution.

Bellah and his coauthors write as avowed communitarians. They are communitarians, that is, "if philosophical liberals are those who believe that all our problems can be solved by autonomous individuals, a market economy, and a procedural state, whereas communitarians believe that more substantive ethical identities and a more active participation in a democratic polity are necessary for the functioning of any decent society." Like the social gospelers at the beginning of this century, Bellah and his colleagues call for the democratization of our economy. They desire not simply a better distribution of income, but, like the Catholic Bishops, they want as well an increase in participation of everyone in a healthy economy. They want, in short, the creation of a genuine public sphere.

The authors resist the suggestion that this call for a greater sense of community and public participation is idealistic. Drawing on Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, they argue that we still possess rich resources for the reconstitution of our lives socially. They point out that we are in fact increasingly bound together in interdependent forms of life, facing common problems that require common solutions. Moreover, we share as Americans, despite our differences, overlapping cultural traditions that can be a rich resource for the articulation of a common good.

The Good Society ends with an appeal for a democracy of attention rather than distraction. The authors rightly argue that most current politics is designed to distract us by creating seductive fantasies. To have a politics of attention, they suggest, we need people who can attend to the concrete needs of families and neighborhoods, of schools, museums, and other forms of cultural life. Such people must learn to enjoy the difference of others as enhancing their own lives.

It is tempting to dismiss this call for a democracy of attention as a nostalgic retreat to a nineteenth–century, small–town, WASP America. That is clearly not what the authors want, but in the absence of concrete proposals by them it is hard to see what their sense of democracy really entails. My criticism is not that Bellah and his colleagues are utopian, but that they are not nearly utopian enough; or, to use terms I prefer, the problem is not that they are insufficiently realist but that they are insufficiently radical.

What they miss in calling for a democracy of attention is that our problem is not that democracy has not worked, but rather that it has and its results are less than good. The authors note that a just social system is impossible without people being just, but they do not see the problem of where in this society the training of people to be good and just might happen. I suspect they cannot press that question because they remain so determinedly committed to the American democratic "experiment." Like their social gospel forebears, they simply cannot envision the possibility that America is not an exceptional society. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in their account of religion in America. Bellah and his colleagues praise religion because they note that religious groups, unlike other groups in our society, are concerned not only with the common good of the nation but also with the common good of all human beings. So religion becomes good for America because it makes Americans concerned about other nations and people. "Religion" is thus understood and justified in functional terms. The idea that people might have convictions correlative to their worship of God that would create a deep tension between that worship and America is not considered.

There is much to admire about Bellah and his associates, not the least of which is their willingness to write together. Indeed, it should be emphasized that they exhibit in the very production of this book the kind of communitarian spirit they so desire for the rest of us. That is an extraordinary witness in itself.

Yet I find this book deeply dissatisfying. Many will read it as a sustained attack on our social and political institutions, but I fear it is far too conventional. Little of the analysis provided of American history, politics, or educational and religious institutions is new or interesting. To their credit, the authors do provide thick descriptions of perennial problems in American political culture, but even then they do little to help us get beyond the false alternatives of individualism and communitarianism. In an odd way they fail to see that that very posing of the problem is produced by the liberal political presuppositions they criticize.

They ignore entirely the more interesting question, raised again by recent events in Eastern Europe, concerning the very viability of the boundaries of modern nation–states. They quote the agrarian poet philosopher Wendell Berry approvingly, but they fail to follow through on Berry's radical challenge to the nation/state as we know it. Had they done so they would have written a much more interesting and compelling book.

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