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Does Robert Bellah Care about History?

It may seem odd, perhaps even unfair, to ask whether a sociologist like Robert Bellah "cares" about history. In one sense he obviously must. The institutions and practices that are his objects of study are shaped by historical events and circumstances. In another way the sociologist clearly does not care about history. A sociologist is not, after all, a historian, interested in recapturing as fully as possible the truth about past events for their own sake.

But, particularly in *Habits of the Heart,* Bellah repeatedly resorts to the authority of one historical figure—the French statesman and philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville—in setting forth his arguments concerning America's cultural ills. More important, he describes American character through analysis of what he claims are the historically rooted traditions of individualism and republicanism. Finally, Bellah points to "communities of memory"—that is, groups bound together by a shared sense of their history—as the proper cure for the ills afflicting our society.

It is fair, then, to ask whether Bellah presents credible accounts of Tocqueville's thought, American traditions of thought and action, and the grounding of communities of memory. If, as I will argue here, he does not, this raises further, more interesting questions: Is Bellah merely attempting to mislead us for his own political purposes? Or does Bellah truly believe that historical truth and historical practice do not matter? And if, as I will argue is the case, he believes the latter, to what end does he make historical references and analyses in his work?

I will begin by arguing that Bellah uses references and terms from Tocqueville for distinctly unTocquevillean ends. Next I will argue that Bellah, far from caring about the traditions set in motion by the "biblical/republican" tradition, sees it merely as a discontinuous "voice" that can guide us, ideologically, to actions he finds politically more palatable than current individualistic practices. I then will argue that Bellah's communities of memory actually rest on politics, political argument, and patriotic myths not grounded in true historical experience. Further, his recent overt use of economic class analysis demonstrates hostility toward tradition as an arbiter of proper social constructs.

For Bellah, history is the source of useful models and myths to be used to encourage the people to proper, civic-minded action. Truth, in this view, is beside the point. Indeed, the historical record is Bellah's enemy. In his own view America's inherited

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institutions, beliefs, and practices are by and large hostile toward his vision of the good life. As an intellectual, Bellah believes his task is to replace this record with stories that will convince Americans to abandon individualism and its capitalist bases in favor of their new-found "tradition" of social democratic politics.

I have argued elsewhere (*Political Science Reviewer*, 1992) that Bellah's frequent references to Tocqueville miss-characterize the Frenchman's thinking. Indeed, they stand Tocqueville's analysis of American individualism on its head.

To a large degree Bellah's status as a Tocquevillean analyst of American democracy rests on his self-conscious borrowing of Tocqueville's term "individualism." Tocqueville defined individualism as that "calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends." Bellah argues that individualism has become "cancerous" in American society and must be rooted out. Tocqueville also thought individualism on the whole destructive. In what way, then, does Bellah misuse the Frenchman's authority? By prescribing a "cure" for individualism that Tocqueville would not only reject but point to as the source of the malady.

Bellah finds the source of our individualism in our economic system. For him free market economics has made communities disposable in the name of increased salaries and so has reduced them, in most instances, to mere "lifestyle enclaves." Leaving home town, old friends, and even family in pursuit of wealth, Americans have become mere consumers and now can only "express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities."

To resuscitate our communities and our characters, Bellah prescribes social democracy. He claims, citing Tocqueville, that the American town was and should be a "moral grid" channelling "the energies of its enterprising citizens and their families into collective well-being." Economic democracy—collective political control over the distribution of wealth and economic decision-making—is needed to form just and fulfilling communities. It also is necessary to combat citizens' individualistic tendency to abandon their communities in pursuit of wealth.

According to Bellah, capitalism's essence is the destructive, individualistic pursuit of wealth. It must be fought through local democratic political action. He cites the leader of an activist group called the Institute for the Study of Civic Values, who "sees political organizing as more than a utilitarian means to the end of power. It is also a context in which to nurture a form of moral development on which democratic self-government depends: the practice of citizenship."

The struggle for social justice creates citizenship. And this struggle entails establishment of political control over the distribution of goods and opportunities. Work itself "should be seen as 'a calling, contributing to the common good and responding to the needs of others as these needs become understood.'" Bellah's community uses political means to understand needs and distribute work to meet them.

Bellah further argues that we must reduce public life to the political pursuit of material equality in order to avoid materialism, an argument that rests on an inverted reading of Tocqueville. Tocqueville encouraged us to nurture family, church, and voluntary associations because they bind individuals to their communities. Bellah asserts the importance of local institutions as well. But he chains them all to the political project of economic democracy. In the process he makes social institutions

the pawns of political movements. Even the most primary socializing institution, the family, in Bellah's view must be the object of democratic experimentation. The result, from a Tocquevillean perspective, is a loss of those forces which bring the individual out of himself and into the various activities constituting public life. The result is a mass of small, weak individuals terrified by and yet worshipful of the indistinct communal whole. The result, in a word, is individualism.

Bellah sees politics at the heart of the community; Tocqueville sees the family. Bellah sees the traditional family structure and traditional property rights as bases of individualism. Tocqueville sees family and property rights as the very bases of community. For Tocqueville the father's authority in the family is natural. And it is in the family that we learn to respect authority, to fulfill our duties and to love our neighbor. Political associations are proper only to the extent that they serve and protect the family. And to the extent that the family loses its close, affectionate, and habitual character, society itself fragments.

Excessive politicization undermines habitual family relations, replacing them with necessarily impersonal political ones. They force man out of his family and into a political world made up of acquaintances and strangers. Lacking the links of family to connect him with society as a whole, man forms no strong attachments. Faced with the unmediated mass of the community, man sees himself as a small and weak creature confronting a powerful majority, and he withdraws from public life into his private world. The democratization of private life breeds individualism. And individualism itself breeds the despotism of *local* political majorities which assume the functions of abandoned social institutions.

In his more recent works, Bellah has strictly muted references to Tocqueville. *The Good Society* more reasonably claims a patrimony leading back to social democratic philosopher John Dewey. But then, as I will show below, Bellah deems the details of one's patrimony far from crucial.

Bellah's story of our patrimony is one of conflict and decline. Since before our founding, American public life has consisted of a number of modes of thought and behavior. "Along with biblical religion and republicanism, utilitarian individualism has been one of the strands of the American tradition since [Benjamin] Franklin's time." Individualism was an American problem from the start. But there was a time when it did not dominate as it does now. Countervailing habits of thought and action once held individualism in check.

But biblical religion and republicanism did not last long as American traditions. Soon after our founding they lost their capacity to dictate proper conduct and character traits. Thus in the end Bellah is pointing us, not toward living traditions, but toward mere "voices" or mythical stories and exemplary individuals to use as models in constructing a fundamentally new tradition.

First in time was biblical religion. Bellah outlines this tradition through a description of Puritan leader John Winthrop. Winthrop came to America "determined to start life anew in the wilderness in company with those of like religious commitment." His "Model of Christian Charity" set forth the rules of this new communal life: "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."

Bellah finds the Puritan body's hierarchical structure distasteful. But he praises the attempt to build "a genuinely ethical and spiritual life." He reserves his greatest

praise for Winthrop's neglect of his own estate while rendering public service to the community.

Likewise Bellah praises Thomas Jefferson, his chosen exemplar of the republican tradition, because Jefferson "left office much poorer than he entered it and faced bankruptcy in his later years." Sacrifice of one's personal wealth in pursuit of the public good for Bellah is a high virtue worthy of great praise.

Also worthy of praise was Jefferson's love of equality. Bellah glowingly reports that "the ideal of a self-governing society of relative equals in which all participate is what guided Jefferson all his life." Of course one could not establish perfect equality given the prejudices of the time, and Bellah notes Jefferson's moral dilemma as a slave-holder. But the ideal of equality was a great symbol to which Jefferson and all who followed him might aspire.

Unlike the biblical tradition, the republican tradition placed great emphasis on the virtue of patriotism. Where Winthrop, in Bellah's view, sought to make Puritan's a single body following God, Jefferson sought a nation in which all had learned to "Love your neighbor as yourself, and your country more than yourself." This patriotism, in Bellah's view, would be misused in America by imperialists and others not committed to the life of equality.

But republicanism had its good side. Early on it fused with biblical religion, and this biblical/republican tradition bound the individual to his community. It produced the sacrifices of a revolution dedicated, in Bellah's view, to equality. In an earlier work, *The Broken Covenant,* Bellah argues that the

> remarkable coherence of the American revolutionary movement and its successful conclusion in the constitution of a new civil order are due in considerable part to the convergence of the Puritan covenant pattern and the Montesquieuan republican pattern.... Both patterns saw society resting on the deep inner commitment of its members, the former through conversion, the latter through republican virtue. Both saw government as resting on law, which, in its positive form, was created by the active participation of those subject to it, yet ultimately derives from some higher source, either God or Nature. When Jefferson evoked at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence the "laws of nature and of nature's God" he was able to fuse the ultimate legitimating principles of both traditions.

At the revolution Americans successfully melded their traditions of service to God and service to nation. In effect the one became the other, as pursuit of equality came to be seen as a holy crusade worthy of great sacrifice. Our founders self-consciously emulated half sacred mythical heroes from the early Roman republic. Cincinnatus, in Bellah's view, was a particularly influential and fitting model because of his self-sacrifice and voluntary poverty.

But factionalism and commercialism set in. Politics became, by the time the Constitution was adopted, a matter of factional infighting over the spoils of government. Thus from our formal beginnings individualism has been on the ascendant. More than this, however, for Bellah individualism early on destroyed the republican tradition qua tradition and left in its stead a mere "voice" or "secondary language" urging us to public service. The Constitution was justified as a mechanism balancing selfish interests against one another. Americans increasingly saw their nation as founded on individualism and ceased sacrificing for their communities as they pursued personal fulfillment.

Today we have no good tradition to look to in combatting the corruptions of individualism. Instead of community, Americans now seek individual satisfaction. Inevitably dissatisfied, they can only express their pain and loneliness in the "coping"

language of a psychology focused solely on individual feelings. In interviews they conducted for *Habits of the Heart,* Bellah and his colleagues found Americans "on the defensive, struggling for biblical and republican language that could express their aspirations, often expressing themselves in the very therapeutic rhetoric that they consciously reject."

In response to our dilemma Bellah recommends yet another tradition: "the tradition of democratic reform that arose in response to the emerging industrial capitalist order."

> This reforming impulse flourished in various embodiments during the great transitional period at the beginning of the century. The motive force of these movements of democratic reform was a fundamentally similar political understanding. It animated the agrarian populism of the Midwest and Southeast, the socialism of eastern industrial workers and western labor, some aspects of Progressivism, and the upsurge of industrial unionism in the 1930s. Suspicious both of the massive private power that was undercutting the basis for independent citizenship and of government without popular control, these movements sought to use government at all levels to bring a degree of public responsibility to the new technologies and the wealth they generated. They strove to adapt the old Jeffersonian republican sense of democratic citizenship to twentieth-century conditions. Politically, of course, the movements failed to do more than place limits, often fragile, on the exercise of private power. But they left a considerable legacy of experience, symbols, and the exemplary type of the movement organizer.

The tradition, as Bellah calls it, of democratic reform has arisen only sporadically and has consistently failed to change significantly American values and behavior. Rather than a set of principles and actions that remain consistent and powerful over time, the reform tradition to which Bellah points is a source of examples of the kinds of character one ought to have. Much like our "second languages," this tradition does not have the consistency or force to determine what characters people should have. It serves only as one possible source of exemplary models.

Bellah does not really care whether we share an actual tradition of consistent values and behavior. He is searching our past for examples of conduct of which he approves. Historical rootedness, in the end, is not a critical criterion.

> Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past.... In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community.... But the stories are not all exemplary, not all about successes and achievements.... And if the community is completely honest, it will remember stories not only of suffering received but of suffering inflicted—dangerous memories, for they call the community to alter ancient evils. The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good.

Bellah seeks to re-connect Americans to one another through communities of memory. Concern for one another, in his view, rests on common feelings growing out of common memories concerning shared events, pains and joys. But Bellah's communities are amorphous and malleable, with little basis in history or even memory. Communities, for Bellah, need not in fact share a history. They are merely cohesive groups pursuing common projects—preferably social democracy.

Writing in the 1970s, Bellah expressed hope that the counterculture would produce political innovation furthering his

communal values.

> In the great welter of urban and rural communes, political and religious collectives, sects, cults, and churches that have sprung up in recent years, there are many interesting developments. A new balance of manual and mental labor, work and celebration, male and female traits have been experimented with. Harmony with nature and one's own body, a more "feminine" and less dominating attitude toward one's self and others, an ability to accept feelings and emotions—including feelings of weakness and despair—a willingness to accept personal variety, have all been valued and tried in practice.

In expressing his limited hope for the future, Bellah looks to experimental collectives and the "innovative way of life" there being lived. In the process he calls into question his own commitment to memory as an objective communal bond.

Bellah seeks to allay his readers' fears that the community he advocates will stifle innovation. This will not happen because neither communities nor the traditions that make up a large part of them are backward-looking. A "living tradition is never a program for automatic moral judgments. It is always in a continuous process of reinterpretation and reappropriation. Such a process assumes, however, that tradition has enough authority for the search for its present meaning to be publicly pursued as a common project."

Our traditions' contents are subject to constant reinterpretation. Our communal memory serves only to tell us that we have and should continue to value certain things. We have an American Way and, it being our way, we should maintain it. This is the essence of civil religion or the sanctification of politics. Civil religion allows us to maintain public service as a constantly valued good while changing radically the goods we as a people pursue.

Tradition provides only abstract principles like equality and mythical exemplars like Cincinnatus to which we can look for guidance. The actual shape and content of our community—its distribution of honor and wealth, the very shape of its families—must be subject to constant reinterpretation. Only in this way can we move toward the kind of community Bellah genuinely values—social democracy, in which the community decides, through political means, who shall receive what goods and on what grounds.

Bellah's communities are based, not on a shared past, but on a subjective memory that is accepted as true. This memory of the community's values, sins and accomplishments determines how members should act and the goals the community should serve. Of course the proper goal is social democracy.

Even myths such as that of Cincinnatus for Bellah are just tools in the pursuit of social justice. Cincinnatus was good, for Bellah, because he served his nation without seeking rewards, instead returning to a life of poverty. But Cincinnatus also was a dictator committed to the strength, glory, and military might of Rome. Of this Bellah says nothing.

Indeed, as shown by the new introduction to *Habits of the Heart,* Bellah relies on an a-historical analysis that reduces our roles in civic life to ones in which we play out the interests of our economic class. Bellah argues that America's is the society most trapped by economic necessity and inequality. The root of our problem is economic individualism or "the belief that economic success or misfortune is the individual's responsibility, and his or hers alone."

According to Bellah our individualist ideology has produced excessive economic inequality and deprivation. And our other traditions have contributed their own problems. The biblical tradition or voice "encourages secession from public life rather

than civic engagements, and is even tempted to condemn the most vulnerable as morally unworthy." And the republican tradition, in addition to justifying an intolerant patriotism, gave birth to "a paranoid fear of the state." Our "individualist focus on adolescent independence...involves enduring fears of a meddling, powerful father who might push one back to childish dependence, fears easily transferred to a paternalistic state seen as threatening to reduce free citizens to helpless subjects." Our fear of the state keeps us from embracing the cure for what ails us—social democracy. Thus even our "good" traditions stand in need of radical reformation.

Bellah now must engage in "an explicit treatment of class" to determine how to combat our new and disturbing "Knowledge/power elite." This economic class hurts society by withdrawing from civic life and by seeking its own interests without regard to others'. This elite has produced poverty for millions of Americans by taking more than its share. And "poverty breeds drugs, violence, and unstable families."

Increasing income inequality constitutes a "war against the poor." By decreasing their income, the upper classes in America have effectively disenfranchised the poor. "Poverty—income insufficient to maintain an acceptable level of living—operates to deprive the poor not only of material capital but of social capital as well." In Bellah's view poverty lowers self-esteem and causes individuals to reduce "social capital" by withdrawing from the associations of public life. "By reducing social capital, chronic poverty blocks economic and political participation, and consequently weakens the capacity to develop moral character and sustain family life."

Throughout the new introduction Bellah blames economic inequality and poverty for America's problems. He dismisses moralistic talk of a crisis in family values on the grounds that those who divorce or fail to marry are "unemployed and thus unable to get married or [do not have] enough income to support an existing family" due to economic pressures. Moral arguments are useless, even counterproductive, without material security. Likewise, to talk of the need for renewed commitment to traditional family loyalties "only increases the level of individual guilt, it also distracts attention from larger failures of collective responsibility." Not personal morals but collective economics holds the answer to our families' decline.

We must look to political action for solutions. To talk of the need for more individual involvement in the community is to ignore the fact that "the voluntary sector is disproportionately run by our better-off citizens and a good many voluntary activities do more to protect the well-to-do than the needy." Emphasis on volunteerism partakes of individualism's "hostility to the role of government."

According to Bellah economics determines behavior. Thus only social democracy can make community possible today. Neocapitalist ideology keeps us from recognizing our need to establish social democracy. But the true way lies not in resuscitating any American tradition or even in returning to local communities. It lies rather in augmenting the role of the state (through democratic means) in organizing our economic and civic lives.

In the end Bellah's is a universalist conception of the good community. He does not want us tied to any particular, substantive tradition. He does not want us tied only to our neighbors or even our local community. As he puts it, "Any community short of the universal community is not the beloved community." We must embrace all mankind in universal benevolence. And such an embrace cannot be motivated by common experience. The lives of an American and a

Bengali are radically different, so any community formed between the two must grow up over time, be based on a necessarily loose natural law-based affection for other human beings, or have its basis in Bellah's materialistic ideology.

Bellah's ideology must be inculcated in differing ways. It requires a "turning away from preoccupation with the self and toward some larger identity." This conversion experience "is characteristic of most of the great religions and philosophies of mankind." Yet for each religion and people conversion must be motivated through the familiar "stories and symbols in whose terms it makes sense."

Bellah must use our traditional stories and experiences to convince us to abandon our traditional way of life. Committed to universal benevolence, equality, and above all social democracy, he sees his job as that of convincing us that we should join him in his program of innovation. The most effective way to do so in his view is to convince most people that the innovation is minor and in keeping with the spirit of our civil religion. But the innovation entails a radical restructuring of political and economic institutions, breaking with tradition in pursuit of equality.

In one form or another, Bellah throughout his career has called for social democracy. And he has been willing to use varied tools in that pursuit—from economic to moralistic argument, from historical to religious myth. This willingness to change tactics seems to stem, not from an explicit desire to mislead, but from the conviction that truth, whether about history or God, is subjective. Whether historical or religious, for Bellah we create our own truths. So it is best to create truths that support good communities.

For example, Bellah sees religion's proper role as that of aiding the process of "communal recreation through public worship." From his earliest to his most recent work, Bellah has insisted that only a public church calling "for sweeping cultural and institutional transformation," can foster community and spiritual fulfillment. From Zen Buddhism to New Age-ism to feminist theology, all proper religions share hostility toward neocapitalist America's economic individualism. As to those who believe in the more traditional notion that God's Will is revealed in the Bible, such believers must recognize that the "Bible is the collection of texts that Jews and Christians have used through history to make meaning."

Religion is a means by which we decide what we shall value and how we shall pursue these things. It is a means by which we determine what is right and what wrong, and so create morality. Likewise, history is a means by which we create our past. In reinterpreting our past and our understanding of God we reconstruct models of proper conduct and principles on which to build our community. Thus democratic participation itself becomes the highest good because it makes one a participant in the process of communal self-creation. A community has no past beyond the time of its creation. Thus a persistently re-created community effectively has no past at all, save that which it gives to itself. Lacking a God or transcendent order that is beyond our ability to recreate, we lack constraints on our desire to change our past and ourselves. We lack any need for objective history, and any basis on which to believe it exists.