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Mark J. Stern

University of Pennsylvania, stern@sp2.upenn.edu

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The End of Progressivism: Paradigmatic Shifts and Social Welfare

Mark J. Stern

A political era has come to an end in the United States. For the better part of this century, middle-class reformers, supported by working class voters, spearheaded an expansion of government programs to benefit the economic well-being and health of the population. This political formation - a combination of political mobilization, institutions, and ideas - I will call progressivism. This paper examines progressivism's demise.

Specifically, I want to argue that the American approach to social welfare was constructed around the turn of this century. Progressivism required the forging of an intellectual framework for understanding social reality and of a set of institutions to support the enactment of social programs.

It was, as well, a construct with limitations, a fact that becomes clear when we compare it to the perspective with which it competed at the turn of the century - populism. Where populism spoke to a set of fears that industrial capitalism would cause a breakdown of democracy and equality and a shattering of community, progressivism was decidedly more upbeat on the prospects of balancing the development of industrialization and the fostering of social stability. It did this by using a model of society that flattened social reality. The progressive model stressed the *economic* over the social, the *individual* over community, and a belief that social interventions - guided by experts - could be rational and effective.

I want to stress the arduousness of this process of social construction. The process of paradigm construction was a product of human agency that stretched out over a fifty year period. Because both the ideas and institutions that supported progressivism are now in eclipse, there is a rush to construct a new basis for justifying the existing social welfare system. Certainly this is a task that must absorb much of our energies. At the same time, we must realize its magnitude. We must accept that - much like the social reformers of the 1880s - we are living in an era that has neither the ideas nor the institutions with which we can successfully construct a new paradigm.

As a result, what we see today is much thrashing around for new approaches and ideas. The recent emergence of *communitarianism* must be seen in this light. Communitarianism is an attempt to move beyond some of the limitations of progressivism - particularly its stress on the individual and economic at the

exclusion of the community and the moral. Yet, the communitarians pursue these worthy goals at the expense of a massive misunderstanding of the relationship of the community and the individual. More worrisome, they often abandon a commitment to equality.

The world is a lonely and cold place for advocates of social welfare at the turn of the 21st century. But we should resist a quick fix, even one that promises an immediate political pay-off. At this point in political development, rather than looking for an all-encompassing intellectual framework, we should search for examples of concrete political practice that may provide an opportunity to move beyond the limitations of progressivism without sacrificing some of its achievements. I focus briefly on one of the areas of practice that I am currently studying - community arts programs - as an example of these new avenues.

This paper first examines the historical construction of progressivism. I use specifically the American approach to the problem of unemployment as an example of the intellectual and institutional work that was necessary to construct a progressive approach to the problem and of the limitations of this approach. The history of the populist movement of the late 19th century - an alternate vision of the future - serves as a standard of what progressivism was not.

The next section examines some of the social impacts of postmodernity with particular reference to three which are most relevant to the communitarian debate: increases in inequality and poverty, the depatterning of social life, and the impact of gender politics on the family.

The third section of the paper examines communitarians' response to these social changes. I pay particular attention to the role of the communitarian "movement" on the social welfare debate. Here again, I return to the topics of equality, the redefinition of community, and gender.

Finally, I use a critique of one of the more fashionable ideas in the communitarian repertoire - social capital - to examine how we might move the dialogue beyond communitarianism through the example of community arts programs.

1 The Social Construction of Progressivism

Progressivism - the intellectual framework and practice of social reformers - grew out of the response to the social crisis which accompanied the spread of industrial capitalism during the late years of the 19th century. It had a protracted development that spanned at least a half century.

Its predecessor - the moral reform impulse of the pre-Civil War era, had developed in a different social context with its own prescription of social reform and regeneration. Within the moral reform tradition, virtue and vice played pivotal roles. If we examine the range of issues with which the moral reformers were involved - from prostitution to slavery to public education - we find that the

containment and elimination of *morally* repugnant activities was at their core. Abolitionists opposed slavery not because it was obsolete or violated principles of justice and equality, but because it: “debased” both slaveholders and slaves (Boyer 1978; Kraditor 1969).

This moral “lens” through which the ante-bellum reformers viewed the world limited their ability to make sense of the economic transformations going on around them. For at least fifty years after the emergence of industrial capitalism, middle class reformers insisted on viewing unemployment through this moral lens. As a result, according to Alex Keyssar - unemployment was virtually invisible. At a time when roughly a quarter of Massachusetts’s workers were unemployed at some point during the year, Keyssar found a “reluctance or inability of the middle class to believe that a new social problem had emerged” (Keyssar 1986, 251).

This blind-spot is easily explained. Since the 1820s, middle-class reformers had convinced themselves that the archetypal poor person was the *pauper*, a moral deficient who used mendacity to shield his or her slothfulness. Because the poor were assumed to spend much of their time developing ruses to fool unwary almsgivers, the well-off could dismiss the very real need they saw around them. From the Association for the Improvement of the Poor in the 1810s until the Charity Organization Society of the 1880s and 1890s, the social image of the pauper effectively short-circuited the discussion of unemployment and poverty.

“Despite the insistent presence of unemployment in the lives and thought of working people, middle-class citizens and public officials displayed little interest in the problem during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Only during depressions did the leading newspapers and magazines in Massachusetts mention the subject, and even then coverage of the issue was skimpy and sporadic. Republican and Democratic politicians alike rarely alluded to the presence of jobless workers in the commonwealth; not until 1894 did the state legislature entertain a bill that referred explicitly to the ‘unemployed’” (Keysser 1986, 251).

With no means through which to bring the issue to the “official” political debate, the unemployed and their advocates resorted to a range of activities - the development of coping strategies, organization and mobilization, demonstrations - which put them outside of politics. These activities - which Robin Kelley has called “infrapolitics” allowed the unemployed to develop the institutions and ideas that would later enter the official political debate (Kelley 1993).

Family and community became the major loci for coping strategies and institution-building for the unemployed. The typical family strategy of the 19th century working class - with its focus on multiple earners, flexible consumption patterns, and short-term crisis management - provided the first line of defense against the new economic realities of the industrial era. At the same time, patterns of community reciprocity - most notably between neighbors and the role of local merchants in extending credit - became the basis for the development of community institutions.

Ironically, the very success of these infrapolitical strategies reduced the visibility of unemployment as a social problem. It was only as these institutions weakened - for example as changing ideas of childhood forced a reassessment of kid's critical economic role - that unemployment and poverty could emerge as visible "public problems".

The primary achievement of the Progressives was to shift the "lens" through which they viewed social experience. This required them to sequester *virtue*, and to substitute an economic or pragmatic model of human action in its place. They could not banish virtue - for a reason I will get to in a moment - but they needed to push it aside and give greater attention to the everyday social practice of working people.

Viviana Zelizer, in her recent study of the *Social Meaning of Money*, discovered that nineteenth-century charity workers were obsessed with the potential harm that relief could cause if it were not used properly. By the turn of the century, this fear had given way to an impulse to make the poor good consumers. As a result where anti-poverty societies had been the leading advocates of the cut-off of public charity during the 1870s and 1880s, by the turn of the century, the use of cash assistance had become the general rule. A decade later, the Charity Organization Society, although with considerable skepticism, acquiesced to the enactment of "mothers' pensions" as a cash entitlement program (Zelizer 1994).

Yet, in spite of the new importance of the economic, virtue remained a problematic category for the new generation of progressive reformers. Even as the charity industry embraced cash assistance in the early years of the 20th century, they found themselves confronted with the actual behavior of the poor, who attempted to impose their own values on the use of money. Zelizer, for example, charts the battle over life (or more accurately burial) insurance during the early 20th century, as reformers fought an ultimately unsuccessful battle to convince the poor of the wastefulness of a nice funeral.

In addition, to the sequestering of virtue and the focus on the economic, the progressive paradigm stressed the individual, or at least the individual family, over community ties. The economy of the working class of the late 19th and early twentieth century was premised on active engagement kin and community networks. In neighborhoods where unemployment and want were endemic, the ability to call upon a friend, a relative, or the local grocer for a "loan" was a critical survival strategy. Whereas an earlier generation of reformers would have seen this behavior as *profligacy*, for the progressives it was a display of poor consumption habits. The answer was to stress responsibility to the nuclear family. The chief technology in this battle was the "cost-of-living" study; it simultaneously provided reformers with rational standard by which to set assistance levels and a new tool for surveillance of the expenditures of the poor.

The "cost-of-living" studies represented as well the progressive belief in expertise and suspicion of democracy. Wherever we look in the progressive paradigm,

we find attempts to constrain the role of popular forces in establishing policy and controlling practice. In the cities of the Northern United States, the Progressives' antagonists were often the political machines. Against their "corruption" Progressives mobilized for "honest" government, which in practical terms translated into the restriction of voting, the reigning in the power of ethnic political "machines" organizations, and the imposition of objective meritocratic standards on officeholders. In the South, Progressivism had a harder edge: It resulted in the widespread disenfranchisement of African-Americans and many poor whites as well.

The progressive paradigm's embrace of the economic over the moral, the individual over community and kin, and experts over democracy was not simply a response to older reform ideas and the everyday actions of the poor. It was formed, as well, in response to oppositional political movements by workers, socialists, and farmers. The most notable of these in the United States was the Populist, or agrarian movement, of the late 19th century. As Lawrence Goodwyn explains in his study, *Democratic Promise*, the populist movement was notable not for its invocation of a romantic nostalgia, but for its forging of an alternative vision of the future. That vision was one in which the social would take priority over the economic, in which community could impose controls over individual wealth-gathering, and in which democratic process would take priority over impersonal relations. As Goodwyn (1976) concludes, the triumph of progressivism over populism,

"encircled such influential areas of American life as the relationship of corporate power to civil prerogative, the political language legitimized to define and settle public issues within a mass society yoked to mass communications and to privately financed elections, and even the style through which the reality of the American experience - the culture itself - is conveyed to each new generation".

For Goodwyn, then, the triumph of progressivism represented "a clear retreat from the democratic vistas of either the eighteenth-century Jeffersonians or the nineteenth-century Populists" (Goodwyn 1976, 516).

Progressivism as a paradigm in social welfare, then, was forged in response to previous cognitive frameworks, the everyday practice of the poor, and its political adversaries. Its features - its stress on the individual, the economic, and the expert - became the dominant cognitive map of reformers throughout this century. Yet, those things that were sequestered by the progressive paradigm - virtue, community, and democracy - were never banished. At the same time, after a considerable period of success, during the last several decades new social realities confronted progressivism with the specter of failure. It is to the obsolescence of progressivism that we now turn.

2 Progressivism and Postmodernity

Progressivism, in the way that I am using it, had a good run. As a cultural perspective on social welfare and governance, it was the dominant method for most of this century. By the time of its zenith in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it had become a part of the great “liberal consensus” of which Godfrey Hodgson has written (Hodgson 1976).

And as with other elements of the dominant world view of the postwar era, progressivism collapsed after the 1970s. The restructuring of the economy on a global model of flexible accumulation, the declining effectiveness of “keynesian” economics, and the resulting crisis of virtually every national political system, the redefinition of the life-cycle and family, and new “postmodern” cultural influences were all part of this transformation (Harvey 1989).

Just as the rise of progressivism took over a century after the Great Transformation, it is likely to take a while for us to make sense of the current cycle of social transformation. Indeed, although I plan to take communitarianism to task shortly, I do so with a certain sympathy. Just as reformers and intellectuals continued to use the rickety constructs of moral reform to try to make sense of the late 19th century, most of us have tried to apply progressivism to what we see around us. Others - the communitarians among them - have decided to make tentative steps toward a new synthesis.

Yet, the fact is - as the 19th century fathers of social thought discovered - ideas are deeply embedded in social context and practice. The development of a new synthesis is not simply an act of will. It will require historical experience - as social learning, institution building, and “natural experiments”. It is my contention that we may be far from the moment when we are ready for that step.

In the absence of a synthesis, however, we must grope toward an understanding of the phenomena that are most central to the contemporary social transformation. Here I focus on three: the rise of inequality and poverty rates in the United States, the “depatterning” of work and family life, and the changing nature of gender roles are all central to the great transformation of our times.

2.1 *The Fiscal Crisis of Government and Poverty*

The welfare state has been caught in a deadly pincers by shifts in the economy. On the one hand, the high levels of unemployment experienced since the 1970s - a level that has now been defined as “full employment” for the sake of the fight against inflation - has given a powerful impetus to inequality and placed enormous pressure on entitlement programs. At the same time, flexible accumulation and the increased mobility of capital has made it virtually impossible for government to increase taxes to pay for these new demands.¹

This is old hat. What I want to call to your attention is two findings of a study I have undertaken of the history of poverty since the 1940 and their implications for the issue of inequality. First, I found that we have seriously *underestimated* the role of government in reducing poverty during the postwar period. In the United States, most accounts of the role of government in reducing poverty begin with the 1960s. The underlying assumption is that the early postwar decline of poverty was a "private" affair - the product of increased earnings as a result of economic growth.

An analysis of poverty data for the 1940s and 1950s contradicts this view. For example, if we examine the poverty decline of the 1950s, we find that only about a third of the decline in poverty during the decade was attributable to the increased earnings of the head of household. Another third was the result of the increased earnings of "secondary workers" - primarily wives - and the final third was a result of the expansion of public transfer payments and unearned income - primarily work-based pensions.

By the same token, the poverty increase of the 1980s is a direct result of cuts in public programs, a fact that has had a particular impact on African-Americans. According to the federal census, the African-American earnings poverty rate - the poverty rate when we examine only family earnings - from 46 to 40 percent during the decade. However cuts in transfer payments - especially unemployment compensation - resulted in virtually no change in the poverty rate of black Americans.

The debate over the causes of increased income inequality - particularly the growth in the richest five percents' share of income - during the past two decades in the United States has been inconclusive (Danziger/Gottschalk 1993). If we restrict our attention to the bottom of the income distribution - to those living below the official poverty threshold - the role of cuts in government transfer programs is clearer and more dramatic. The pincers of high unemployment and government program cuts had a very direct impact on the decrease of poverty in the 1950s and its increase three decades later.

Second, we have underestimated the role of direct government employment on reducing poverty. The most widely held theory of concentrated urban poverty sees the increase as a result of the collapse of private-sector manufacturing jobs in American cities after the 1960s (Wilson 1987; Kasarda 1989, 26-47). According to this view, manufacturing employment was the single most powerful reason for the relative economic well-being of urban African-American communities during the early postwar years. The "post-industrial" economic transformation left these communities in tatters.

My research contradicts this view in two respects. First, the model of African-Americans' participation in steady, well-paid, manufacturing work only fits three of the fifteen cities that I have studied - New York City, Chicago, and Detroit. In the remainder of the cities, African-American factory workers suffered the same

irregular employment and discriminatory wages that the rest of black workers faced. Second, it was government work - not factory work or "middle-class" employment - that was most likely to pay good wages and be (relatively) free of wage discrimination .

The poverty decline of the 1950s and the rise of the 1980s was very directly tied to government programs and employment, a fact that was doubly bad news for the progressive paradigm. The ability of nation-states to exercise sovereignty over the economy is undercut by the globalization of the economy, so even if the state has the will, it no longer has the means to reduce poverty. At a time when many - across the political spectrum - were willing to consider cuts in public expenditures to ease the state's fiscal crisis, there was faith that the revival of economic growth would itself ease the increase in inequality. The American experience since World War II does not support this contention. For a progressivism, which viewed society through the lens of the economic well-being of individuals and families, the shifts in the political economy - the decline in the autonomy of the state and its fiscal limits - were devastating. Economic globalization leaves progressivism without the means to carry on its traditional social policy goals.

2.2 *The Transformation of the Life-Cycle and the "Reflexive" Life-Politics*

Postmodernity has been accompanied by a widespread depatterning of the life-cycle. The idea that one has a career for one's entire life is virtually obsolete, and the belief in one family per life is not nearly as secure as it once was. Furthermore, the decline of career and the family life-course have reinforced one another. As the "script of life" becomes less clear, individuals are more apt to fill in the lines for themselves. Traditional notions of duty and honor around work and family have tended to give in to a cost-benefit logic. Finally, as new notions of human fulfillment and affiliation gain credence, these trends accelerate (Yankelovich 1981).

In addition, these practices are likely to become more "reflexive" over time. As relationships and work are seen as more problematic activities, open to a wide set of choices, experts and the media are likely to reinforce the legitimacy of innovation by examining new options and ideas about what would constitute the good life. Take, for example, the issue of domestic sexual abuse - what we used to call incest. A decade ago, it was seen as a tragic, but rare, outrage perpetrated by psychotics; today, we view it as a common occurrence, with widespread ripple effects throughout society, open to the freeing of "recovered memories" if not the manufacture of "false memories". Now, one's own experience with sexual abuse is used as a mitigating circumstance in explaining criminal behavior. In this context, the traditional power and authority connoted by "incest" gives way to a

therapeutic discourse open to debate, discussion, self-help groups, and afternoon TV shows.

True, most Americans continue to get married and get jobs, following more or less orthodox notions of what the good life is. At the same time, they often view the consequences of postmodernity - disruptions in one's work life, increased divorce rates - as a loss. Thus, these new social patterns - as the threat they appear to pose to average Americans - provide a fertile field for nostalgia mongers, a fact that I believe explains the holy war against illegitimacy and welfare dependency that conservatives are waging.

We have here, in my view, a situation similar to that bedeviled reformers in the late 19th century who did not have a language or intellectual construct with which to make sense of work and community. A set of human desires around love, autonomy, and happiness have historically been put on hold by the needs of the social structure for order and reproduction. Just as it took decades to free ourselves from a set of "traditional" ideas about sex and family to construct the "compassionate marriage" of the postwar years, so there is another level of "tradition" that is currently being peeled off by the everyday decisions of ordinary individuals in search of happiness. The recurrent reinvention of tradition in domestic relations and its rapid obsolescence is the essence of reflexive life-politics.

Progressive social welfare advocates have sought to reduce the risks of industrial society through the reinforcement of a stable family life. What has come to be called the "breadwinner" family - working dad, homemaker mom, and the kids - was the standard against which poverty and dependency were measured. Although this family form was never as dominant as reformers wished to believe, most social welfare programs in the United States - from social security to public assistance - were designed to protect against the *risks* to this family form.

As a reflexive life politics becomes widespread, this model no longer is sufficient. The search for *security* that was behind the progressive's agenda becomes less important for persons for whom the development of the autonomous self is paramount. In the pursuit of these new goals, individuals are driven not only by security, but by the need to create intentionally new risks for themselves, a pattern that is particularly common among young people.

The spread of reflexive life patterns has a direct impact on progressivism's attempt to sequester morality. Behind much of the progressive program is the hope that a transparent moral consensus could guide social policy. Health is better than sickness; happiness better than agony; security better than risk. Reflexivity challenges these assumptions as the definition of the good life is open to question, if not endless discussions. Traditionalists - who have been fighting a rearguard action against the cultural changes of past century - were in a better position to exploit this turn of events for their political benefit than were progressives who used the language of "alternative life-styles" rather cautiously.

At the same time, reflexivity undercuts the effectiveness of expertise. From a *management* perspective, individuals' actions and desires are less predictable. The model of a group of stable, two-parent families pursuing their economic betterment produces a relatively clear map of aggregate social demand (it was - after all - this model that fired the dreams of the central planners of a generation ago). As the goals and forms of the private sphere become less stable and more complex, abstract systems of expertise are less able to predict and respond to social trends.

The spread of self-help groups and alternative medical practices are only two symptoms of the withdrawal of experts' legitimacy. Thus, reflexive social relations require experts to redefine their talk with "lay persons" as a dialogue. Take the example of an individual with cancer who wishes to try an alternative therapy that she learned about through a support group. Her decision may appear "crazy" to her physician, but even so, the physician will have to engage in a conversation with her about it. The doctor's claim is no longer based on his white coat, diploma, and "authority" but on the trust and influence he is able to sustain in the conversation. Thus, the decline of expert authority and its replacement by the democratization of abstract systems is part of the increased reflexivity of social relations.

This discussion has paid no attention, yet, to the interests of different groups in the development of post-traditional personal relations. For the impact of reflexive relationships can only be fully seen in the radical shift in gender relations.

2.3 *Family Life and the Redefinition of Gender*

It is easy to underestimate the influence of feminism is the scope of human history. In the United States, at least, the relative narrowness of the "official" feminist political agenda, and the obvious unease with which many women in the less fashionable classes view it, make feminism appear as simply another of the welter of "rights" movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, when viewed from a broader perspective, the impact of the entry of women into the paid labor force and the radical redefinition of relationship between women and men that it set off must be seen as the most monumental social change of our era.

Women's economic dependency on men is a reality which has set strict limits on the range of "objective possibilities" that women could consider in creating their lives. Even today, in the United States, the decision of a women to leave a relationship - especially if she is a mother - involves the acceptance a serious economic consequences. From this perspective, the rapid spread of reflexive and flexible family patterns is remarkable.

The historical experience and current realities of African-Americans deserves special mention in this regard. The conventional wisdom is now that "black

women have always worked". This generalization, however, overlooks two facts:

1. Black women's involvement in the paid labor force has hardly been universal. The labor force participation rate of black women in the 1950s and 1960s was greater than that of white women (40% versus 28% in 1959), but is low compared to the rates for women of all races after 1979.
2. Until the 1970s, black women's occupational choices were confined to a few low-paying menial jobs.

The economic context of black women changed dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s. Black women found themselves positioned geographically and educationally - to take advantage of the expansion of clerical jobs in central cities. Although these were hardly the most glamorous or well-paying jobs in the postindustrial economy, they provided a new economic foundation for black women. Black men - by comparison - suffered even higher rates of redundancy in the new economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s.

During the early postwar years, black male householders were more likely to escape poverty and find steady jobs than were female householders. However, the limited opportunities open to black men and women kept the gap small, particularly compared to white households. After 1970, however, black female householders with jobs were much more likely to achieve economic security than black male householders.

Giddens argues that the most important element of the new reflexivity of social relations in late modern society is the

"pure relationship", in which "a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens 1992, 58).

The continued economic dependence of women limits the possibilities for the "pure relationship". The recent advances of black women give us our first experience with male-female relationships formed outside of this dependency. It is in this context, I believe, that we must view the "crisis of the black family" which has come to dominate policy discussions of welfare in the United States. In many respects, all of the trends - family dissolution, single parenthood, and poverty - are worrisome. But we should hardly be surprised. On the one hand, we have a glimpse of all of our futures; as gender inequality declines, relationships will become less stable. On the other hand, the combination of pure relationships with oppressive poverty, the breakdown of community institutions, and the spread of a culture of hopelessness is often a (literally) lethal combination.

To summarize, the breakdown of traditional family ties has been seized by many communitarians as an example of the "radical individualism" of our society.

My point here has been to cast the “breakdown” in the light of women’s economic position. If we are to prevent the *post-traditional* family from becoming “short, brutish, and nasty” it will require much effort by men and women to come to terms with a new set of social rules. But this hope for regeneration of the family should not be cast as a *return* to some mythic notion of family life, but as social innovation. We will need to construct a family life (and for that matter a community life) “on the other side” of the post-traditional divide; in a context in which traditional notions of duty and virtue have been replaced and where the use of economic resources to set the ground rules of relationships is no longer possible.

This is not a task we will complete overnight. In the mean time, we will have to put up with a lot of instability and suffering as women and men sort out a new language and practice for defining their relationships. But, until we are able to do so, there is no voluntary turning back. Without coercion (in the form of a victory for fundamentalism), we will need to “muddle through” until those new relationships have been worked out.

I have tried in this section to outline an understanding of three of the notable transformations of our time: the increased inequality in the distribution of economic resources, the rise of a “reflexive” life politics, and the impact of these new politics on gender and family. These social changes - and the decline of the progressive paradigm of which they were a part - set the stage for a search for a new paradigm for social well-being. It is this search that is behind the communitarian impulse to which I now turn.

3 The Communitarian Response to Progressivism’s Decline

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The limitations of progressivism have become abundantly clear in the past two decades. Its stress on material well-being has made it difficult for it to respond to the new social desires of a “reflexive” social order. Its model of personal life - individual families pursuing social “security” - tended to ignore the wider realm of social relations - kin, neighborhood, institutions - within which families were embedded. And its faith in experts and a transparent moral consensus could not be sustained in a world that became less predictable and in which the authority of experts tended to be leveled by forces of democratization.

Communitarians have stepped into the breach opened by the decline of progressivism. Their efforts have been premature; we are not yet prepared - either intellectually or institutionally - to synthesize our new social world. As a result, the communitarian prescription is inadequate - a grab-bag of romantic notions from the past and a faith that there is a universal moral vision that - despite appearances - unites us.

Communitarianism has come to apply to a range of disparate intellectual phenomena. Its first meaning - at least in the recent intellectual context - was to refer to a set of political philosophers - including MacIntyre, Sandel, and Walzer - who attempt to formulate a philosophical alternative to liberalism based on the community's role in the construction of the individual.² In the United States, Amitai Etzioni, a sociologist, proclaimed a communitarian "movement" based on the work of Galston, Glendon, and himself (Glendon 1991; Etzioni 1993). Finally, a number of scholars - ranging from those concerned with social ethics, like Robert Bellah and John McKnight - to Tocquevillians like Robert Putnam to political commentators like Mickey Kaus have clearly been influenced by communitarian ideas. In this discussion, I focus on Etzioni and the "movement" communitarians.

The "Responsive Communitarian Platform: Rights and Responsibilities", issued in November 1991 and endorsed by "seventy leading Americans", provides a clear summary of the movement's outlook. In contrast to the communitarian philosophers whose work has been motivated by a critique of liberalism, the movement communitarians have attacked "radical individualism" as the primary moral malaise of contemporary America (Etzioni 1995, 12-17).³ This "pursuit of private interests [which] erodes the network of social environments on which we all depend" allows the communitarians to position themselves as a force in the "middle" fending off radical civil libertarians on the one hand and rapacious capitalists on the other. Indeed, the tendency to move in one direction, and then the other, is a chronic communitarian inclination. For example, they want to reinforce the ability of communities to uphold their "moral voice", but - lest they be viewed as coercive prudes - they turn around and assert that any bad "communal values must be judged by external and overriding criteria, based on shared human experience" (Etzioni 1993, 255).

The movement, then, sees the need for a strengthening of the moral voice of communities through an increase in their power to control values and the political process. The chief obstacles for this process are individual's over-concern with their own well-being and the legal discourse which legitimates this orientation - what Glendon calls "rights talk". Radical civil libertarianism is a problem because, by placing government on the side of a neutrality, it eliminated the "moral voice". Only through a reassertion of social responsibility - personal responsibility for our families and communities, public responsibility for the political process - can we turn these trends around.

Based on this orientation, the communitarian movement has been concerned with a particular set of policies:

Families - The movement takes seriously the "decline" of American families, which it analyzes as a result of 1) the time-gap that has resulted from the entry of women into the labor force; and 2) the ease with which marriage can be

terminated. Therefore, they call for mandated pregnancy and child leave (although they believe that the family must take responsibility for funding part of it) and restrictions on divorce. Given current American sensitivities on the issue, they take pains to assert that "on average *two-parent families are better able to discharge their child-raising duties*".

Education - The educational system is important to the movement because: 1) after the family, it is the chief locus for moral education, and 2) it encourages our common culture and its values. Seeking a "middle ground", the movement attacks both the advocates of "multiculturalism" and its enemies. He pulls off this trick through the assertion that there is a set of universal moral principles that underlay all cultures. It is all right to teach the Bible, Koran, and the teachings of Confucius, but not simply in the name of "multiculturalism"; rather it should be to explain how they all share a common moral universe.

Politics - The 'platform' calls for a revitalization of public life "so that the two-third of our citizens who now say they feel alienated or that the polity is not their will again be engaged in it" (Etzioni 1993, 262). Their program includes a number of procedural reforms governing campaign financing, a faith in freedom of speech, increases in the ability of communities to enforce their standards against "radical individualism" (for example, in the "rights" of the homeless to use public space or the use of more forceful action against drug dealers).

There is much that should be appealing to advocates of social welfare in the communitarian approach. After all, its starting point - the responsibility of communities for the general welfare of their members - is a theme that united a variety of perspectives on social welfare.

Why is communitarianism disappointing? Part of the explanation probably lies in political expediency. The communitarian movement has gone out of its way to advertise its political influence, an influence which will stem from positioning itself between the liberal/conservative divide that currently defines American politics. A number of communitarian positions - for example their suspicion about multiculturalism - are clearly defined with an eye toward defining a "third way" between liberalism and conservatism. Their most notable position, in this respect, has been their endorsement of welfare reform. Under the mantle of reinforcing the two-parent family and parental responsibility, a number of communitarians have supported the Clinton administration's call for more forceful measures to remove uncooperative welfare recipients from the rolls. The speed with which this "moderate" proposal for welfare reform was swamped by a more radical call for welfare cuts should give us pause about the pragmatism of moderation.

But more important than jockeying for political position, the failures of communitarianism stem from a flawed understanding of the social changes that we have experienced. I want to examine briefly, three problems with the communi-

tarian position: equality, the self-sufficiency of communities, and role of the family.

3.1 Equality

The communitarians do not spend much time on equality. Indeed, in Glendon's deep suspicion of "rights talk", we find an indictment of the means through which most American liberals believe that greater equality can be achieved. Communitarians' concern about the moral dimension of community life leads them to suppress issues of equality and distribution which emphasize the individual and economic instead of the community and moral. Lund, for example, sees the communitarian position on equality as based on "a virtue-centered ethical theory that assumes citizens are equally interested in true human 'lourishing'" (Lund 1993, 577).

The communitarian-influence writer who has been most explicit about equality is Mickey Kaus. In *Beyond Equality*, Kaus calls for an abandonment of "Money Liberalism" based on the idea of increasing economic equality and the substitution of a "Civic Liberalism" based on a concern for fostering "social equality" - the non-transferability of economic inequality into other spheres of social interaction. Drawing on Walzer's concept of complex equality, Kaus argues that Civic Liberalism attempts:

"to prevent money inequality from translating into social inequality. The primary way it does this is through social institutions that create a second, non-economic sphere of life - a public, community sphere - where money doesn't 'talk', where the principles of the marketplace (...) are replaced by the principle of equality of citizenship" (Kaus 1992, 20).

Underlying Kaus' advocacy of civic liberalism is an idea that a society with a strong sense of social equality would be self-legitimizing. Thus, even as economic resources become less equally divided, the existence of social equality in the form of universal national service, public spaces free of drug-dealers and homeless people, and a welfare system that reinforces work and responsibility - will be enough to make citizens feel that they live in a just society.

I suspect Kaus is right that the pursuit of greater economic equality is doomed. The power of economic interests to resist redistribution has always been sizable. The globalization of the economy has reinforced this power by effectively rendering nation-states unable to decide to go it alone on this issue. The strength of economic power and the weakening of the "countervailing" forces that Galbraith found in the 1960s - most notably organized labor - has effectively removed equality from the political agenda.

But to say that something is inevitable is different from saying it is just; a point that Walzer, but not Kaus, understands. And Kaus is right to point out that it is

silly to posture on equality - or "fairness" as American liberals now tend to do - if you have neither the means nor will to do something about it. Addressing the problem of economic inequality requires a greater commitment to democratization than either mainstream party is willing to consider. The issue is not - as Kaus argues - that we must abandon equality, but that we will need a moral vital civil society to force a readjustment of the relative power of the market and politics in our social life.

Rather than accepting inequality as unimportant, as the communitarians appear to do, we must see it as a problem. The construction of civil society, in this view, is not a substitute for equality, but a means of moving toward it. Kaus and the communitarians are right to worry about how - in a society in which inequality is growing - individuals are going to cope with the limitations on their life-chances. But the value of reinvigorated communities must be judged by their ability to mobilize for community controls over the economy. This will require a different idea of community than that used by the communitarians.

3.2 Community

"Communitarians are nostalgic for self-sufficient communities. Their dominant language is one in which we *return, revitalize, reinvigorate* our community life. At its most extreme we find John McKnight who in a recent book argues that the spread of social services was primarily a ruse foisted upon America's self-sufficient communities by professional entrepreneurs:

The most significant development transforming America since World War II has been the growth of a powerful service economy and its pervasive serving institutions. Those institutions have commodified the care of community and called that substitution a service. As citizens have seen the professionalized service commodity invade their committees, they have growth doubtful of their common capacity to care, and so it is that we have become a careless society, populated by impotent citizens and ineffectual communities dependent on the counterfeit of care called human services" (McKnight 1995, IX-X).

True, historical research supports McKnight's contention that moral entrepreneurs have promoted the bureaucratic form that many social services have taken. However, McKnight's confuses this with creating the situation itself. Progressive professionals were not responsible for creating the community's neglect of the poor and dependent; they were able, however, to impose a definition of these problems and a plan for responding to them (deSwaan 1988). "Civil society's" denial of these problems opened the door to moral entrepreneurs.

As our review of the literature on poverty suggests, the communitarian account of social welfare has much to do with the myth of the golden ghetto. If we establish an era when communities were forceful at upholding their standards and caring for the unfortunate, then modern social welfare looks, as it does to

McKnight, as a usurpation. However, a more accurate reading of that history leads to skepticism about communities' capacity for caring in the past and present.

The use of the term "community" manifests a fuzzy warmth for almost all of us. But the analysis of community undercuts this nostalgia. Communities have historically been defined as much by conflict and suspicion as by warm and shared values. As Gerald Suttles has noted, the demands of territoriality and the enforcement of boundaries has pulled people together more often than a shared moral universe. Indeed, when Elizabeth Bott went out in the 1960s to look for the common values that united even more intimate social networks, she could not find them; it turned out people assumed - incorrectly - their friends and neighbors shared their values. The history of community is one of enforced membership in the face of necessity, territoriality, and defensiveness (Bott 1971; Suttles 1978).

Communitarians and progressives shared a faith in an underlying moral consensus that was rooted in the "community". In light of postmodernity, however, morality is unlikely to emerge as a sphere of consensus and agreement. Community under conditions of postmodernity will have to root itself in another life-sphere.

The emergence of a reflexive life politics poses a possibility that civic association might have a different role in a post-traditional society. For community to become less identified with the needs to defend oneself against predatory behavior and more with a sphere for seeking development of the reflexive self in a social context is not a simple return to some mythical past.

3.3 *Gender and the Family*

The communitarians' shortcomings are most glaring in their analysis of gender and the family. Although feminists are attracted by communitarian analysis of the social construction of the self and their stress on "a commitment to collective values, public culture and a concern with the collective aspects of human life", the invisibility of patriarchy or *gender* as a social category illustrates the non-critical stance most communitarians have taken toward these issues (Frazier/Lacey 1993, 3). Even a left communitarian like Walzer, although he grants that "the bonds of love, without the ancient reinforcements of power and interest, will not make for social stability", still gets through his entire his discussion of the sphere of "kinship and love" without a discussion of women's economic oppression *within* the family. For "movement" communitarians, gender oppression receives even less notice. For Etzioni, Glendon, and Galston, the advocacy of the two-parent families and new restrictions on divorce take precedence over an examination of the unequal division of power within the family. Indeed their diagnosis of the contemporary crisis of the family - that material acquisitiveness has cut the time men and women are willing to devote to building strong relationships - is strictly

gender neutral. Again, Etzioni and company find themselves dwelling on themes of restoration and tradition. In this case, they use the highly questionable literature on "bonding" to provide a social scientific fig-leaf to cover up a conservative agenda (Derber 1993, 27-31).

A call to reconstruct the American family by requiring parents (read women) to stay home longer with their kids and limits on divorce is to turn one's back on the monumental transformation of gender relations that we have experienced. As I have noted, in the face of the uncertainty created by new modes of relationship, there will continue to be an audience for this kind of nostalgia, but as a guide for action within either the public or private sphere, it is useless.

It is this distinction between traditional notions of social affiliation and a redefinition of relationships "on the other side" of the postmodern divide that is at the heart of my critique of communitarianism. Its strong attraction to conservative themes of *restoration* and the blind eye it turns to the positive influence of reflexivity, life-politics, and the redefinition of gender leave communitarians with little to offer the reconstruction of notions of social welfare.

As I said earlier, I do have sympathy for communitarians' inadequacy. We do not yet have a language or a set of institutions to allow these themes that are so central to our lived experience today to enter our public discourse. Husbands and wives who are involved in the daily disputes that constitute the redefinition of family and gender - who will pick up the kids today, what will we do for dinner - are more likely to find a dialogue that is relevant for their lives on afternoon talk shows - if they have time to tape them on the VCR before they go to work - than in politics. In this respect, the disputes over life politics and reflexivity are more *infrapolitical*; they inform our actions but do not find expression in official discussion. It is premature to attempt to formulate a sweeping synthesis of what post-traditional society - and certainly post-traditional social welfare - is likely to look like. What we can hope to do is identify concrete practices and their institutional embodiment that might give us hints about what that society might look like and how it might be organized to promote justice, equality, and democratization.

In the final section of this paper, I turn to one concept that has become critical to the American debate over "civil society" - social capital - and demonstrate how it confuses the distinction between traditional and post-traditional forms of human affiliation. I use community arts programs as an example of an emerging institutional reality for post-traditional forms of affiliation.

4 "Social Capital", Emancipation, and Community Arts

Social capital has become virtually overnight one of the most important concepts in American social science. Originally used by Jane Jacobs over thirty years ago,

the term was given formal explication by James Coleman in his *The Foundations of Social Theory* in 1990. It was the use of the concept by Robert Putnam in his study of the development of regional government in Italy that gave social capital its current intellectual standing.

Social capital refers to the features of social organization - like trust, norms, and networks - which improve the ability of individuals to coordinate social action. As Coleman notes:

"Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence. (...) For example, a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust" (Coleman, quoted in Putnam 1993, 167).

For Putnam, social capital refers to the level of "civic engagement" found in a particular society. In Italy he found that traditions of engagement - ranging from degree of political participation to the number of voluntary organizations - were the best predictor of the performance of the new regional governments established during the 1970s. Moreover, these civic traditions were a critical correlate of economic development during the 20th century. This manifestation of "community" was the key to both the political and economic health of a region.

These traditions were as durable as they were important. According to Putnam, they derived ultimately from medieval political patterns. More concretely, Putnam finds a high correlation between indexes of civic engagement from the turn of the century and the 1970s and 1980s. In a recent article on America's social capital, Putnam again emphasizes the durability of patterns of engagement. Even though the level of engagement has declined significantly over the past quarter century, America's traditional leadership in civic association continues (Putnam 1995, 65-78).

Social capital has taken America by storm. One can hardly pick up a journal of opinion these days without reading an article on improving civil society through the increase of social capital. It is striking that an essentially conservative argument - that centuries-old patterns of social organization are the critical feature of social and political success - has been seized upon by those in the middle and on the left.

The connections between social capital theory and the communitarians is clear enough. Its emphasis on the unique role of networks of trust and a common moral grounding fits nicely with the new moral vision at the core of the communitarian movement. Social capital shares, as well, communitarianism's failure to differentiate the institutional realities of traditional communities from new social affiliations that might grow out of the search for social solidarity in post-traditional society. Or rather, Putnam wishes to see the one as predicting the other. For example, in Italy, the areas with the most social capital are not the areas domi-

nated by a cozy *Gemeinschaft*. Far from it. It is the industrialized North that is the leader. However, it is the presence of traditional patterns of engagement, Putnam argues, that allows the newer forms of civic engagement to flourish. In the United States, Putnam is concerned about the deterioration of traditional measures of engagement (church, fraternal organizations, volunteering), but is doubtful whether the spread of newer forms of engagement (particularly not-for-profits and self-help groups) are a real substitute.

The strength of *capital* as a metaphor is that it connotes the ability to equate things that are intrinsically different. A plot of land and a stock certificate have nothing in common, but thanks to the magic of the market, one can be converted into the other.

Is social capital convertible? If we need to focus on different *kinds* of social engagement - if church going doesn't equal fraternal organizations, if bird watching does not equal labor unions - then a concept that equates them is flawed. This skeptical posture suggests that research should examine the interaction of different forms of participation and affiliation, at the local as well as the national and regional level.

I am currently examining this set of questions with particular focus on the role of cultural organizations. The social organization of arts and culture is an underdeveloped field of study in the United States. Influenced by Bourdieu's idea of "cultural capital" the bulk of recent work in the field has been concerned with attempts by dominant social groups to use arts and culture to reinforce social inequality.

Through some preliminary research on Philadelphia, I've reached the conclusion that this concern with the *vertical* role of culture is less important than its *horizontal* role. Rather than simply reinforcing inequality - as cultural capital theory holds - arts and cultural activity might serve as a nascent form of social affiliation. It - along with other new institutions - may provide one tentative step out of the impasse caused by the collapse of progressivism.

My working hypothesis then is that the social organization of community arts and cultural activities may be one means through which people attempt to construct new methods of social solidarity on the "other side" of the post-traditional divide. My interest in this topic was piqued by a preliminary study of participation in the arts. I expected to find - as cultural capital theorists and empirical research suggested - that participation was tightly correlated with individual's education, occupation, and ethnicity. We found, instead, that some rather rudimentary measures of cultural resources in an individual's neighborhood was a better predictor of participation than these individual characteristics. This led me to the suspicion that this type of engagement was not simply individual, but was a product of social networks and engagement - that is, of social capital.

Subsequent research has increased my belief that arts and cultural activity merits examination as part of the redefinition of social welfare in the post-traditional world. Consider these observations:

- Arts and culture are closely connected to the reflexive construction of the self. Individuals seek out these opportunities as a means of personal growth and definition. It provides a means of increasing one's skills and self-esteem as well as affecting a wholesale redefinition of who one is.
- At the same time, involvement in the arts is deeply embedded in community contexts. Most arts involvement happens in local communities, where the "civic engagement" has a spillover effect of increasing trust and social affiliation. Thus, arts participation allows one to find new forms of social solidarity which are consistent with the post-traditional demands for autonomy, democratization, and reflexivity.
- The institutional structure of the arts does not mirror the patterns of inequality we find in other social spheres. My results are preliminary in this respect, but they seem to show that unlike health, education, or crime - arts participation does not simply mirror economic inequalities. Rather, at least in Philadelphia, residents in poorer sections of the city have access to as many opportunities in the arts than those who are more well-off.
- This is connected as well with the American obsessive concern with the social deterioration of the "underclass". Although many social institutions have virtually disappeared in the poorest neighborhoods of America's cities, they continue to be home to many, vital cultural organizations.

In short, at least as a preliminary position, arts and cultural activity are important because they provide an example of a new institutional form based on the reconciliation of individual autonomy and the need for social solidarity and because they are strategically located in those areas of America's city most in need of institutional strengthening.

They relate as well to the realities of inequality that currently define the limits of social welfare. If Kaus is right - as I suspect he is - that we do not have the means to really address inequality in the world of flexible accumulation, then two reciprocal tasks are necessary:

1. We need to develop means of providing spheres - outside of the economic - in which individuals can feel that they can pursue their personal development in spite of economic inequality. Without such hope, the cycles of self-destructiveness and alienation that concern all advanced societies - particularly with respect to young people are likely to continue. The arts provides a possibility for this kind of "complex equality". I am struck by the fact that the arts offer what I call "good bad jobs". From a purely economic perspective, the arts are

a classic unequal, low-wage sector, quite typical of flexible accumulation. But in contrast to domestic labor or working at McDonald's, kids employed at low-wages to paint wall murals see themselves as fulfilled. Indeed, in virtually any large city, restaurant staffs are likely to be composed of artists, actors, and writers waiting to "make it". In a society that cannot provide its citizens with adequate health care or income, perhaps we should feel lucky that there are other ways of confirming human dignity.

2. With the deterioration of the traditional institutional structure of American progressivism - ethnic societies, labor unions, political clubs - arts groups and other grass-roots organizations, including community development groups, neighborhood improvement societies, local environmental action organizations, etc. may provide a basis for the resuscitation of the institutional structure for social change. Although this may be a protracted process, it may be one that deserves our attention.

I will beg your indulgence for a set of speculations based on a rather flimsy empirical foundation. In light of the current political impasse, it seems worthwhile to consider some of the emerging possibilities for constructing the ideas and institutions we need to move forward. Those of us who are concerned about the attack on existing institutions and the possibilities for their democratization should examine emerging movements and groupings - including arts and cultural groups - as a potentially promising field of action.

5 Conclusion

The current political context in the United States is one that could give "critical thinking" a bad name. All over the nation, conservatives have picked up the mantle of "radicalism" as part of their holy war against welfare, environmental regulations, and race and gender equality. By the same token, those on the Left have found themselves reacting to these charges by defending existing welfare arrangements.

I argue in this paper that this cannot be the only task before us. If we accept the contention that current economic realities based on "flexible accumulation" have removed the means for us to move the economy and the state toward greater equality and democratization, the defense of existing welfare arrangements becomes a difficult position to defend. It was possible to defend the improvements in a bureaucratically-defined system of public assistance, as long as one could make a plausible case for incrementalism - that things were, however slowly, getting better.

Once we remove this caveat, what does our defense of existing arrangements become but an argument for maintaining the poor in a state of dependency. It is

hardly surprising, in this case, that the Right has successfully painted liberal into a corner. We can either acquiesce to their proposals or accept their definition of us as the defenders of an unjust status quo.

In this respect, the communitarians have challenged the Left to sharpen its definition of the current situation and how to move beyond it. In the United States, the impoverishment of political dialogue has made this a particularly difficult task. Perhaps no term has suffered from this debasement more than *community*.

I have argued in this paper that the communitarians share a nostalgic vision of community which cannot be sustained by the historical and sociological literature. But at the same time, the end of progressivism means that we can no longer rely on its limited vision of a society based on economically-driven individuals who can be made to do right through the manipulation of experts. In this respect, postmodernity has propelled us toward a precipice.

We are not ready to jump. Without a coherent set of ideas and institutions, we do not have a synthetic vision ready to move forward. So we have little choice but to stand and fight. Especially in the case of programs that promoted the interests of the poor and other groups historically excluded from civil society, this is a worthwhile task.

But at the same time, we must keep our eyes open for alternative practices on which a new vision might be built. As I have said, I am sympathetic with the communitarians because they see the need for this new visions. But they - like the rest of us - are not ready.

The brittleness of the current conservatism should give us hope. For underneath a rhetoric of innovation and radicalism, the new right is captive of its own nostalgia; one in which communities are self-sufficient and families are loving. Conservatism's fragility - in spite of appearances - gives us the space to dream of what might yet be. For the time being, it may be the only option left for those who dwell on the precipice.

Notes

- 1 It turned out that the "supply-side" contention that the federal government could increase revenue by lowering tax rates was wrong, but in my home, Philadelphia, where business only has to move a few miles to escape the local taxes, it turned out that the city was at the point where an increase in tax rates did lead to a decrease in revenue.
- 2 The literature on philosophical communitarianism is voluminous. Among the standard sources are: MacIntyre, 1985; Sandel, 1982; Walzer, 1983.
- 3 It is interesting to note that whereas the philosophers' have formulated their analysis in universal terms, Etzioni is explicit that the call for more responsibility is a response to specific American conditions. In contrast, he has noted that in the new democracies of the Eastern Europe a call for greater individuality.

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