The Dance with Community

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Part One

The Context
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Chapter Two

Present Discontents

Community is the goal, a goal that comes in many shapes. To understand the urge toward community, we have to appreciate the broader mood among many contemporary American political intellectuals: a mood of unease, complaint, concern at best and panic and desperation at worst. The Reagan era relieved some of the alienation of many Americans. However, intellectual dissatisfaction burned bright through the 1980s and into the 1990s. Perhaps political intellectuals tend by nature to be dissatisfied. Certainly they often have been in recent times.

The attraction of community has not simply happened magically; it is directly related to the intellectual mood of complaint. Yet widespread complaints need not lead in a straight line to affirmations of community. Thus the specific nature of the present discontents is crucial because if we understand this, the current rush to affirm community loses much of its mystery.

Of course the category "intellectual" is imprecise; it must be, and this reality cannot be overlooked. There are many attempts to define intellectual, but here I shall define the category culturally and treat as intellectuals those who are presented in journals of ideas and discussion as serious thinkers in the realm of political thought today. This definition is inclusive, and that, perhaps, is its most troubling feature. There are an incredible number of such intellectuals, and the diversity of those who meet the definitional standard and are engaged in the political concerns this book addresses is substantial. The list of well-known figures is considerable and the variety of ideas they advance seems endless. Given this fact, I have to choose whom to include and
exclude in examining intellectual discontents today. Moreover, I cer­
tainly do not propose that there is consensus on the current unease or
on its causes, much less on how to address present discontents. Many
perspectives exist, no doubt of it, and I make my choices in terms of
where emphasis should fall.

Caveats aside, this book must begin with a sense of the consider­
able intellectual dissatisfaction in our age and with the characteristics
of that unease. Although by no means does everyone incline to a
portentous pessimism—"the new dark ages . . . are already upon
us"—or an almost casual pessimism—"how very grim things are in
this country"—pessimism and criticism are the foundation for all that
follows. So much effort concentrates on sounding the charge against so
much of the United States, its values, and its institutions that one may
wonder if complaint does not overwhelm or sometimes substitute for
the formulation and defense of a vision of community. No doubt it
sometimes does.

The intellectual climate from the 1970s to the 1980s has been nega­
tive and critical. This is obviously true if one compares it with the 1950s
and also, in a way, with the 1960s. There was no dearth of angry
intellectual criticism in that unforgettable time, to be sure, but under­
neath it almost to the end was a confidence and a hope that is plainly
absent in many intellectual circles today. Many political intellectuals
are sunk in their unhappiness, unable to do much but be negative. Yet
for others the irresponsibility of free-floating negativity clearly appeals
as a form of liberation. This is especially the case with some of the
postmoderns, dedicated to deconstructing anything and everything. Either
way this age is not an era of bliss among prominent political
intellectuals.

Yet there is much more here than sheer negativity. At first the
complaints overwhelm one, but on reflection one finds a more inter­
esting story, the presence of a substantial, creative element in recent
political thought. It is the movement toward ideas about the origin
and the healing of modern dissatisfactions. Driven by intellectual dis­
content, political theory is now alive and well in the United States.

When one wades through the flood of complaint pouring from
political intellectuals, the sheer volume is impressive. There is almost
no limit to what is wrong. Yet great volume does not mean formless-
ness. Though they cannot be categorized neatly, the present discontents are surprisingly tightly focused and not just in their aspiration toward community. Three themes predominate, and two others are closely connected. First is the emphasis on the American crisis as one of meaning, a spiritual crisis, if you will, the assumption that there is no inner life in modern society. The image is of an America without goals, without explanations. Second is the tremendous concern with the crisis over values that many political intellectuals identify as endemic to the U.S., one generally perceived as woeful and as of great significance. This crisis is sometimes connected to the larger metaphysical condition. Third, worry over crises of meaning and value lead to the attack on their offspring, the rampant individualism that critics believe afflicts our age. It is routine for political intellectuals to trace everything they perceive as wrong with the U.S.—a formidable list indeed—to American individualism (and liberalism). In the process, emphasis shifts from general ailments to the specific carriers of disease (the particular contribution) and to the noxious manifestations of the disease (the corruption and collapse of American lives and American institutions).

Daniel Bell has proclaimed that the “real problem of modernity is the problem of belief . . . it is a spiritual crisis.” Though hardly unanimously shared, this sober judgment is popular. The underlying assumption is expressed by Richard J. Neuhaus: Our missing “language of communal meaning,” our absent “public ethic,” our lost “sense of shared responsibility” once drew their strength from and had their origins in religion. The decline of religion in society, or among elites, explains much of the crisis and leaves us adrift.

For some the remedy is obvious. We must turn toward God if we wish to alleviate our spiritual exhaustion. Only through God working with us can we build community. Nonbelievers lack this faith, but as with Michael Harrington, often note the “disappearance of the traditional Western God” and bemoan the costs of spiritual emptiness: “The work day world . . . has become empty and alienated, without a transcendent justification or preserve. . . . There are private escapes from this fate, such as the religion of sexuality. But these can hardly hold a community together.” Thus, Harrington urges, we have a need to develop “transcendental common values” which are, somehow, not
grounded in the "supernatural." Bell also encourages us to search for a solution to the spiritual crisis. Modern political thought in the U.S. is from one angle exactly about this search.

Of course, the crisis of meaning is not discussed only in terms of the (alleged) decline of religion. Nor is it unusual for a thinker to argue that preoccupation with religion or any form of answers—including obsessive concern with their absence—is yet another problem for a liberalism that today fails to appeal to a surprising number of political intellectuals. More typical though are dissatisfactions similar to the perception of meaninglessness but not directed at the problem of decaying religious foundations. After all, what Bell describes as the (now absent) "rational cosmos" had other underpinnings besides religion, certainly in Western intellectual life. Alasdair MacIntyre is, to say the least, another worried student of the crisis of meaning. He notes that the efforts of Kant and the Utilitarians to build a "rational secular account" for moral life did not succeed. They "have in fact failed." Michael Sandel contributes to the same anxious mood as he contemplates liberalism and problems of justification.

Meanwhile, Nietzsche has increasingly attained status as the greatest postmodern thinker. For theorists such as MacIntyre and Allan Bloom, Nietzsche's brilliance and influence are overwhelming—and devastating. Their Nietzsche announces the triumph of modernism and the loss of foundations. He ushers in the twentieth century and its spiritual crisis. The consequences are as numerous as they are crushing, but two in particular get the most attention. Relativism has seized the stage, as Bloom argues so insistently in The Closing of the American Mind. People float with "no common object, no common good, no natural complementarity." No wonder our civilization loves sincerity; it substitutes for missing truths. We have become, says Irving Kristol, a decadent society whose cultural life is in another metaphor, nothing more than "a vast and variegated cultural supermarket." And even among those who in the postmodern or deconstructionist spirit applaud such a breakdown, there is no sympathy or even charity for the resulting crisis in the United States.

This does not mean we are in imminent danger of collapse yet. As Bloom describes the situation, "American nihilism is . . . a vague disquiet . . . nihilism without the abyss." More directly the consequence is unchecked self-interest: hedonistic, rapacious, ruthless.
Those who no longer have an idea of evil or those for whom “the sacred is destroyed” naturally exist in a fashion any society might find frightening. As Bell says, “we are left with the shambles of appetite and self-interest and the destruction of the moral circle which engirds mankind.”21 The nonreligious Benjamin Barber concludes it is obvious that we have “a collection rather than a collectivity” as our society.22 Less pessimistic, Robert Bellah and his associates in Habits of the Heart nonetheless insist on an honest acknowledgment of the results of our spiritual situation. People are not out of control on the whole, but they are often lost and we pay no mean price for that.23

All this invocation of spiritual crisis shades quickly (and inevitably in American political thought) into a discourse on the destructive sway of the relativism of values. There is plenty of agreement (ironically) that the “new language is that of value relativism.”24 Shared morality has been submerged by modernism which has torn apart boundaries.25 We are increasingly a “culture of separation,” wondering how we can be a society and, ironically, how we can ever be individuals, requiring as we do others to define ourselves.26 In human relationships and even in our very souls “the psychology of separateness” rules.27 We are, Richard J. Neuhaus protests, trapped in a world of “indifference to normative truth, an agreement to court all opinions about morality as equal . . . because we are all agreed there is no truth . . . The result is the debasement of our public life by the exclusion of the idea—and consequently of the practice—of virtue.”28

At issue, Michael Sandel argues, is what is left of us “as situated selves” versus our modern “unencumbered selves.”29 It is not just a matter of religion or of values but also of traditions, culture, and institutions: All of them have been eroded. Richard Merelman in Making Something of Ourselves: On Culture and Politics in the United States draws on anthropological images. We are now a “loose-bounded” culture. The “weakness of church, state, and clan leaves the individual alone and adrift in an often alien social and political universe.”30 Bloom describes his students as “The Clean Slate,” lacking tradition, guidance, and moral foundations.31

Rampant individualism is the favorite theme and the constant complaint among many American political intellectuals. As Herbert Gans observes, the complaint is everywhere, diverse in its basic analysis and assignment of blame but truly axiomatic among contem-
Bloom bemoans the world of students where, he insists, almost everything but individual sovereignty is dismissed. Bellah and his associates confirm the same reality in the middle America they study where the reigning value is the individual and his or her freedom.

Classic expressions of rampant individualism garner the most attention, eliciting relentless criticism. A common charge is that barely checked appetites now govern Americans. Conservatives routinely speak in these terms, lamenting "ungoverned will and appetite," citing statistics on divorce or crime and the like. But conservatives are scarcely alone. Another response is the denunciation of the triumph of consumerism as the economic expression of unrestrained appetite. Its analogue is the popular lust for more benefits from the government, especially the drive for ever-expanding entitlements which plays its role in budget deficits and general overload placed on government. In its harsher versions this concern directs us to the underclass or to the serious drug culture and to their locations in American culture where appetite has overwhelmed all else (for whatever reason) and the human wreckage mounts higher and higher.

While some political intellectuals thunder at the American who has no values, only limitless wants, others worry about the self-absorption, or, let us acknowledge Christopher Lasch, the narcissism of the contemporary American. Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* is already a classic in this genre. It describes American life as a perpetual adolescence, a permanent creation and recreation of oneself, an activity revolving around oneself and often unconcerned about anyone else. Of course, Bellah argues, this journey does not prove entirely satisfactory. We cannot just create ourselves from ourselves; such narcissism fails. Other grounding is required, though it is often missing.

Bellah develops a typology of the kinds of individualism prevailing today as well as in the American past. He acknowledges diversity beneath the concept of individualism, yet he also concludes that there is only modest variation among the species of individualism in the present. They all involve devotion to self and to the freedom of self. A key example is Bellah's discussion of love and marriage, a remarkable chapter, perhaps his most powerful, and one which Allan Bloom's discourse on "Relationships" repeatedly parallels—though neither might want to admit it. Bellah's starting point is differ-
ent from Bloom's and his judgments far less harsh; still, the two analyses are eerily close, characteristic, in truth, of a number of views today. The gods of the contemporary United States, expressed through the gospels of individual absorption, personal achievement, and faith in personal freedom, challenge lasting love, marriage, and family. It is a tough struggle in such a world to affirm such often quaint ideals as duty, obligation, or family. Much better to rush to a new relationship, to a divorce court, or to a family therapist to learn how to have a family on each member's terms and to fulfill each one's individual needs.43

Another common complaint emphasizes how many people seem to be left alone—and not alone just in the sense of lacking given values or real spiritual direction.44 They are often socially alone even when with people or even when married. One refrain is that we cannot build relationships or make commitments or even keep those we grudgingly say we will.45 We insist we must be free, though free to be what is much less clear.

In this context the image of the sad, stripped-down American gets (negative) attention. Michael Sandel treats this theme with flair. We find ourselves with the "solitary self" who we urgently affirm has (must have) great dignity. However, Sandel notes this dignity has nothing to do with us as particular persons. Anything specific about us and anything that might bring us together as real persons is banished today. We are formally individuals, devoted to freedom, but not real individuals located in serious lives, communities, and ethical roles, both different and alike. He finds it no surprise, then, that our politics is superficial and that we are as "strangers" in our public life as citizens. Sandel does not dismiss dignity; he admires it, but he insists it must be connected to a stabilized order of value and life to allow it or us to be anything amounting to dignified.46

Benjamin Barber sneers at what community we have left in our current situation. The "thin liberal community lacks any semblance of public character." He scoffs that it "might be better called a multilateral bargaining association, a buyer-seller cooperative, or a life insurance society," arrangements whose inherent inferiority Barber takes as a given.47 Sheldon Wolin is among the most bitter and brilliant critics. For him American democracy is a joke of images and manipulations. We cannot take seriously those who claim we have a community in or
out of politics. Instead of the participatory community that Wolin believes is integral to our development as social beings, we have inequality, domination, and too many intellectuals who are more interested in word games than they are in either truth or democratic community.\textsuperscript{48}

An alternative here is "character," a word now much in vogue. Daniel Bell observes that our society demands that everyone have "personality," which is all individualism implies now. People seem to want in personality what the concept implies, a superficial individual, one with little depth or inner direction. Bell favors its virtual opposite, character—real people with substantial values.\textsuperscript{49} Michael Sandel echoes this concern in \textit{Liberalism and Its Critics} and elsewhere, as does Alasdair MacIntyre in \textit{After Virtue}.\textsuperscript{50} There are a number of variations, but the core message is the same.

One hears echoes of the 1950s with its intellectual outcry against mass society and against the mass of conforming Americans. The talk then was of the sad and even dangerous "other-directed" individualism and the extent of unfocused freedom, but today there is less sense of a tyranny of the majority and more concern over the prevalent shallowness and the unrealized potential of too many Americans. Another difference is in the degree of intellectual anxiety, sometimes even desperation, that pervades so many of these discussions today; the word crisis gets a lot of use.

Contemporary political intellectuals find several culprits behind the crises of meaning, morality, and character. None, however, begins to rank with liberalism, repeatedly the targeted enemy. Allan Bloom makes it all sound inevitable: Our addiction to liberalism led to a society without standards or substance. What else could one expect, since liberalism lacks absolutes and legitimates only freedom?\textsuperscript{51} From another angle Alasdair MacIntyre berates liberalism as a rather pathetic political theory of process, lacking all substance, clinging to equality since it is unable to make distinctions, and making implausible claims to neutrality. No wonder, he observes, "the lawyers, not the philosophers, are the clergy of liberalism."\textsuperscript{52}

In a famous analysis C. B. MacPherson blasts liberalism for its disintegrative image of human beings—possessive and materialistic, power-oriented, relentlessly fixated on what they can get for themselves.\textsuperscript{53} Liberalism leaves us, Michael Sandel laments, disconnected
in a world without meaning, where each of us has to construct his or her own meaning. MacIntyre observes that liberalism today leads us to the triumph of the individual will or to continued lostness. Both are painfully unsatisfactory and leave liberalism without a defense: "We still, in spite of the efforts of three centuries of moral philosophy and one of sociology, lack any coherent, rationally defensible statement of a liberal individualist point of view." Liberalism, Sandel insists, leaves only "the unencumbered self," which we know does not describe or promote valuable things—"character, self-knowledge, and friendship." Liberalism separates us and abandons us, and in the process we fail to understand that significant moral experience is not about a private, autonomous being, unconnected to goals, to tradition, or to others.

Liberalism not only neglects our need for community, indeed it is often downright hostile to it. It impedes thinking in terms of community. The issue is conceptual: Thus, honest liberals such as Nancy Rosenblum acknowledge "the communitarian failings of liberal thought" as a given. Certainly some political intellectuals take it for granted. William Sullivan notes that liberalism simply does not deal with "social solidarity." Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis lament how "impoverished" liberalism is in this realm. Michael Sandel agrees. Bloom joins in, but in his own way, targeting feminism as one of liberalism's most powerful disintegrative forces today. The general theme runs through contemporary American political thought: Liberalism is at fault, particularly in its affection for "the acid of modern natural rights," which denigrates and destroys community and leaves only the individual.

John Diggins affirms the analysis that liberalism has long been in the saddle in our political culture and that the results have not been impressive. It has failed to comprehend what Wilson Carey McWilliams calls "fraternal relations," what William Sullivan defines as "the value of politics as moral cultivation of responsible selves." Liberalism does not deal well with relations among people, especially communal relations. Contemporary judgments more and more interpret this lacuna as its crippling flaw. Liberalism drives "relationships to the model of pure instrumentality." This reality, "with its corollary the subjective and finally arbitrary nature of value, is the deepest motif in liberal thinking." And it is a motif (no matter how
characterized) no longer in favor among many political intellectuals. Granted, by no means does every critic dismiss liberalism as hopeless. Even Benjamin Barber concedes that it is unfair to blame liberalism for every drawback of modernity. But Clarke Cochran has a great deal of company in his conclusion that liberalism is “too thin” and lacks that center of community, of a public good, and of a recognized standard of justice. If the problem is not natural rights, it is that “liberal pluralism makes any intelligible notion of the common good impossible.”

The inadequacy of liberalism in general is not the only popular explanation for present discontents. Some intellectuals look to the past, having in mind a particular moment in the history of liberalism as the problem. For example, some concentrate on the Founding Era as crucial. One version faults that age for its creation of the “very national purpose that first united America, liberty defined as economic individualism.” In other viewpoints, too, this period is identified as the moment when a more communitarian ethic became the path not chosen. Another favorite period for historical discussion is, of course, the brief (and to its critics) inglorious era of the 1960s. Theorists as different as Daniel Bell and Allan Bloom isolate that decade as the period of steep decline in our national community, however mixed the historical liberal legacy up to that time. The disastrous costs of technological imperatives are another popular explanation in reflections on the United States today. For example, Christopher Lasch emphasizes the power of technology and how we are more and more its children at the sacrifice of all else. Other structural problems such as our modern economy, large population, or sprawling geography are also perceived as elements encouraging our alleged formless individualism and indifferent success at community.

Yet nothing besides liberalism attracts the attention that capitalism does as the cause of America’s ills or, less directly, as the creator and reinforcer of the real culprit: liberalism. One cannot read American political intellectuals today without recognizing that capitalism receives scant sympathy. Beyond the celebrated names, the Friedmans and the Buckleys, the numbers of the faithful are modest. Even conservatism is by no means totally sympathetic to capitalism, as Russell Kirk’s continuing observations on its baleful effects testify. “There is no greater fool than the man who dies for his standard of living, except the man who dies for someone else’s standard of living.” Leftist
intellectuals such as Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers center the problems blocking their ideal of democracy and community on capitalism and elitist "capitalist democracy." Others bemoan how "corporate values define modern American Culture" or deplore the "capitalism which wallows in an eternal, spiritless present." Jeffrey Lustig's *Corporate Liberalism* represents one of the liveliest and most trenchant discussions. Lustig claims capitalism has overwhelmed the United States and snuffed out democracy and conflict, mystified realities of power, and exalted science and technique at the expense of a public good. Community got lost in the process, too, a perspective which Lustig hardly holds alone.

Of course, no single opinion dominates. The economics profession in the United States is overwhelmingly capitalist in orientation. Its practitioners proceed in a number of directions, though most are not in the tradition of the nearly unchecked capitalism promoted by the Chicago School of economists. One can hardly doubt that during and after the eight Reagan years there has been a far less doctrinaire dismissal by all but the most ideological Marxists of everything that might be linked to capitalism. So capitalism has at least some intellectual respectability, if not a great many warm supporters beyond the realm of economics.

Still, even though capitalism and liberalism are deeply intertwined concepts (and not just in many contemporary analyses of the United States), the principal explanations for what has gone wrong today lay the blame on liberalism more than on capitalism. Frequently capitalism is identified as part of the problem, but it is liberalism itself which draws the critics. Marxism is not, therefore, currently the most powerful source of the critique of liberalism. Its star may not have set among political intellectuals, but its light is less bright than it was a few years ago.

A favorite intellectual pastime is to identify liberalism's dubious consequences beyond the thin individualism and routine meaninglessness of modern life, such as the tendency for Americans to compensate for liberalism's failures by grasping for any connection, littering the landscape with false communities which divert people from confronting their situation and building serious community to address it. The charge is that our age is inundated with those who do not know what community is, despite a vague popular affinity for the word.
Bellah and his colleagues describe how individualism grips the profession of psychology, itself largely a response to lost meanings in the modern world. Modern clinical psychology tries to patch up relationships and foster community. However, Bellah asserts it does so by justifying community in terms of self-growth and only to the extent that individualist values are promoted by any community. For Bellah, communities founded on this sand will last only so long as they are convenient to their participants, which too often will not be long. Bellah dismisses the multitude of social groupings in America merely as "Lifestyle Enclaves" having few characteristics of stable and deep community. People floating from group to group and acting on the basis of temporary self-interest do not equal community. And although there has been a major expansion of public interest groups in recent decades, it has been argued that they do not advance democratic community.

The family, of course, draws limitless attention, and analyses stress its failures as community. Some proclaim divorce to be America's most urgent problem — concretely but also symbolically. We are more and more divorced from each other and from what families can transmit: love, tradition, community. The family now reflects society: It is no communal bulwark against fashion or the storms of life; indeed, its weak walls are no more formidable than anything else in the United States.

If community is weak and weakening, authority is in even more disrepute and disrepair. Some critics declare that everywhere in our society our institutions have lost the capacity to stand for anything, to stand up for anything. No wonder Bell claims that authority figures have suffered an incredible "loss of nerve." Christopher Lasch is more ambivalent about the value of many American institutions than is Bell, but he shares Bell's discomfort over the decline of authority — of the superego — and over the result that we find ourselves with only the unpopular government to direct us. Lustig sees us left with abundance, which makes him no happier than the consolation of the state makes Lasch. Authority (not to mention a social teleology) is missing.

Also missing, it is sometimes claimed, is a political means to address the crisis in our postmodern era. This lack is the final gasp, the failure of political capacity. The familiar argument is that we have only
a mean politics of competing wants, a politics that yields to powerful greeds or that ends with the whimper of deadlocked interests. The only signs of resolution are unsettling ones: a large public and private bureaucracy reaching out to clasp alienated and disoriented citizens.

One notes the reprise here to themes in the political thought of the 1950s: Wants have triumphed over needs, alienation is rife, politics seems unable to break through. But this is not the 1950s, when the faith in liberalism was still vigorous; it was not yet the culprit. Ours is a far more disillusioned age, and perhaps one in which there is much less confidence in the United States as well. The considerable stir over the work of Paul Kennedy and of other theorists of decline is surely significant. As Kennedy argues, there is nothing inevitable or routine about an intellectual literature of decline in any era. Persian Gulf wars or books, some angry, some sober, undertaking to refute theories of decline hardly dispel the idea that suspicions of decline, of a loss of confidence in the United States, are afloat.

Of course this is not the only story. A good many theorists of political philosophy have tried to refurbish liberalism. These thinkers, we may term them neoliberals perhaps, have occasioned a good deal of deserved discussion at least in circles of political theory. On the whole, intellectuals such as James Fishkin or Amy Gutmann have tried to clean up liberalism, sometimes in theory and often in (American) practice without renouncing it in any fundamental sense. There are more students of reform than of crisis. One common theme has been liberalism and justice; another has been liberalism and value justification; a third has been liberalism, democracy, and democratic education. All are topics long of concern to liberalism and on which critics in the present and in the past have concentrated. Whether one may say that community has been as much a topic for discussion among neoliberals is debatable. Equally so is whether community is a concept which provokes much enthusiasm. What is more certain is that these philosophical liberals simply do not share the widespread sense of crisis in their analyses (though they are hardly complacent) or a zealous drive to make community the philosophical center of their intellectual efforts.

From another angle, it is impossible to ignore the controversy during the last several decades over John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. His discussion is self-consciously philosophical and thus meant as
much more than an argument regarding the United States. On the other hand, it can be read as a defense of the liberal order of the United States. Either way, Rawls is notably silent on the general subject of community.

Yet Rawls and the controversy that has swirled around his book also serve to illustrate my general interpretive point. The truth is that Rawls, though surely a liberal, is hardly sanguine. Liberalism in his mind has failed to address adequately either problems of justice or questions of justification. In both areas liberalism and (by implication) the U.S. face a serious crisis. All may not be lost according to Rawls, but crisis within liberalism there is, by now a familiar refrain.95

One should note other voices with a distinctly more optimistic sound. There are those who insist that recent times have been, on balance, good for a great many Americans and that liberalism has produced some unquestioned glories. In one version, this view holds a stunning expansion of human liberty in the United States beginning in the late 1960s, especially for women and for blacks. This view also argues ours has been a wonderful time of spiritual liberation and development when many Americans have turned to self-fulfillment in a bewildering, but also exciting, variety of ways. The result of both phenomena has been in practice an unparalleled democratization of society. Although not fully open to all or in all areas, the doors of opportunity have opened wider.96

This approach, well articulated by Peter Clecak, is more enthusiastic than that of Richard Reeves, who makes considerably more modest claims. Reeves speaks for those like him who share the mood of criticism and unease. He offers a host of complaints about American policies, especially during the era of Ronald Reagan, and also about some American institutions, while scrupulously avoiding such abstract matters as the metaphysics of American society. Yet Reeves represents those who conclude that things are, on balance, satisfactory in the United States. Reeves claims that ours may be a “selfish democracy” and that we are barely holding our head above water with our great problem and challenge, race relations.97 Still, he rejoices that the American Dream is quite alive and grants that Clecak is correct: We are a more democratic country than ever.98

Much more positive analyses also exist as illustrated in Daniel Boorstin’s history in the grand manner and his political role as some-
thing of a celebrator of the American experiment. Exemplified by his classic *Genius of American Politics*, if often repeated later, Boorstin's view is distinctly negative toward intellectuals and abstract intellectualism. In his analysis, our culture has produced little political thought and as a result has had little fundamental political conflict. We have been free of the abstraction which often leads to real political division and blessed instead with a practical mindset which has had and can continue to have impressive results in terms of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He implies that skepticism should always control our apprehension of intellectuals who shout crisis or rush forth with one or another nostrum. In Boorstin's histories such intellectuals are a nuisance, and the idea that they have much creative energy is laughable.

It is not surprising to learn that the mood of complaint is hardly the only attitude present among political intellectuals. Who would have expected consensus? Such an expectation was perhaps never reasonable despite the brilliance of Louis Hartz; certainly it is not now. My purpose is not to show that all political intellectuals agree, a task beyond both my intentions and my capacities. Yet there is little reason to contest the claim that the mood of complaint is the current reigning disposition and that it represents a major turn in American intellectual thought over the last twenty years.

The breadth of complaint is impressive. Thus we hear from traditionalist Robert Nisbet a dirge for "the present age," where we have degenerated until about all we have left in the United States is the "loose Individual." Or we learn from Alan Wolfe why we must decry the excessive individualist ethic ruining American culture. For him the liberal capitalist market has penetrated and undermined all aspects of our common life, the family, the school, even the ordinary civic and charitable organizations. In his chosen language, market relations have subverted civil society. Moreover, according to both Nisbet and Wolfe liberalism's only solution, the state, has done little good once we get beyond questions of economic survival. It has had nothing positive to offer to resuscitate human lives and human relations. As Wolfe put it, liberalism simply cannot meet communal needs.

What should be done? Over and over the question is asked, "What
medicine does one prescribe for a social order that is sick?"\textsuperscript{103} The answers, alas, are sometimes disappointingly thin. It is unfortunately true that "too much time has been spent assaulting liberalism, too little articulating and defending an alternative in any detail."\textsuperscript{104}

And yet. And yet there is a distinct turn in American political thought that has moved and continues to move beyond the present taste for complaint as almost an end in itself. This shift is toward a broad and various but far from formless response, a shift toward community. The rest of this book is about that turn in contemporary intellectual thought.