

## CHAPTER SIX

# The Poverty of Progressivism and the Tragedy of Civil Society

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THE UNCERTAIN FATE of progressivism in America has been a recurrent theme of public intellectual contention for well over a century. In that time, American politics has experienced recurrent waves of discontent, reform, and stasis. The reforms of the progressive era, the New Deal, and the Great Society can be thought of in terms of such cycles. That the United States has recently been experiencing a prolonged stasis is a diagnosis shared by many commentators and articulated cogently in E. J. Dionne Jr.'s acclaimed book on the subject—*Why Americans Hate Politics*—a book that, though over a decade old, is still frequently cited as having captured an enduring truth about our contemporary political life. Stasis, impasse, interregnum—for a variety of reasons, we are deeply disposed to believe that such conditions ought not to persist and cannot persist, that difficulties should and will be resolved in the course of time. Thus, Dionne's diagnosis has given rise among many liberals to the notion that a progressive revival is in the cards. Following Walter Lippmann's influential pro-

This chapter draws on Isaac, *The Poverty of Progressivism: The Future of American Democracy in a Time of Liberal Decline* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

gressive era essay “Drift and Mastery,” these progressive liberals discern drift, and they seek, and anticipate, a new form of mastery.

The idea that American society is currently poised for another wave of progressive reform has had remarkable staying power for well over a decade. Originally buoyed by the promise attributed to the Clinton victory in 1992, this idea has persisted in the face of the disappointing domestic record of the Clinton administration, the ignominious 2000 defeat of Gore, the illiberal consequences of the war on terror undertaken by the Bush administration in response to the September 2001 terrorist attacks, and, indeed, in the face of George W. Bush’s continued popularity as a “war president” (of course, this popularity is currently in doubt). The staying power of this idea is a sign of its aspirational and motivational power. And yet, the notion of a new progressive hegemony does not seriously reckon with the profound obstacles confronting such a hegemony. Although American society today may confront pressing challenges analogous to those of a century ago, the social and political structures of opportunity, and indeed the consequences of the long-term exhaustion and delegitimization of progressive liberalism, make a progressive hegemony highly unlikely.

Here I briefly discuss this idea of progressive hegemony and especially its most recent articulations; argue that the notion of such a hegemony is wishful thinking, especially in the wake of September 11; and then consider whether a more modest conception of “new citizenship,” rooted in civil society, represents a plausible residue of this conception. I argue that such a politics is plausible, and indeed necessary, but that it is profoundly unsatisfactory. My basic point is that the stasis currently afflicting American politics is likely to persist, and progressive liberals must come to terms with it. Although this is not a heartening perspective that does not lend itself to new activist prescriptions, it seems warranted by the current situation.

### A Progressive Revival?

The 1990s saw the emergence of a distinctive set of arguments about the need for a progressive revival. Just as the America of the 1890s was poised before a new century, so, it has been argued, are we, poised at the dawn of a new century, confronting new technological opportunities and severe social challenges that demand a new spirit of progressive reform. Overwhelmed by our own interdependencies, we need new forms of social intelligence. Debilitated by an inflationary rights revolution, we need a more pragmatic, yet vigorous, approach to governmental regulation. Beset by fragmentation and division, we need a new activist public policy, centered around the problems of a postindustrial economy and the decline of middle-class living standards. This policy might repair the social fabric and restore direction and coherence to national life. We must do all this, neoprogressive writers and activists argue, because the only alternative is to submit to the forces of reaction, to squander the prospects for progress presented by new opportunities, and to resign our politics to a prolonged period of suffering, resentment, and antagonism.

John Judis and Michael Lind's 1995 manifesto in the *New Republic*, "For a New American Nationalism," helped bring this broader argument to the foreground of discussion. Criticizing the incoherence of the Clinton administration and the "primitive anti-statism" of Gingrichite republicanism, Judis and Lind called for a new nationalism, inspired by the examples of Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt and summed up in Herbert Croly's influential *The Promise of American Life* (1909).

America today faces a situation roughly analogous to the one Roosevelt and the progressives faced. Workers are not threatening to man the barricades against capitalists, but society is divided into mutually hostile camps. . . . [T]he goal of a new nationalism today is to forestall these looming divisions in American society. . . . Can we meet these challenges? In the decades between Lincoln and

Theodore Roosevelt, the country floundered as badly as it has during the last few decades. Their mountebanks were no different from ours; their corruption was even more pervasive; and their sense of political paralysis even more profound. Still, they were able to think and act anew. As we prepare to enter the next century, we believe that we are on the verge of a similar era of national renewal.”<sup>1</sup>

This theme was echoed in Dionne’s much-cited book *They Only Look Dead*, the subtitle of which aptly sums up its argument: *Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era*. Opening with an epigraph from Theodore Roosevelt, Dionne endorsed a new progressivism, inspired by Croly, whose “task is to restore the legitimacy of public life by renewing the effectiveness of government and reforming the workings of politics.”<sup>2</sup> Similar sentiments were sounded by Jacob Weisberg in *In Defense of Government*. Reviving liberalism, he wrote

is not a matter of starting from scratch but rather of recovering and renewing lost principles. . . . In its original incarnation, progressivism offers a needed corrective to liberalism as it has come to be defined by the Democratic Party over the past few decades. Looking back to the old Progressives, we find a liberalism without a century’s accretion of bad habits, without mawkishness or excess. We find a practical, democratic approach to bettering the country. By reviving progressive ideas, liberals can fit themselves for governing again. By resurrecting the term, we can indicate a break with our recent past and our link to an older tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Similar prescriptions were also developed in Theda Skocpol and Stanley Greenberg’s *The New Majority: Toward a Popular Progressive Pol-*

1. John B. Judis and Michael Lind, “For a New American Nationalism,” *New Republic* (March 27, 1995), 27.

2. E. J. Dionne Jr., *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996), 16.

3. Jacob Weisberg, *In Defense of Government: The Fall and Rise of Public Trust* (New York: Scribner’s, 1996), 158. See also Michael Tomasky, *Left for Dead: The Life, Death and Possible Resurrection of Progressive Politics in America* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

*itics*, which maintained that the current moment represents “a period of opportunity for progressives,” and that although the tactical strength of liberalism is minimal, the larger unfolding social changes offer political openings for the revival of progressive liberalism.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most ambitious of these calls for a revival of progressivism was Michael Lind’s *The Next American Nation*, which proposed that we currently stand poised for economic and cultural renewal at the dawn of a “Fourth American Revolution.” Lind outlined an elaborate set of policies designed to turn back the deterioration in middle-class living standards and to cement a strong reformist political coalition. Such policies, he averred, can only succeed as part of a “war on oligarchy” that seeks to make the accumulation of private wealth compatible with overall national interests.<sup>5</sup>

This neoprogressive discourse, though chastened by political events of the past decade, which can hardly be seen as proof of a new progressive ascendancy, has not been dampened. Thus, Bush’s presidential victory was interpreted as an anomaly, a sign of the underlying strength of progressive forces (Gore won a popular majority; demographic trends favor Democrats, etc.). Thus, even the war on terrorism undertaken in response to the September 11 attacks was interpreted as a sign of the necessity of progressive politics (the war requires a vigorous governmental response; the anthrax scare highlighted the importance of public health policies; domestic security requires a new attention to public goods and infrastructure [airports, ports, railways, etc.]).

This optimism about the long-term prospects for progressivism is mirrored in three recent books that update, but do not substantially amend, the neoprogressive arguments of the 1990s: John Judis and Ruy Teixeira’s *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, Stanley B. Green-

4. Stanley B. Greenberg and Theda Skocpol, *The New Majority: Toward a Popular Progressive Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

5. Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 301–2.

berg's *The Two Americas: Our Current Political Deadlock and How to Break It*, and Ted Halstead and Michael Lind's *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics*. In different ways, each book argues that the demographics and economics of American society are inconsistent with the current stasis and that these forces point toward a new progressive hegemony. The first two books, which focus on electoral dynamics, argue that democratic advantages among middle-class professionals, minorities, women, and workers can be the basis for "an emerging Democratic majority." The latter book, which focuses on the functional requirements of a postindustrial, information-based economy, argues that a "new social contract" is necessary for social forces to be liberated from old structures and to function efficiently. None of these books treats these developments as inevitable. All recognize that such developments will require political agencies and strategies. Greenberg was the most explicit in acknowledging the power of the current stasis, which he described as a "game" that offers incentives to both parties to continue working at the margins in the hope of the next electoral victory. Yet none of these books deals, with any degree of seriousness, with the kinds of social movements and political coalitions that might make possible a new hegemony and with the kinds of obstacles that such movements and coalitions confront.

I believe that these neoprogressive visions rest on specious analogies with the past and on weak functionalist arguments. As for the first, although progressivism was a political project of what James Scott called "high modernism," American society is characterized by many postmodern features—most notably a "post-Fordist" economy characterized by extreme forms of flexibility and mobility that defy regulatory mechanisms and that severely test the capacities of the nation-state; new forms of consumerism and consumer credit that severely weaken the "organic solidarities" that in the past grounded oppositional social and political movements; and especially new forms of communication associated with the mass media and with new informational technologies that profoundly call into question the pro-

gressive assumption of any kind of rational public or meaningful public discourse about public problems and their solution. Whereas previous waves of progressive reform were driven by politically organized social movements, American society today lacks any functional equivalents of these movements. As for the second book, the existence of social problems associated with new demographic and economic structures, and the functional need for these problems to be solved for society to function more smoothly and fairly, does not necessitate political agencies capable of addressing these problems in serious ways, nor does it mean that these problems are likely to be solved. In a similar vein, the existence of a “demand side” for progressive platforms and policies does not entail the likelihood of a “supply side” capable of satisfying this demand for a sustained period. My basic point, then, is that progressive aspirations are not likely to be realized and that liberals who subscribe to core progressive values need to think in more chastened and pragmatic ways about what is possible under current conditions.

In what follows, I suggest that it is on the terrain of civil society and its voluntary initiatives and third-sector organizations, and not on the terrain of the national state and its regulatory agencies, that the best chance for the advancement of such generally progressive values as social justice and civic empowerment lies. This does not mean that civil society and the state can simplistically be counterposed or that civil society initiatives can succeed without political support of various kinds. Civil society is surely no panacea, the enthusiasm of some of its partisans notwithstanding. It simply means that an ambitious agenda of political reform and socioeconomic regulation is unlikely to be enacted; thus, more modest and localized efforts represent the best hope for a left-liberal politics of democratic problem solving and public regulation. Theorists of “the new citizenship” and of the so-called “third way” have correctly seen this. The third way represents a formula for electoral success, but, more important, it represents a modest politics that embraces the terms of political real-

ism and conducts itself on the terrain of political retrenchment. Third-way politics, and the civil society–centered initiatives it promotes, has much to recommend itself under current historical conditions. But it is also a profoundly limited and unsatisfying form of politics. Partisans of the third way too rarely acknowledge these limits, thus falling victim to their own form of Panglossian optimism. Instead, I argue, what is called for is an honest acknowledgment of the obstacles and tragic binds confronting left-liberal politics today, as well as a sober commitment to nourishing those efforts that promise, in limited ways to be sure, a modicum of justice and empowerment in the face of these obstacles.

#### How Civil Society Initiatives Offer an Alternative Means of Advancing Progressive Values

In recent years, an eclectic group of writers and activists from across the political spectrum have turned toward civil society as the answer to today's social problems. Refusing simply to celebrate the retrenchment of political agency in the face of market forces, most civil society advocates acknowledge that serious social problems exist and that meaningful forms of collective response are both necessary and possible. Unlike neoprogessives, however, they maintain that such responses are best located in the sphere of civil society rather than in the sphere of conventional politics and public policy formation. Although there is no simple consensus among them, civil society is typically taken to denote that intermediate sphere between the state and the market, between the modalities of sovereign political decision making and individual self-interest. Some civil society advocates, with roots in conservative and neoconservative critiques of the welfare state and its therapeutic culture, focus on such "moral" institutions as the family and religious congregations.<sup>6</sup> Others, closer to the Left, are

6. See Don E. Eberly, *America's Promise: Civil Society and the Renewal of American Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), and the Council on Civil



primarily concerned with the injustices of capitalist markets and focus on a broader range of voluntary associations, from nonprofit organizations to community-development corporations to trade unions and social movements.<sup>7</sup> There is no single civil society perspective because one of the premises of the civil society discourse is the plurality of civil society associations and the inadequacy of political programs to express or represent this plurality. There is, nonetheless, a general proposition common to those interested in the revival of civil society: neither the progressive, regulatory state nor the free market is sufficient to address America's social ills, and the only way to address those ills is by strengthening the mediating institutions of society.

As their proponents argue, civil society initiatives and organizations have much to recommend them.

(1) They work on the principle of subsidiarity, typically proposing to solve social problems at the lowest and most proximate level consistent with their solution. They are thus appealing to all those, Right and Left, who are wary of the centralized, bureaucratic state and who seek to promote greater civic engagement through more localized and accessible forms of citizen participation.

(2) They purport to promote civic responsibility, requiring individual citizens to work collaboratively to achieve public goods. In this regard, civil society initiatives can be seen as fostering empowerment rather than dependence, deliberation rather than zero-sum strategic bargaining, and communitarian dispositions rather than predatory practices aimed at colonizing public power on behalf of particular interests.

(3) They purport to rest on social self-organization and on diverse forms of volunteerism. Thus, they do not require large amounts of money to be allocated by the federal government.

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Society, *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths* (New York: Institute for American Values, 1998).

7. See Benjamin R. Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

Civil society initiatives thus combine, at least ideal-typically, the virtues of entrepreneurial effort, efficiency, voluntarism, and civic-mindedness. For this reason, they are often presented as being practical in a way that welfare state regulations and allocations are not. Further, they are often seen as sources of social capital that build trust and confidence in social and political institutions.<sup>8</sup> As Benjamin Barber summed up this view:

[It] posits a third domain of civic engagement which is neither governmental nor strictly private yet shares the virtues of both. It offers a space for public work, civic business, and other common activities that are focused neither on profit nor on a welfare bureaucracy's client services. It is also a communicative domain of civility, where political discourse is grounded in mutual respect and the search for common understanding even as it expresses differences and identity conflicts. It extols voluntarism but insists that voluntarism is the first step to citizenship, not just an exercise in private character building, philanthropy, or noblesse oblige.<sup>9</sup>

The civil society idea, which has assumed great prominence in contemporary American political discourse, has generated a proliferation of practical experiments that have been promoted by an extensive and increasingly dense network of philanthropic foundations and academic institutions, including the Kettering Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Bradley Foundation, the Open Society Institute, the National Civic League, the Hubert Humphrey Center at the University of Minnesota, and the Walt Whitman Center at Rutgers University. Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland, in their book *Civic Innovation in America*, have gone so far as to call this collection of efforts a genuine "movement for civic renewal."

8. See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); and Richard A. Couto, with Catherine S. Guthrie, *Making Democracy Work Better: Mediating Structures, Social Capital, and the Democratic Prospect* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

9. Barber, *A Place for Us*.

The promotion of civic renewal initiatives is of great value, and civil society advocates working in this vein have made it clear that even though progressive politics at the level of the national state may be stalled, when one examines the landscape of American society more carefully, one will discover a vigorous civil society politics. As Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari put it, “For all our problems and fears as a nation, civic energy abounds. Americans are not uncaring or apathetic about public affairs. In fact, a rich array of civic work in many diverse settings is evident across the country.”<sup>10</sup> Partly in response to the practical limitations of progressive social policy, partly in response to the ideological disrepute of ambitious progressive policy visions, and partly for pragmatic reasons, citizens and civic groups have developed important, innovative practices worth taking very seriously as forms of democratic practice for a post-progressive age. Some examples follow.

### *Labor*

Many neoproggressives note that the dramatic decline of the American labor movement has had harmful distributional and civic consequences, eroding the principal means of working-class social capital, and thereby exacerbating economic inequality.<sup>11</sup> In the face of the manifest political weakness of the organized labor movement, labor activists, working in conjunction with the AFL-CIO and with forward-looking union leaders, have pioneered such innovative efforts as cross-border solidarity networks, campaigns against child labor and sweatshop labor, student efforts to support living wage arrangements

10. Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 5.

11. See Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Theda Skocpol, *The Missing Middle: Working Families and the Future of American Social Policy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); and Edward N. Wolff, *Top Heavy: The Increasing Inequality of Wealth in America and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: New Press, 1995).

on university campuses, Jobs With Justice efforts to support living wage ordinances, and community tribunals to hear worker grievances and to publicize employer maltreatment of workers. Such efforts—notably the living wage movement—sometimes seek to influence public policy, typically at the local rather than the national level.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, as in the widely publicized demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, they seek to protest national public policy. More often, they seek to press specific grievances and to influence public opinion, thus shifting public discourse and building solidarity for workers without substantially altering the balance of power between classes or effecting dramatic changes in public policy.<sup>13</sup>

For example, Randy Shaw documented how human rights, labor, and religious activists joined together to pressure Nike to reform its overseas labor practices, which sanctioned repressive and abusive labor relations and extremely low wages in Third World countries, indirectly generating a worldwide race to the bottom regarding wages and working conditions for garment workers.<sup>14</sup> The campaign's outcome was neither a collective bargaining agreement nor a piece of national legislation but simply a "voluntary accord" between Nike and its critics, brokered by the Clinton administration, that required Nike to voluntarily limit its overseas abuses, to pay so-called prevailing wages, and to submit to voluntary forms of quasi-independent monitoring of its labor practices. This accord also led to the formation of a cor-

12. See Robert Pollin, "Living Wage, Live Action," *Nation*, November 23, 1998: 15–20.

13. For a useful overview of many of these efforts that is also a brief on their behalf, see Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 1999). See also Klein, "Does Protest Need a Vision?" *Nation*, 2000; and Martin Hart-Landsberg, "After Seattle: Strategic Thinking About Movement Building," *Monthly Review*, July–August 2000: 112.

14. See Randy Shaw, *Reclaiming America: Nike, Clean Air, and the New National Activism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), especially 1–96.

poratist organization, the Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP), intended to encourage other apparel manufacturers to undertake similar measures. Subsequent to these developments, the AIP spawned another organization, the Fair Labor Association (FLA), designed to bring together corporations, labor rights groups, and universities behind a program to limit sweatshop abuses. In response to the corporate biases of the FLA, student activists associated with United Students Against Sweatshops, working in tandem with the AFL-CIO, UNITE, and other worker organizations, formed the Workers' Right Consortium (WRC) as an alternative to the corporatist FLA to pursue strategies of independent corporate monitoring. The WRC has pressed almost 100 American universities to affiliate with it.

Significant momentum against sweatshop labor has been generated by these campaigns. In many ways, the effects of such activity have been limited, and it is clear that such campaigns cannot bring the force of law to bear against corporate abuse. As critics point out, prevailing wages in most Third World countries are abominably low, and labor law in these countries affords few rights to workers. Voluntary accords, such as the one brokered with Nike, do very little to alter such harsh realities. They similarly do little, in broad terms, to affect global wage rates or to put an end to the tendency of global sweatshop conditions to depress the wages of American workers. Nonetheless, they can effect some measure of change in those particular factories that become the focus of public attention. Through this, they may create small ripple effects of change. In addition, these accords help raise public awareness about labor issues and express solidarity with poorly treated workers here and abroad.<sup>15</sup> Such efforts are not the result of mass movement activity; they do not substantially enhance the bargaining or political power of organized labor, neither

15. See Archon Fung, Dara O'Rourke, and Charles Sabel, "Realizing Labor Standards: How Transparency, Competition, and Sanctions Could Improve Working Conditions Worldwide," *Boston Review*, February/March 2001: 4–10, 20.

in Third World countries nor in the United States; and they do not add up to a large-scale public policy agenda. Nonetheless, they do have important, if limited, effects on economic life and on the process of political empowerment itself.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Environment*

In the face of declining political support and federal funding for vigorous environmental regulation, new civil society approaches have emerged to supplement, and sometimes replace, top-down bureaucratic regulation of corporations: new forms of deliberation about hazardous waste disposal and appropriate risk that include business, local government, environmental activists and civic associations; public information campaigns about toxic substances, such as the Right to Know Network and Citizens' Clearinghouse on Toxic Waste; civic monitoring of pollution and waste disposal; local green space ordinances, community land trusts and environmental stewardship, and good neighbor agreements. What has come to be called "civic environmentalism" comprises a repertoire of innovative forms of partnership designed to allow local, place-based communities to develop modes of consensus, or at least levels of mutual understanding and trust, about questions of acceptable risk, the costs and benefits of different kinds of toxic cleanups, trade-offs between jobs and the environment, and the most appropriate methods of managing forests, watersheds, and other environmentally sensitive areas.<sup>17</sup> These techniques are partly a response to declining federal ability and inclination to impose environmental solutions.<sup>18</sup> But they are also the result of a

16. See Jeffrey Isaac, "Thinking About the Antisweatshop Movement." *Dissent*, Fall 2001: 36–44.

17. See Bruce A. Williams and Albert R. Matheny, *Democracy, Dialogue, and Environmental Disputes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); and Andrew Szasz, *Ecopopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

18. See, for example, Katharine Q. Seelye, "Bush Proposing to Shift Burden of Toxic Cleanups to Taxpayers." *New York Times*, February 24, 2002: A1.

learning process that has taught many environmental activists that there are no cost-free ways to make environmental decisions and that bureaucratic regulation is often inferior to consensus building and civic responsibility. In *Civic Innovation in America*, Sirianni and Friedland present an impressive inventory of such efforts, which have sprung up across the country and have worked, in fairly mundane and unpublicized ways, to collaboratively resolve environmental problems at the local level. The results of such innovations are varied, and, unsurprisingly given their modus operandi, such results tend to be localized. But they are not without effect upon environmental policy and local politics.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, civic environmentalism has moved beyond collaborative approaches to the environment to address broader issues related to urban sprawl, “local self-reliance,” and “sustainable development.” Communities across the United States have thus taken up the theme of civic responsibility to support new modes of land use regulation and regional planning that promote urban density and “compact urban form,” neighborhood preservation, environmentally sustainable agriculture, and locally owned business.<sup>20</sup>

### *Urban Issues*

In the absence of a massive federal effort to revitalize impoverished inner cities through public housing subsidy and construction, job cre-

19. Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America: Community, Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 85–137.

20. See Michael Shuman, *Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000); Myron Orfield, *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997); and Manuel Pastor Jr., Peter Dreier, J. Eugene Grigsby III, and Marta Lopez-Garza, *Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Michael Sandel discussed such efforts in *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 334–36.

ation, and the serious enhancement of public education, a range of less ambitious and ad hoc efforts to address urban problems have sprung up throughout the United States: local nonprofit social service agencies that offer child care, support for the victims of domestic abuse, temporary shelter, and job training; community development corporations that seek to leverage public, private, and philanthropic funds to revitalize neighborhoods through the construction of low-cost housing, the establishment of neighborhood-based health clinics and cooperatives, and the promotion of neighborhood-based retail outlets, banks, shopping centers, and other businesses; community development banks that bridge major financial institutions and inner-city communities, countering the effects of redlining and making funds available for community development; community organizations facilitated by the Industrial Areas Foundation, such as East Brooklyn Congregations, which pioneered the Nehemiah Project of building low-cost housing, and Communities Organized for Public Service, which has organized in support of a range of redevelopment efforts in San Antonio; and innovative, locally oriented, third-sector programs designed to build human and social capital, such as YouthBuild and the Algebra Project.<sup>21</sup> According to one of the most articulate advocates of such civil society efforts, they have generated “a surprising legacy of hope as Americans of good spirit have stepped in to do a job that needed to be done. . . . [W]e can look to these small-scale, local efforts to find responses to the problems of poverty

21. For an overview of such initiatives, see Lisbeth Schorr, *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997); Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, eds., *Urban Problems and Community Development* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997); and Sirianni and Friedland, *Civic Innovation*, 35–84. On the Industrial Areas Foundation, see Sirianni and Friedland, *Civic Innovation*, 43–56; and Harry Boyte, *Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 81–126. On the Algebra Project, see Jeffrey Isaac, “The Calculus of Consent: The Algebra Project and Democratic Politics,” *Dissent*, 1998.



that are not only more effective but more humane than our current social service and welfare programs.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Why Civil Society Initiatives Do *Not* Offer an Alternative to Progressivism**

The aforementioned efforts clearly hold promise as examples of the way ordinary citizens and grassroots civic organizations can effect a measure of change through their own means. Our sensationalist and media-saturated culture obscures this in its reduction of politics to celebrity gossip, electoral horseraces, and professional punditry. For this reason, civil society efforts are important not only for their practical value but also for their exemplary or symbolic value, as instances of “civic virtue” and dedicated “public work” that should be emulated and extended.

Nonetheless, there are dangers to exaggerating the significance of these efforts because they are typically patently inadequate to the problems they address. Although new labor networks and antisweat campaigns may furnish valuable support and solidarity to workers struggling against the ill effects of untrammelled free trade and financial globalization, such networks have little effect on the ability of workers in the United States or elsewhere to collectively bargain about wages or about working conditions, job security, and the long-term effects of investment decisions. They have just as little effect on the possibilities of national policies regarding employment, trade, or long-term, sustainable development. Such efforts are thus no substitute for a coherent political agenda centered on the concerns of workers and their families.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, civic environmentalism can help citizens negotiate the

22. Robin Garr, *Reinvesting in America* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 230.

23. See Mark Levinson, “Wishful Thinking,” and David Moberg, “Unions and the State,” in *Boston Review*, February/March 2001: 13, 15.

terms by which environmental degradation is abated or remedied, as well as collaborate in local deliberative processes about managed growth and environmental sustainability. But such efforts, by themselves, can do little to affect broader environmental policies regarding acid rain, or global warming, or even the cessation of simple environmental point pollution. For this, there can be no substitute for a national (and indeed international) regulatory policy capable of articulating uniform standards and supporting well-funded and predictable regulatory enforcement. Yet such a policy requires a mobilization of resources and political will that simply does not currently exist. In such a setting, ongoing practices of production and consumption have a life of their own, generating a “mobilization of bias” in favor of environmental waste and degradation. The experience of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation is instructive here. The foundation is presented by Sirianni and Friedland as a model of civic environmentalism. It has joined together many local environmental and civic groups, across state boundaries, to call attention to environmental degradation and to promote collaborative stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay. And yet, as the *New York Times* recently reported, this exemplary effort to restore the Chesapeake Bay watershed continues to confront extraordinary obstacles. In 1987, the group committed itself to reducing nitrogen pollution by 40 percent. However, it has succeeded thus far in reducing it by only 17 percent because the group must contend not simply with the legacy of decades of uncontrolled pollution but also with an additional 300 *million* pounds of nitrogen pollution every year.<sup>24</sup>

The same limits present themselves, in an even more striking way, with regard to the problems of urban poverty and inequality. Even the most elaborate and well-connected civil society efforts come up against broad social trends, such as deindustrialization and suburban-

24. “Progress in Cleaning Chesapeake Bay, But Far to Go,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2001: A12.

ization; massive social problems; and shortages of funds, bureaucratic delays, and the resistance of bankers, bondholders, corporate elites, and sometimes even municipal unions and social service agencies.<sup>25</sup> To offer just one example, the story of Sandtown, an inner-city neighborhood of Baltimore, is often cited as a civic renewal success story. An impressive partnership of city government, community organizations, and philanthropists supported a number of innovative housing, job training, youth development, and educational initiatives. And yet, as Peter Edelman—who has extolled this effort as a model—pointed out, these successes are limited and have come hard:

Sandtown is still a poor neighborhood. Many of its adult residents are at a point where positive change is hard for them. There are still too many influences, both at home and on the street, that pull children in the wrong direction. Drug use seems to have actually increased. Nonmarital births are still four times the national rate. Two of the elementary schools have improved phenomenally, but it is not yet even near the truth to say that the school system is consistently turning out job-ready graduates from Sandtown. . . . The job situation is little better.<sup>26</sup>

Keep in mind that this is a civic renewal *success* story. Edelman's comments make clear how difficult success really is, even in those rare settings where "success" can plausibly be claimed at all.

In each of these domains, it would seem, we are presented with broad and systemic public problems whose solution would require equally broad and systemic public policy. Yet, what civil society offers tends to be ad hoc, localized, voluntarist, and often voluntary. What civil society offers is short on money and short on what political scientists call the "authoritative allocation of values." Authoritative

25. On these themes, see Matthew Filner, "On the Limits of Community Development: Participation, Power, and Growth in Urban America, 1965–Present," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Political Science, Indiana University, August 2001.

26. Peter Edelman, *Searching for America's Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 197.

allocation is precisely what progressivism offered at the turn of the last century and what progressive public policy, in its subsequent iterations during the New Deal and Great Society periods, has always offered: a clear, coherent, national policy agenda for attacking social problems; for bringing them, as it were, to heel; and for substituting an overarching public purposiveness and public power for the anarchy of the market and the automatism of society.

To be sure, civil society efforts are genuine *efforts*. They mobilize a certain kind of civic power that is constituted by the concerted energies of diverse citizens working together. They tap practical idealism, they generate civic confidence, and they promote problem-solving experiences that are distinctive and worthy.<sup>27</sup> Such efforts do make a difference, but they do not typically mobilize *political power*. They do not generate organizational forms or ideological commitments that might render them capable of offsetting the power of privileged elites and of supporting a substantial political or policy agenda. To the extent that this is true, civil society efforts do not, and cannot, represent a solution to the problems that neoprogessives seek to address.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, few proponents of civil society would contend that voluntary efforts by themselves could succeed in solving pressing social problems. Even such conservative civil society advocates as Robert Woodson of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise recognize that governmental support for civil society efforts is indispensable to their success.<sup>29</sup> In every domain in which civil society

27. For a discussion of this kind of power, see Hannah Arendt, "On Violence," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, 1972), especially 143–55.

28. Theda Skocpol makes this point in "Advocates Without Members," 499–506. See also Christopher Beem, *The Necessity of Politics: Reclaiming American Public Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

29. Robert L. Woodson Jr., "A Challenge to Conservatives," *Commonsense* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 23–25. As Christopher Beem wrote: "The institutions of civil society are inherently ill suited to address some of the movement's core objectives. . . . [O]ur polity is best able to achieve the goals of the civil society movement when both the state and civil society are operative and vibrant," in *The Necessity of*

initiatives have been lauded, it is fairly clear that these initiatives have thrived not as alternatives to public policy but as the beneficiaries of a supportive public policy. What Sirianni and Friedland observed about civic environmentalism is true in general: “it serves as a complement to, not a substitute for, regulation. A strong federal role is often required to trigger civic approaches.”<sup>30</sup> But civil society advocates often fail to take the full measure of the significance of this reliance on public policy at a time of liberal political weakness. Sirianni and Friedland’s *Civic Innovation in America* offers a case study of this failure, a failure that is all the more instructive because their book is the most empirically sound, careful, and discriminating account of such efforts to have emerged in the past decade.

Sirianni and Friedland catalogued a range of efforts that have emerged in four domains—community development, environmentalism, health policy, and public journalism. They insisted that these innovations are linked together in what they call a “broader civic renewal movement . . . with common language, shared practices, and networked relationships across a variety of arenas.”<sup>31</sup> That these innovations share common themes—the importance of active citizenship, the danger of bureaucratism, the importance of pragmatic collaboration—seems clear, just as it seems clear that they are commonly promoted by a core network of philanthropies. The broader significance of these efforts, however, is less clear. Sirianni and Friedland seemed genuinely ambivalent here. On the one hand, their text is infused with an explicit “hopefulness” and with a sense that these civic innovations are transforming American public life. “Over the past decades,” they wrote, “[Americans] have created forms of civic practice that are far more sophisticated in grappling with complex public problems and collaborating with highly diversified social actors than have ever existed in American history.” Amid the worrisome signs of civic

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*Politics: Reclaiming American Public Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.

30. Sirianni and Friedland, *Civic Innovation*, 85.

31. *Ibid.*, 8.

disaffection documented by Robert Putnam and others, Sirianni and Friedland maintained, “there is already clear evidence of the kinds of civic innovation that could anchor and instruct broad revitalization strategies in the coming years.”<sup>32</sup> The broad democratic promise of these efforts is the major theme of their text. On the other hand, they noted the serious difficulties confronting such a revitalization.

We are deeply aware of the many obstacles that exist and the great uncertainty—even profound disagreement—about what a vital civic democracy might mean at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The story we tell is thus not only one of innovation and learning, but also one of roadblocks and detours, struggles and failures. Some of the failures, to be sure, have provided occasion for further learning, but others demonstrate the difficulty of bringing innovations to scale, embedding them in policy design, and creating a politics that will sustain them.<sup>33</sup>

When writing in this vein, they presented the broader project of democratic revitalization as a profoundly difficult task. They observed that “without a powerful movement capable of shifting the tides, too much of the vital public work and innovation of citizens analyzed in our core chapters will remain invisible and segmented, unable to inspire broad and vigorous commitment, and unable to redefine the underlying dynamics of ‘politics as usual.’”<sup>34</sup> Here, the “movement for civic renewal” becomes something of a moral *imperative* rather than an existing state of affairs; and their argument, a call to arms rather than a descriptive account. It may be that without such a movement meaningful change will be impossible;<sup>35</sup> but this does not mean that such

32. Ibid., 1, 19.

33. Ibid., 9. See also p. 260, where they reiterate their view that the civic renewal “movement” has “achieved an important threshold of recognition in the media,” but then note that “nonetheless, these important foundational accomplishments over a decade should not be exaggerated, nor the obstacles to further development of a broad movement underestimated.”

34. Ibid., 33–34.

35. Ibid., 27–71.

a movement is likely to be forthcoming. Like Harry Boyte's earlier *Backyard Revolution*, which, as they acknowledged, first made the case more than two decades ago for the importance of such civil society efforts, *Civic Innovation in America* is not simply an analysis but rather a brief for a particular vision of civic renewal, whereby a broad convergence of interest is anticipated and endorsed.<sup>36</sup> This hopefulness cannot simply be dismissed. The innovations in question *could* anchor "broad revitalization strategies," but these innovations might *not* have this effect. That these efforts together even make up a "movement" is far from clear.

A political movement typically involves more than certain common symbolic frames and some degree of overlapping memberships. It also involves a common substantive vision and a sense of historical destiny and forward *movement* toward the achievement of this vision. A political movement, arguably, requires a *teleology*, a grand narrative within which particular efforts acquire larger meaning<sup>37</sup>—early twentieth-century progressivism had this; so did New Deal liberalism. It is not clear that the civic efforts Siranni and Friedland discuss share any such teleology. They admitted as much, explicitly underscoring what sets the civic renewal movement apart from other social movements of the past and what constitutes its genuine distinctiveness:

Because the civic renewal movement is not primarily a rights or justice movement, it cannot rely on the metaphors, frames, strategies, or tactical repertoires of recent democratic movements. It cannot inspire action on the basis of unconditional claims to rights or righteous struggles against clearly defined oppressors. . . . It cannot capture and focus public attention through mass protests, marches on Washington, boycotts, strikes, freedom rides, and sit-ins, nor can it count on repression by authorities to galvanize widespread

36. See Harry Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

37. My argument here is indebted to Richard Rorty's essay "Movements and Campaigns." *Dissent*, Winter 1995: 55–60.

support. It cannot expect dramatic court decisions to energize activists or to secure significant new levers of power and representation. . . . And while legislation could certainly enact “policy designs for democracy” that help build civic capacity in specific areas, a civic renewal movement cutting across many institutional sectors cannot hope to build its networks through advocacy coalitions and lobbying for specific laws.<sup>38</sup>

This analysis suggests that while civil society efforts surely make up *something* worth emulating, they do not necessarily make a movement at all but rather a heterogeneous, pluralistic, fractious assemblage of particular and local activities and aspirations, with little political unity or historical directionality whatsoever. This sense is further reinforced by Sirianni and Friedland’s insistence that the “movement” is, and ought to remain, beyond partisan political competition. While they clearly leaned toward the Democratic Party, believing it the most suitable partisan vehicle of civic initiative, they insisted that what is most distinctive about civic renewal is its communitarian, collaborative, and pragmatic ethos. Such civil society efforts, they insisted, draw their energy from a sense of civic responsibility that is, in important respects, *antipolitical*. Direct linkage to conventional political organizations and movements “has little relevance to the work of civic renewal that needs to occur in all kinds of institutional and professional settings, from schools, universities, and hospitals to corporations, social service nonprofits, and public agencies. Meeting the major challenges in these settings . . . has little to gain from politicization and much to lose.” For, according to Sirianni and Friedland, direct politicization encourages adversarial, rather than collaborative, orientations; it encourages “rights talk” and other insistent discourses about justice and injustice and the political remediation of wrong; and it focuses too much of its energy on the satisfaction of “interests that can be served by state regulatory, social welfare, and redistributive policies.”<sup>39</sup> Politicization, in other words, implicates a progressive lib-

38. Sirianni and Friedland, *Civic Innovation*, 272–73.

39. *Ibid.*, 264–65.



eral project that Sirianni and Friedland considered outmoded and indeed counterproductive, not only because it requires the empowerment of bureaucratic state institutions but also because it is likely to generate powerful political opposition.

In making this argument Sirianni and Friedland's book merges into the broader discourse of the third way, which has risen to prominence in the past decade largely in connection with the electoral victories, and policy agendas, of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. The "third way" is a slogan that has been deployed, with substantial effect, by American New Democrat and British New Labour politicians seeking political power in societies that had experienced the electoral defeat of progressive or social democratic parties and the political ascendancy of Reaganite and Thatcherite conservatism. Sidney Blumenthal, erstwhile Clintonite, described the third way as "the practical experience of two leading politicians [Clinton and Blair] who win elections, operate in the real world, and understand the need, in a global economy, to find common solutions for common problems." Beneath the slogan, the third way connotes both a political strategy and a policy agenda. The political strategy is to move, in the words of Anthony Giddens, "beyond left and right," and to seek a broad consensus in the center of the political spectrum, at what is called, interchangeably, the "radical center," the "vital center," and the "active middle."<sup>40</sup> The basic point of this strategy is to acknowledge that neither progressive liberalism nor social democratic reformism can any longer rely on the support of an organized and powerful working class. Both must instead make their accommodation with the forces of deindustrialization and suburbanization and the hegemony

40. See Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); and Giddens, *The Third Way* (London: Polity Press, 1998). See also Jeffrey Isaac, "The Road (Not?) Taken: Anthony Giddens, The Third Way, and the Future of Social Democracy," *Dissent*, Spring 2001: 61–70.

of market values that have weakened working-class solidarities.<sup>41</sup> Accompanying this strategy is a policy agenda associated with the retrenchment of the welfare state and the politics of national regulation and an effort to actively promote the opportunities associated with private markets, third-wave technologies, and third-sector philanthropic activity. In the name of flexibility, third-wave politics endorses a dramatic scaling back of the role of the national state and a virtual repudiation of the progressive legacy in the name of progress itself.

In the United States, this third way has been associated with the Democratic Leadership Council and the Progressive Policy Institute under the leadership of Al Fromm and Will Marshall, respectively. Marshall nicely summarized this third-wave approach in an essay, “A New Fighting Faith,” published in the DLC’s *New Democrat* in support of the Clinton reelection campaign:

The party’s old faith, New Deal progressivism, has run its historic course. In his January State of the Union address, President Clinton made it official when he declared that “the era of big government is over.” The venerable New Deal creed was undone both by its great success in creating a large middle class that now sees itself more burdened than benefited from government, and by its undue reliance on outdated bureaucracies and top-down programs to meet the needs of a fast changing society. . . . For today’s progressives, there is no challenge more compelling than the need to replace a governance model developed for the Industrial Age—an era characterized by large, centralized institutions. . . . The new paradigm for progressive government springs from a simple insight: since we can no longer rely on big institutions to take care of us, we must create policies and institutions that enable us to take care of ourselves.”<sup>42</sup>

41. See William A. Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck, “Five Realities That Will Shape 21st Century US Politics,” reprinted in Anthony Giddens, ed., *The Global Third Way Debate* (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 2001).

42. Will Marshall, “A New Fighting Faith,” *New Democrat* 8, no. 5 (September/October 1996): 14–15.

Marshall's so-called new progressivism thus repudiates a strong state and a vigorous public policy in the name of equal opportunity, mutual responsibility, and self-governing citizenship. In the place of a supposedly heavy-handed and sclerotic state, the New Democrats exalt voluntarism, in economics, ethics, trade policy, social regulation, and social service delivery. For Marshall, this new progressivism is a partisan strategy suited to Democratic electoral victories.<sup>43</sup> But the affinities between this approach and the "new citizenship" endorsed by such "compassionate conservatives" as Michael Joyce, Michael Woodson, and William Schambra, who are closely associated with the political agenda of the Republican Party under the leadership of George W. Bush, should be obvious. These compassionate conservatives tend to be *civic* Republicans who sound the same themes—fiscal austerity, social solidarity, and civic engagement—as their New Democratic counterparts.<sup>44</sup> The new citizenship is, ideologically speaking, a *bipartisan* approach well adapted to a political terrain characterized by liberal exhaustion and substantial conservative success in delegitimizing a progressive agenda.<sup>45</sup>

Instructive in this regard is the Reinventing Citizenship Project organized in 1993 by William Galston, a prominent political theorist, long-time Democratic issues adviser, and White House Deputy Assistant for Domestic Policy in Clinton's first term. Under Galston's leadership, this project brought together many of the academic and civic leaders of the civic renewal movement. It organized meetings,

43. See Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Clinton to Reagan* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2000).

44. See, for example, Don E. Eberly, ed., *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994); and Stephen Goldsmith, *The Twenty-First Century City: Resurrecting Urban America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

45. This convergence was noted in Herbert Wray, et al., "The revival of civic life." *US News & World Reports*, January 29, 1996. See also Craig R. Rimmerman, *The New Citizenship: Unconventional Politics, Activism, and Service* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

conducted public hearings, published reports, and drafted policy proposals and public declarations on the themes of civic renewal and reinventing citizenship. Sirianni and Friedland—active participants in this process—described the effort with a measure of legitimate enthusiasm, which seems legitimate because the project involved many interesting people and ideas and seemed to signify a real openness to civic innovation at the highest levels of government. But they offer only a single sentence by way of an account of the ultimate political fate of these noble efforts: “The administration, however, proved unable to focus on this and other related initiatives once the congressional elections of 1994 took center stage.”<sup>46</sup> They do note that the White House continued to consult with academics linked to the civic renewal discourse and that it even “fashioned active citizenship themes” for use in the 1995 State of the Union and the 1996 presidential campaign. However, there does not appear to have been any White House follow-through or policy outcome associated with the project. For the Clinton administration, “reinventing citizenship” appears to have been a theme rather than a political vision.<sup>47</sup> As a rhetoric, new citizenship themes have clearly served a Democratic Party leadership intent on unburdening liberalism of its progressive liberal past, dismantling the welfare state, promoting global free trade, and emphasizing the assumption of civic duties at a time when there seems to be little political interest in enforcing social or economic rights.

At the same time, it is important to note that if the new citizenship was for the Clinton administration primarily a theme, its distinctive features *as* a rhetoric at least deserve note. In a political

46. Sirianni and Friedland, *Civic Innovation*, 250. My account of the Reinventing Citizenship Project draws largely from Sirianni and Friedland’s account but also from the texts posted on the Civic Practices Network website.

47. This is also the chastened conclusion of Benjamin Barber, who, like Sirianni and Friedland, was an active participant in the Reinventing Citizenship Project. See Barber’s recent book *The Truth of Power: Intellectual Affairs in the Clinton White House* (New York: Norton, 2001).

context in which social Darwinist themes have played an important role in delegitimizing liberalism, and in which forms of ethnic and religious fundamentalism have come to prevail throughout many parts of the world, the discourse of new citizenship and civic responsibility emphatically articulates liberal and universalist values. The appeal to civility is no grand answer to the problems confronting American society, but it is to be preferred to rhetorics of incivility that demonize or vilify particular groups and essentialize individual competition and social conflict. At the same time, however, when this appeal is not accompanied by a serious and coherent policy agenda at a time of intensified social and economic insecurity, it can easily assume a moralizing tone that smacks of hypocrisy—something from which new citizenship discourse has too often suffered.<sup>48</sup>

This is not to say that the third way is a politics of betrayal. To the contrary, the third way represents a savvy political strategy of coming to terms with changed social and political conditions. Those who charge New Democrats with betrayal, however sincere they may be, fail to reckon with these changes. As Lars-Erik Nelson pointed out, Bill Clinton—the only truly successful Democratic presidential politician since the mid-1960s—was never a left or progressive Democrat. He was a moderate governor of a Southern state who was elected to office in 1992 with 43 percent of the popular vote—hardly a mandate for progressive change. He had already demonstrated his commitment to the DLC strategy of modernizing the Democratic Party by shifting it to the Right. He was supported by the smallest congressional majority of any president elected in the twentieth century. And he confronted a Republican Party that had moved far to the Right and that had successfully shifted political discourse to the

48. This is the theme of Benjamin DeMott's provocative *The Trouble With Friendship: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

Right. In Nelson's words, "[T]here was a great political middle to be grabbed, and Clinton grabbed it."<sup>49</sup>

Clinton may well have betrayed his own idealistic rhetorical flourishes, and he surely treated the rhetorics of liberalism and civic responsibility in an opportunistic fashion that demoralized many who took seriously his rhetoric of renewal. Further, he surely made tactical mistakes—most notably regarding health care reform—that may have limited his subsequent ability to live up to even a small portion of the promise that many originally attached to his presidency. But, given the balance of political forces that were arrayed behind him and against him, it is hard to imagine him performing much differently than he did.<sup>50</sup> Like most politicians, he took the path of least resistance to electoral success. If that path was essentially a neoliberal one, this can hardly be blamed on Clinton because there existed little backing for anything more progressive and many obstacles were in the way of a more ambitious agenda. Clinton is not without blame for many of his failings, but neither is Clinton the demiurgic betrayer of liberalism that many of his critics on the left believe him to be. He was, simply, a creature of his times—a Democratic leader at a time when the sources of liberal vigor had dried up and the Democratic Party had become, for all intents and purposes, Republican. Clinton surely aided and abetted this transsubstantiation, but he was hardly its prime mover.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, to note the affinities between the discourse of civic

49. Lars-Erik Nelson, "Clinton and His Enemies," *New York Review of Books*, January 20, 2000: 20.

50. This argument is brilliantly made by Theda Skocpol in her *Boomerang: Clinton's Health Security Effort and the Turn Against Government in U.S. Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

51. On this matter, see the fascinating exchange between Robert Kuttner and E. J. Dionne Jr., "Did Clinton Succeed or Fail?" *American Prospect*, August 28, 2000: 42–46. See also Stephen Skowronek's discussion of Clinton's "preemptive" third way politics, in *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership From John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 447–64.

renewal and the third way policies of the New Democratic Clinton administration is to impugn neither the motives nor the achievements of the proponents of civic renewal. I agree with Sirianni and Friedland, and indeed with Will Marshall and other proponents of third way thinking, that progressive liberalism is largely anachronistic, the product of economic and political conditions that no longer pertain. I also agree that meaningful partisan political contention in American national politics is likely to take place in the “active middle,” on the terrain of a consensus on the impracticality of ambitious social democratic regulation, the virtues of economic globalization and the market, and the centrality of a civic politics centered on social solidarity and voluntarism rather than on vigorous politicized demands for socioeconomic justice.<sup>52</sup>

In such an environment, collaborative approaches often have the greatest chance of practical success, and partisan entanglement often promises little reward for civil society initiatives—political vision or substantial funding seem forthcoming from neither party—and many costs. At the same time, once one presumes that the policy debate is severely constricted, it seems advisable to work, pragmatically, with all those—conservative and liberal, religious and secular, business-oriented and labor-oriented—who are committed to practical solutions to public problems. In the domains of neighborhood and community organizing, civic environmentalism, the experimental practice of deliberative democracy in local settings, philanthropic activity (especially United Way fund-raising, which is a major source of social service funding in most American local communities), and even faith-based initiatives in social service delivery, there exist collaborative opportunities to work effectively across partisan and ideological boundaries.<sup>53</sup> Such work may not be where the partisan political action is, and it

52. This is also the argument of Ted Halsted and Michael Lind's *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

53. See Jeffrey Isaac, “Faith-Based Initiatives: A Civil Society Approach,” *The Good Society*, Summer 2002.

is a far cry from more ambitious visions of policy innovation and political transformation, but it is most assuredly where much of the civic energy and action really *is* in American society today. It would be sheer foolishness to deny this.

My problem is not with the civil society focus of the partisans of civic renewal, nor with the disposition of these partisans to discern promise in such collaborative efforts. Rather, it is with the celebratory and credulous tone with which much of this tends to be discussed by civic renewal writers. For although these writers display great knowledge about the rhetorics and tactics of civic renewal, they tend to be too buoyant in their view of what such efforts can and do accomplish. Committed to the agency of ordinary citizens and to the importance of civic self-understandings and purposes, these writers assume the role of civic storytellers, whose task it is to relate inspiring tales of civic innovation that might extend and deepen future innovation. This is an admirable task. The closer one gets to the ground of activism, the more one may feel called to this task of civic self-promotion. Such a vocation, however, substitutes an interest in meaning for an interest in *causality and consequence*. What is lacking in much of the civic renewal literature is a serious reckoning with the causal *constraints* under which civil society efforts operate. These constraints, which severely limit the chances of reviving a progressive policy agenda, also limit the aspirations of civic renewal.

### The Sisyphean Task of Civil Society Politics

Thus, civil society efforts both do and do not offer an alternative to more progressive aspirations. They are promising examples of civic initiative and pragmatic problem solving. They may well be the only game in town. But they are limited, and frustrating, in ways that civic renewal advocates rarely admit. The problem with the discourse of civil society is not its post-progressivism but its *credulity*, its failure to see the *tragedy* in the decline of progressive liberalism. Civic renewal



writers of the Left and the Right—and for the partisans of civic renewal, these lines are increasingly blurred—properly discern the poverty of progressivism and properly seek to discern the redeeming promise in progressivism’s decline. They rightly appreciate the innovative character of contemporary civil society efforts, which are the products of genuine learning experiences among activists and elites in the post-1960s period. But they present as an unambiguous gain what is in fact a problematic achievement. They insufficiently consider the fact that these efforts are largely the product of learning *under severe duress* and that this duress is due to the political weakening of progressive forces. This duress has created not only new opportunities and flexibilities but also new *vulnerabilities* and anxieties.

While the welfare state surely had its pathologies, the decline of the progressive agenda has unleashed the equally potent pathologies of the private sphere, including the pathologies of civil society itself: Privatism. Insularity. Greed. Self-absorption. Exclusivism. Ethnic, racial, and sexual resentment. These pathologies cannot simplistically be laid at the feet of a bureaucratic state or the social engineering aspirations of progressive elites. They are features of contemporary civil society, which is not a pristine or communitarian site of smooth and edifying social interaction and need satisfaction.<sup>54</sup> The “liberation” of society from social regulation represents not only a defeat of bureaucracy but also a serious eclipse of public agencies and identities. The new citizenship this has called forth embodies genuine civic impulses, but its very voluntarism and its partiality serve to vitiate one of the most important features of modern liberal democratic citizenship—its universality. Civil society’s gain has thus been civil society’s loss—a loss of material resources and of the ethical and civic resources associated with a serious commitment to universal citizenship and social justice on the part of the state acting in the name of

54. On this theme, see Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, “Bad Civil Society,” *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (December 2001): 837–66.

society as a whole. Civil society discourse typically lacks any appreciation of the *tragedy* of this.

Similarly, although civic renewal may not be strictly a partisan affair, the current partisan *stasis* is hardly supportive of independent civic initiative. While third way liberals and their compassionate conservative compatriots offer rhetorical support for social responsibility and civic engagement, they do not offer a coherent program for supporting civil society initiative on a level commensurate with the problems confronting society today. Yet, at the same time, their neoliberal economic commitments help generate many of the problems against which ordinary citizens and grassroots civic associations set themselves. In this context, moral invocations of civility, voluntarism, and the importance of a sacrificial ethos ring hollow.<sup>55</sup> Civil society needs more than moral earnestness; it needs a great deal of *help*. The most honest partisans of civic renewal acknowledge this, as do many neo-progressives, such as Theda Skocpol, E. J. Dionne Jr., and Margaret Weir, who have sought to critically engage the partisans of civil society in dialogue about the necessary reliance of civic renewal upon public policy.<sup>56</sup>

What this means is that *the political crisis of progressive liberalism is a problem of enormous proportions for civic renewal*. It is not something that can be ignored on the grounds that civic politics is non-partisan or beyond Left and Right. The situation may well be beyond Left, but *it is not beyond Right*. Conservative economic policies have dominated, and continue to dominate, party-political discourse. American politics today operates on the terrain of triumphant market values and institutions.<sup>57</sup> However, this is not a natural or ineluctable

55. See, for example, Stephen Carter, *Civility* (New York: Harper, 1977).

56. See, for example, Margaret Weir and Marshall Ganz, "Reconnecting People and Politics," in Stanley B. Greenberg and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The New Majority: Toward a Popular Progressive Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

57. For a perceptive, if exaggerated, argument to this effect, see Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

development or a simple actualization of freedom; it is a *problematic historical outcome*. Civil society is a solution that is not commensurate with this problem; yet it may be the only viable solution in the sense that no other method of practical response is viable.

There is no point in denying this tragic bind or seeking an easy way out of it. An honest reading of the political situation suggests that the prospects for a progressive revival are dim. This does not mean, however, that efforts to craft political coalitions and movements designed to move beyond the current situation and generate a new progressive hegemony are hopeless. If it would be foolish to credulously anticipate a new progressive dispensation, it would be no less foolish to adopt a posture of dogmatic incredulity. The truth is that we cannot confidently predict the future. Things may change. Progressive forces may strengthen. A crisis might precipitate the turn toward a more radical agenda—though this may just as likely be a radicalism of the Right as of the Left. The most appropriate approach to such scenarios is simply an experimental openness to new possibilities. However, this experimental openness should consist of more than willful optimism. It should draw on a sober historical and social analysis combined with a chastened sense of political realism.

Such a sense of realism would caution against optimism, but it would not counsel political despair. Although the national political landscape is bleak, there currently exist some promising examples of seemingly successful efforts to create new progressively oriented coalitions at the state and local level. In Milwaukee, for example, the Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee, a coalition of more than 100 labor and citizen groups, has worked to achieve substantial influence over the city council and to promote regional planning, job training, and living wage initiatives. In Burlington, Vermont, a progressive coalition of socialists and liberal Democrats has been able to advance an impressive policy agenda centered around left-liberal values. In Connecticut, the Legislative Electoral Action Program has successfully run citizen-activist candidates for the state legislature, in the process build-

ing a base for political and economic reform. In New York, the Working Families Party, a fusion party formed by progressive unions and such activist citizens' organizations as ACORN and Citizen Action, has achieved some modest headway through its cross-endorsements of liberal Democratic candidates. In cities across the United States, from Boston to Portland (Oregon) to Baltimore, living wage campaigns linking unions, citizens, and liberal politicians have successfully instituted "living wage ordinances," raising the wage rates of city-contracted workers and enhancing the local influence of unions.<sup>58</sup>

Each of these efforts involves the mobilization of party organizations and the winning of electoral offices; and each contains promise. But to date, these efforts have had a limited effect on national politics, at the level of political discourse, party agendas, or public policy. Each also confronts political obstacles, particularly once they are extended beyond local contexts and treated as models of national renewal. The original progressivism emerged out of disparate local tumult and experimentation; historical conditions at the turn of the twentieth century supported this emergence. In retrospect, we can understand how and why such a progressive coalescence occurred. Unfortunately, historical conditions today do not appear similarly supportive.

### **America in Search of a Public Philosophy?**

What then of politics understood as the practice of public decision making oriented toward a conception of the public good? Is the very idea of "public good" anachronistic? Is it necessary for the diverse efforts noted above to add up to something larger, more visionary, or

58. See Jay Walljasper, "Burlington, Northern Light," *Nation*, May 19, 1997: 18–23; Bruce Shapiro, "Rappaport Makes the LEAP," *Nation*, September 21, 1998: 27–28; Micah Sifry, "A Working Third Party," *Nation*, November 6, 2000; Harold Meyerson, "California's Progressive Mosaic," *American Prospect* 12, no. 11 (June 18, 2001); and Michael H. Shuman, "Going Local: Devolution for Progressives," *Nation*, October 12, 1998.

more edifying? Do we need what the political philosopher Michael Sandel called a new “public philosophy” of citizenship, capable of inspiring citizens to undertake collective projects and of orienting them toward greater, more substantial, inclusive commonalities?

Sandel was notably ambivalent on this score. On the one hand, he supported a “political agenda informed by civic concerns” and of a “formative project” of engaged, republican citizenship that is intimated, “hinted,” and “gestured” at by current civic renewal initiatives.<sup>59</sup> The entire thrust of his book *Democracy’s Discontent* is to criticize the inadequacies of contemporary post-1960s liberalism as a materialistic and individualistic “public philosophy” and to suggest the desirability of an alternative, “republican” philosophy of public life. On the other hand, he was quite vague about both the substance of such a philosophy and the collective agents or institutional forms capable of bringing it into existence. Although he briefly mentioned many of the initiatives discussed above, he admitted that they are “disparate expressions” of citizenship and that they exist “around the edges of our political discourse and practice.”

A similar ambivalence haunts Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*. Having analyzed at great length the current “disappearance of civic America,” Putnam concluded by considering “What Is to Be Done?” He maintained that “we desperately need an era of civic inventiveness to create a renewed set of institutions and channels for a reinvigorated civic life that will fit the way we have come to live. Our challenge now is to reinvent the twenty-first century equivalent of the Boy Scouts or the settlement house of the United Mine Workers or the NAACP.” We need such innovation, Putnam insisted, both to restore civic confidence and because social capital is “not an alternative to, but a prerequisite for, political mobilization and reform.”<sup>60</sup> Putnam issued a sermonical call for civic invention and “social capitalism” in

59. Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 324, 333, 338.

60. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 401, 399.

six domains. He desired that the renewal of “social capital” should become a unifying political project. He sought a convergence of interest in renewal on the part of all of those active in civic life. Yet, he offered no political account of how or why this convergence might occur.

There are good reasons to believe that such a convergence is not likely to occur. Beyond this, however, there is something peculiar about the very desire to promote such a convergence. What is most distinctive about civil society as a site of civic engagement is precisely its associational plurality, which resists clear political representation. Labor, religious, environmental, community, racial, and other associations form in civil society and operate there on a voluntary and particularistic basis, without any necessary or clear overarching political goals. Sometimes such groups form coalitions or work in tandem. Sometimes they work at cross purposes with each other. Civically active women might join together in support of a local soup kitchen or county museum or the Girl Scouts; and yet some may support Planned Parenthood or the National Abortion Rights Action League, while others support “family values” groups or anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centers. Religious congregations and clergy groups might join together to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day and yet disagree strongly on the topic of gay rights. A range of community groups—neighborhood associations, environmental organizations, labor unions, League of Women Voters, chambers of commerce, various trade and civic associations—may come together to support organizing forums of “public deliberation” about the economic future of their community, and yet they may sharply diverge when it comes to the initiatives and policies they are willing to support. If the site of political innovation today is in the domain of civil society, and if this domain is inherently complex and multivocal, then perhaps it is pointless to hope for some Hegelian synthesis to emerge from it.

Along these lines, the record of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is instructive. The IAF is a fascinating example of a successful

civic initiative that is informed by a robust conception of democratic participation. Its combination of idealism and effectiveness explains why many contemporary writers regarded it as exemplary.<sup>61</sup> In his recent book, Mark R. Warren presented the most careful account of the IAF written thus far.<sup>62</sup> Focusing on the successes of IAF organizer Ernesto Cortes Jr., Warren charted the development of an elaborate community-organizing network, rooted in the power of San Antonio's Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), which has extended throughout the state of Texas and indeed has developed a broader presence in the Southwest region as a whole. IAF organizations are broad based, rooted in local institutions and faith communities, and created on the basis of painstaking face-to-face contact, discussion, and public work. They engage in voluntary community-building initiatives. But they also practice grassroots political organizing, deploying tactics of nonpartisan political pressure and carefully planned protest to focus public attention on the plight of disadvantaged communities and to demand, and achieve, governmental responses in areas ranging from garbage collection and sewage disposal to affordable housing to public school reform, job training, and employment.

Warren demonstrated that IAF organizing has been effective because it is centered in local institutions and dedicated to grassroots capacity building. He concluded:

It is quite easy to dismiss this local organizing in the face of the globalization of the economy. Many analysts jump immediately to

61. See for example William Grieder, *Who Will Tell The People* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 222–44; Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 145–46; Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 336–38; Sirianni and Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America*, 35–84; William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 85–92; and Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 68.

62. Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

an effort to figure out the correct policy, the right issue, to solve local problems. Activists rush to influence the highest levels of power. To do so is a serious mistake. Political and policy elites have much to offer our understanding of public policy, but they can't operate alone. Grand schemes launched by Washington-based advocacy groups often lack the organized backing to be adopted in the political arena. They are not necessarily the most effective policies anyway. Local knowledge, a close understanding of the needs and aspirations of Americans at the ground level, must inform social policy if it is to be effective.<sup>63</sup>

Nonetheless, Warren also recognized the limits of such organizing, contending that "high-level power is still required" to facilitate such local efforts and to develop public policies commensurate with the problems confronting ordinary American citizens. He also noted that "the relentless emphasis on local work . . . has left the IAF ill equipped to undertake national action now that it has the foundation to do so." Like Sandel and Putnam, Warren nourished a lingering hope that the successes of the IAF could be replicated on a national level and that the IAF might serve as a model for a "national force for political renewal."<sup>64</sup>

Warren correctly noted the limits of IAF strategies and observed that some kind of national renewal would be necessary to more vigorously and comprehensively address the problems of urban America. But his expectation that the IAF might somehow anticipate such a renewal seems to fly in the face of his own analysis of the IAF's distinctiveness. The IAF has sought to develop power locally and to exercise this power in ways that are experimental and issue-specific and that forswear the establishment of permanent alliances or the identification of permanent adversaries. Such an improvisational *modus operandi* does not lend itself to national forms of organization,

63. *Ibid.*, 254.

64. *Ibid.*, 256, 262.



to mass politics, or to ambitious programs of national renewal and redistributive social policy.

If the IAF is exemplary, it is precisely because of its unique and pragmatic combination of civic audacity and programmatic modesty. It should best be viewed not as a model of civic innovation to be replicated on a larger scale but rather as an example of effective civic innovation under arduous conditions. Models can be reiterated, replicated, and expanded; examples can only be emulated. To view the IAF as an example is to acknowledge that it is not an all-purpose guide to civic initiative nor the harbinger of something bigger and better. It simply exemplifies some important principles and pragmatic understandings that are worth amplifying and that might be the basis for a range of efforts across a range of domains. My point is not that the IAF should forswear efforts to organize and to expand its influence in new places, but that it would be a mistake to overburden the IAF with large-scale political expectations that exceed its capacities and that obscure its distinctive modalities and achievements.

What I am suggesting is that the IAF furnishes a useful example of what politics in America today can accomplish. As such, it can be a touchstone for a new political orientation, but less as an integrative public philosophy or agenda than as an ethos of pragmatic public engagement. Such an ethos would promote the value of individual and associational freedom and encourage the exercise of this freedom by conscientious citizens and civic groups. It would foster an appreciation for the pluralism that is endemic to modern social life while promoting civility and the inclination to engage, rather than demonize, one's adversaries. It would advance the values of civic equality and social solidarity, which entail that a political community is more than a war of each against all and that questions of inequality of opportunity or advantage are public questions that involve some measure of public responsibility. Most especially, it would promote the idea of democracy itself—the idea that ordinary citizens ought to take responsibility for the problems of their world and ought to collaborate

in crafting, implementing, and monitoring public solutions to these problems. However, it would be distinguished not by the way it philosophically configures these values nor by an integrated vision of public policy believed to actualize these values. Instead, it would be distinguished by the understanding that as a matter of politics, there is no single “best” way to articulate and advance these values.

Instead of anticipating some new integrated vision of public life, we should attend to the range of experiments, initiatives, and organizations that currently exist and are likely to grow. These are not likely to be informed by a common vision, and they are not likely to converge upon a common vision. They are likely to function in a hostile political environment in which social and economic “progress” is the source not only of advantage but also of difficulty, disappointment, and risk and in which national political organizations and state institutions are incapable of generating either the public vision or the political will to bring such problems to heel.

To propose this is not to dismiss or disparage more hopeful scenarios and projects. Hopefulness, visionary thinking, and ambitious policy agendas have their place in politics. Without them, democratic politics could never rise above the prosaic and the banal. Without them, democratic politics could never have begun to institute social justice and progressive social policy. But hopefulness and vision also have the potential to limit political thinking by furnishing a measure of optimism and comfort where it is not warranted and by encouraging a kind of overreaching that can be dispiriting and self-defeating. The comfort of neoprogressivism is the belief that historical forces are tending in a progressive direction and that a sufficient grasp of these forces can unlock the strategic key to progressive triumph. The comfort of the partisans of civil society is that the prose of everyday civic life is sufficient to sustain public problem solving and civic renewal. But both forms of credulity are mistaken. History does not bode well for progressivism, but neither is a robust civil society sufficient to redeem what Herbert Croly called the promise of American life. The

irony is that at this moment of American celebration, this promise may be, in crucial respects, beyond redemption.

The asymmetry between the problems we confront and the likely means of their solution should not be a cause for despair. Democratic energies and vehicles for the partial realization of these solutions continue to exist, and these warrant critical support. The values they embody ought to be elucidated, publicized, and made the topic of civic self-reflection and civic education. Citizens who engage in them can experience a sense of efficacy and perhaps some measure of practical satisfaction, but they are also bound to experience such efforts as limited, partial, and frustrating. Learning to live with these frustrations, and to persist without resentment in spite of them, may prove to be the most important civic virtue of our time.

In Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux, the heroic leader of the resistance, is asked what gives him the confidence to persist in his struggle against an injustice that seems virtually implacable. "I've no more," he responds, "than the pride that's needed to keep me going. I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing." The world, he avers, is bounded by death, and our victories on behalf of life are always temporary, always fragile. "Yet this is not reason," he concludes, "for giving up the struggle." Camus's Rieux is a slightly more heroic version of Sisyphus, who also confronts a tragic fate. Sisyphus is doomed to persist, without end, in the impossible task of raising his stone to the top of the mountain. His fate is to fail. Such a fate could well cause him to despair. But on Camus's telling, Sisyphus learns that it is not the mountaintop but the rock that is his true fate. His universe henceforth "seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Sisyphus's happiness is a tragic happiness, but it is more than despair because Sisyphus is motivated by a value—

the value of his own agency—and so motivated, his struggle, and its always inadequate results, has meaning. Those who interpret the myth of Sisyphus as a story of futility are mistaken, for it is only from the standpoint of the mountaintop that Sisyphus fails.

American democracy faces severe challenges. I do not think that we can, in good faith, confront the present century with the same optimism and ambition with which progressives confronted the last one. The kinds of democratic responses that are likely to be effective are bound to be partial, limiting, fractious, and in many ways unsatisfying. They are likely to disappoint the modernist quest for mastery and the progressive faith in the future. And they are likely to frustrate the democratic project of collective self-control and self-governance. Yet it is the great virtue of democracy as a form of politics that it prizes contingency, experimentation, critique, and further experimentation, *ad infinitum*. For, in the end, politics, even under the most favorable circumstances, is nothing else but the Sisyphean task of constructing provisional solutions to our unmasterable difficulties.