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# *Civil Society and Public Policy*

by William A. Schambra

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# Civil Society and Public Policy

I've been asked today to speak to you about the importance of civil society for public policy. As I pointed out to Paul Mero, coming to Salt Lake City to talk about civil society is a bit like carrying coals to Newcastle. Surely, if any state has a rich tradition of active civic life, it's Utah.

But let me say a few words first about why I became interested in the topic of civil society. To put my bias up front – I'm a Midwestern conservative. But I've long been troubled by a charge made against conservatism: namely, that we conservatives all believe in rugged, isolated individualism and in the survival of the fittest in the dog-eat-dog world of the unfettered, capitalist marketplace. As a corollary to this, we conservatives are accused of not caring at all about the poor and vulnerable, about those who don't fare well in that dog-eat-dog world we champion.

Now, this may in fact be the view of a few isolated libertarian theorists here and there. But it certainly doesn't describe particularly well the conservatives I knew in the small town in central Michigan where I grew up. Yes, they believed in capitalism and the marketplace – this was Midland, after all, the hometown of Dow Chemical. But at the same time, these conservatives very much cared about the poor and vulnerable. Indeed, they had founded and nurtured a vast network of private associations of all sorts – houses of worship, fraternal orders, and voluntary associations – a central point of which was precisely to care for those who had not fared well in the marketplace, and to protect those who couldn't protect themselves.

As a child shaped by church and voluntary association, it was always clear to me that I had an obligation to do what I could for the most vulnerable, and to treat them with dignity and respect. It would have been contrary to everything I had been taught to ignore them or treat them as losers. I know that most of you in this room today have been raised according to similar moral and religious codes.

Although I didn't know it the time, the fancy name for this network of small, local groups surrounding me as a child was "civil society." And I would only learn later, as I studied the American political tradition as a graduate student, that a strong civil society in fact had been the bedrock of American social and political life. For much of our history, most Americans had been closely bound one to another by strong families, tightly-knit neighborhoods, and active voluntary and fraternal groups. Through these small, local, "human-scale" associations, Americans not only achieved a sense of belonging and connectedness, they also tackled the full range of social and human problems that today have largely become the province of government. As sociologist Robert Nisbet noted, "the social problems of birth and death, courtship and marriage, employment and unemployment, infirmity and old age were met, however inadequately at times, through the associated means of these social groups" (or "intermediate associations," as he called them in *The Quest for Community*.) Citizens thus had a significant say in the most important decisions affecting their own everyday lives. What we today call "public policy" was not a manufacture of government, but a lived, daily experience.

Thus, a citizen's house of worship and voluntary groups reflected and reinforced his moral and

spiritual values and imparted them to his children, surrounding him with a familiar, self-contained, breathable moral atmosphere. Voluntary social welfare associations ministered to the community's vulnerable according to the tenets of compassion and charity implicit in those values. A citizen's schools, whether publicly or privately funded, enshrined and were run in accordance with those values, and with extensive citizen involvement and supervision. Critical public decisions were made in township meetings, ward conclaves, or other small, face-to-face gatherings in which the individual's voice was as important as his vote. In short, the most important decisions about citizens' lives were made not by faceless others in some distant state or national capital; they were made by and among themselves, in gatherings of neighbors and acquaintances.

This, of course, is the America celebrated and immortalized in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations," he noted, because this was how virtually every significant public problem was solved. The weak central state, he noted, was not just an accident of history, but the design of the Founding Fathers, who understood that the civic and communal commitments and skills critical to a free society could be developed only by sustained interaction within small, intimate, decentralized settings.

But this way of life seemed to be doomed, as America entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the view of the progressive intellectuals of that era, the irresistible forces of modernity, among them industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, were sweeping away the boundaries of the small, self-contained communities of the past. In this new age, social problems were seen to be extremely complex and national in scope – far beyond the reach of small communities.

The only people capable of understanding and solving these new, far more complicated problems were the emerging professional experts of the age – individuals trained in the new social sciences like sociology, social work, psychology, public administration and scientific management. The social sciences offered secular, materialistic, data-based explanations for human behavior, which could be used by experts to manipulate and control it. Of course, this was all to done in the best interests of the public, who themselves were clueless about the new complexities of modern life. That's because they remained hopelessly enslaved to their primitive religious and moral views, with distinctly non-materialistic, superstitious spiritual and metaphysical explanations for human behavior. And so the progressive intellectuals took a much more skeptical view of religious attachment than that taken by the Founders. Certainly the Latter Day Saints suffered from this contempt. But the Roman Catholicism brought to our shores by new waves of immigrants seemed to progressives to be a particularly benighted and archaic faith. Religious convictions in general would have to yield to or be reinterpreted in light of the new, secular explanations of human behavior, if we were to make progress against society's problems.

Most of the political reforms of the progressive era were designed to insure the triumph of expertise over superstition. And so they undertook to transfer political power away from everyday citizens, who were still shaped by the petty, parochial religious values of their local communities or neighborhoods, into the hands of trained, scientific experts.

For those of you in city government, for instance, this was the era of the "city manager," who was to assume considerable administrative responsibility from elected city councils and mayors, and make

the city run more efficiently, more scientifically, without all the turbulence and complication of petty local politics. This was also the era of the “municipal research bureau,” which would generate the statistics and scientific data the new administrative elites needed to manage the affairs of the city objectively and rationally. Elections were no longer to be based on decentralized, localized ward and precinct systems, which had, as the historian Samuel Hayes noted, “enabled local and particularistic interests to dominate” and had assured that elected officials “spoke for . . . those aspects of community life which mattered most” to the average citizen. Instead, we were to have at-large, city-wide systems of voting and representation, which handed over governance to corporate and professional elites possessed of an enlarged, scientific, rational view of governance.

The triumph of progressive structural reform would mean, in essence, that citizen involvement in public affairs was reduced from active, intense, face-to-face problem-solving on a daily basis, to passively casting a lonely, solitary ballot once in a great while, for a handful of offices. That ballot would be aggregated with vast numbers of other solitary votes into a mandate for an elite corps of professional experts, who would now conduct the real business of public life.

I’ll return later to the issue of education, so it would be useful to note that during this era, “reforms” also were undertaken to insure that local schools were removed from the hands of everyday citizens organized around religious or ethnic values. This was the beginning of that great movement away from the one-room school house of the village and the neighborhood, to massive consolidated school districts manned by professionally trained educators and managed by expert administrators; in other words, away from parental and toward expert control.

As Sol Cohen suggests, the decentralized, neighborhood-based management of the New York school system came under assault in the 1890’s by reformers who were particularly anxious to drive religious expression and teachings out of the schools. He notes: “The reformers’ battle cry, ‘Take the school out of politics,’ not only meant take the schools out of the hands of Tammany Hall, it also meant take the schools out of the hands of the Roman Catholic Church.” Joel Spring notes that “declining local control of the schools” was paralleled by “the increasing differentiation, specialization, and centralization of school administration,” all of which “contributed to a decrease in lay influence on the schools.”

These trends at the local level had parallels at the national level, as governing power was moved upward, from benighted local communities, into the hands of national elites, and away from elected officials into the hands of national commissions and bureaucratic agencies, who could be counted on to manage public affairs scientifically, efficiently and supposedly without partisan bias. Hence the enormous growth of the federal administrative apparatus over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with the rise of think tanks, policy research institutes, and schools of public policy, which would generate the objective data and train the professionals necessary to sustain this vast, gleaming tower of rational administration.

Under the sway of the progressive vision, even civil society or the non-profit sector came to transform itself along rationalist, scientific lines. In part this was because by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, government began to deliver most of its services through contracts with nonprofits, which inevitably forced them to become more like government agencies. But even aside from the issue of government

funding, nothing less seemed to be required by the new progressive age of enlightenment and sophistication.

So today, the non-profit sector is dominated by mammoth associations that are organized indistinguishably from large government agencies, with centralized, bureaucratic management structures executing directives issued by headquarters in Washington. They mail out annual reports that may cost as much to produce as earlier non-profits once scraped up for their entire annual budgets. Their offices teem with accountants filling out the paperwork needed to attract and report on federal grants, and public relations specialists insuring that the best spin is put on their efforts. Above all, the non-profits employ swarms of experts well-credentialed in the century's powerful new social sciences, who dutifully deliver services to their passive, helpless clients.

Now, this massive transfer of authority away from everyday local citizens, into the hands of ever more remote professional elites, has hardly gone unchallenged over the course of the century. We have heard the charge that progressive reform's presuppositions are arrogant, elitist, and undemocratic. Now, many think this is entirely a conservative argument, concocted during the 80s and 90s to undermine confidence in government.

In point of fact, though, it issued first in the 1960's *from the New Left*, in its assault on the massive, distant, alienating structures of American technocracy. Their alternative was "participatory democracy" – a return of political authority to smaller, decentralized, self-governing communities as modeled by their own modes of communal organization. As Andrew Polsky put it, "authority now vested in public bureaucracies and private corporations will have to be devolved to ward-based, participatory governing councils."

The progressive vision was simultaneously challenged in quite similar terms, though from the opposite end of the political spectrum, by a group of intellectuals who came to be known as "neo-conservatives." In his introduction to *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, Irving Kristol traced progressive hubris to origins in the French Revolution, noting that modern heirs of that revolution "affirm that the state, in the hands of the 'right men' and following the 'correct' policies, could solve, through central planning, the economic problems of society," as well as its other social ills.

Neoconservatives, he argued, do not believe that the public interest can be "rationally defined, at a moment in time, by any kind of expert or consortium of experts," but rather that it would emerge "from the process of self-government in all relevant institutions – government at all levels, but also local school boards, religious congregations, professional organizations, trade unions, trade associations, organized charities, organized enthusiasm for almost any imaginable activity." Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus's *To Empower People* expanded this critique of top-down, centralized, expert-driven public policy, calling instead for a transfer of authority back to self-governing, decentralized "mediating structures" like family, neighborhood, church, and voluntary association to deliver social services.

In part because of this critique from right and left, the restoration of civil society and the transfer of authority back from professional elites to local civic associations has become a serious issue for public policy as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the area of education, for instance, parents – especially in poorly performing urban school districts – have become increasingly disturbed by the apparent indifference of the educational elites to their plight, and are exploring various options to change that. After years of tinkering at the margins – experimenting with different curricula or changing school supervisors – parents now seem to realize that they’re better off changing the fundamental distribution of power within the system, and reassuming for themselves the ability to decide what sort of education their children should have.

Coming from the Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee, for instance, I’ve seen a parental choice or voucher program up close. Entirely aside from whether or not it raises test scores, it is in fact a marvelous way to stimulate civic revitalization. The schools selected by parents embody their moral and spiritual commitments. Parents are thus able, for the first time in a long time, to make a vital, publicly supported decision that reflects, rather than flaunts, their fundamental values. Children again find themselves in morally rigorous, character-forming environments, free of the disorder that has stymied education in many public schools. And the local moral, spiritual, ethnic, or neighborhood community for which the school is often the institutional centerpiece tends to flourish, now with the help of, rather than in spite of, the state. Competition among schools for voucher-bearing students insures that parental demands for academic and moral excellence are met at lower cost, and the public schools themselves are driven to improve in order to capture their share of students.

So far, school choice has come only to a few cities, though it is spreading – I understand in fact that Utah now has a voucher program for children with disabilities. But a much more widespread approach taken by frustrated parents has been home-schooling. Although it’s often characterized as a withdrawal from civic activity and therefore a minus for civil society, in fact home schooling parents have formed a vast civic network for mutual self-help, in order to exchange information, to locate and develop appropriate curricula, to contract for services they cannot supply children themselves, and simply to get together so their children can socialize. It is in fact a perfect example of a revival of grassroots civil society in the face of the failure and neglect of professional elites.

Clearly, many of the parents involved in home schooling come from a religious perspective, and so this phenomenon is related to a larger trend that would have come as a great shock and disappointment to our national progressive elites, namely, the survival – indeed, the flourishing – of religion. And the faiths that are flourishing today are not the ones that tried to reinterpret themselves in light of modern social science, but in fact are the ones that present themselves as enthusiastic alternatives to scientific rationalism. After the past presidential election in particular, we saw renewed interest in the rise of the evangelicals. Many mainstream journals and newspapers dispatched reporters to the exurbs, to try to understand the interdenominational, evangelical megachurches that have sprung up there.

While the journalists notice first the sprawling, mall-like structure filled by thousands of worshippers on Sunday, the deeper meaning of the megachurch, they note, is to be found in the week-day meetings of countless small, intimate groups, organized to meet the full variety of human needs: child care, job search, education, recovery from addiction, just filling the lonely hours. As a recent article by a *Mother Jones* reporter noted, “By taking on roles as various as those of the neighborhood welcome committee, the Rotary, the corner diner, the country club mixer, the support group – and, of course, family and school – megachurches have become the tightly knit villages that many Americans

think they grew up in.” Similar religious associations have sprung up among urban Hispanics and African-Americans, likewise inspired by evangelical and Pentecostal teachings and built around small self-help groups. In other words, today’s religious resurgence is in fact a prime example of grassroots civic revival, long after the progressive elites told us this sort of small community had been doomed forever by the forces of modernity.

The left, of course, provides its own examples of community revitalization and civic engagement in its community organizing tradition. But as various students of the tradition have observed, even the once distinctly secular Industrial Areas Foundation increasingly roots its organizing efforts in churches and other faith-based institutions, incorporating religious symbols, parables, and doctrines into its teaching, and even helping congregations expand and organize their own worship community. In a recent critical but appreciative account of the rise of the evangelicals, IAF’s Mike Gecan noted that the new exurban churches thrive because they appreciate the power of relationships – “relationships that start with an enthusiastic recognition of the capacity of others to grow and develop, of the innate preference that most people feel to be viewed not as clients of agencies or bundles of needs desperate to be ‘served,’ but as good and full beings who are agents of their own destinies.”

As far-fetched as this may seem, the left’s community organizing tradition has far more in common with the right’s evangelical communities than many realize, because both have suffered from, and both are cultural and political insurgencies against, what Gecan describes as the “contempt of the progressive elite for ordinary people – for their faiths, their speech patterns, their clothes, their hobbies, their aspirations.” On both the left and the right today, then, we see sustained and growing rebellions against centralized, secular progressive elitism, in the name of the small, local, grassroots community.

To be explicit about some of the distinctions I’ve been making here: what I’m describing is related to, but not the same as, the decentralist preference for localism over centralism. The deeper problem, I would say, is that of professionalism vs. citizenship. The belief that trained elites should manage public affairs, and that everyday citizens should get out of the way except on election day, can be found at all levels of government, and within most professions today. It is certainly the conviction that governs the aspect of American life on which I focus much of my work today, namely, philanthropy.

Furthermore, what I’ve been saying is related to, but not the same as, the issue of conservatism vs. liberalism, for both left and right have given rise to powerful dissenting traditions against progressive elitism. There are strong currents within left and right today that consider progressivism’s reliance on professional expertise to be arrogant, oppressive, and undemocratic.

Finally, I hope it’s clear by now that I’m not talking about backing down from our obligation as a generous and compassionate people to care for the poor and vulnerable – the sort of obligation I learned in that small town in central Michigan. I’m not suggesting that the marketplace can handle all human problems. I am saying that there were certain strengths in the traditional way of caring for the poor and vulnerable within the smaller units of civil society. Care was often humane, personalized, and specially tailored to meet the needs of each individual. And the active provision of

care called out the best in Americans, making them active, committed citizens, able to govern themselves. When care became the province of professionals, it more often than not became bureaucratic, impersonal, and inflexible, with no adaptability to individual needs. Formerly active and vigorous *citizens* became instead passive, helpless, nameless *clients*.

While it had been the fondest hope of the progressive elites to transfer authority away from local civic associations and their archaic, reactionary religious principles, today we see a repudiation of progressive elitism, and a yearning by everyday citizens to take back control of their own affairs. I think we've only begun to think through what this means for public policy – I've cited some examples from the field of education, for instance, but surely this same tendency will show up in other areas as well. We'll consider shortly how it might affect local government. But the trend is not likely to fade anytime soon, in part because it is rooted in a larger religious revival underway in America, and it manifests itself on both left and right. Insofar as Alexis de Tocqueville was correct about the critical need for local civic vitality in America as a way to sustain democracy, this is a good and healthy trend indeed.