
'THE GOOD SOCIETY'

SHAPING THE INSTITUTIONS THAT SHAPE US

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Walking in any American city today, one participates in a ritual that perfectly expresses the difficulty of being a good person in the absence of a good society. In the midst of affluence, perhaps with a guilty sense of the absurd wastefulness of the expensive meal, new blouse, or electronic gadget that has brought us to town, we pass homeless men or, often, women with children asking for money for food and shelter. Whether we give or withhold our spare change, we know that neither personal choice is the right one. We may experience the difficulty of helping the plight of homeless people as a painful individual moral dilemma, but the difficulty actually comes from failures of the larger institutions on which our common life depends.

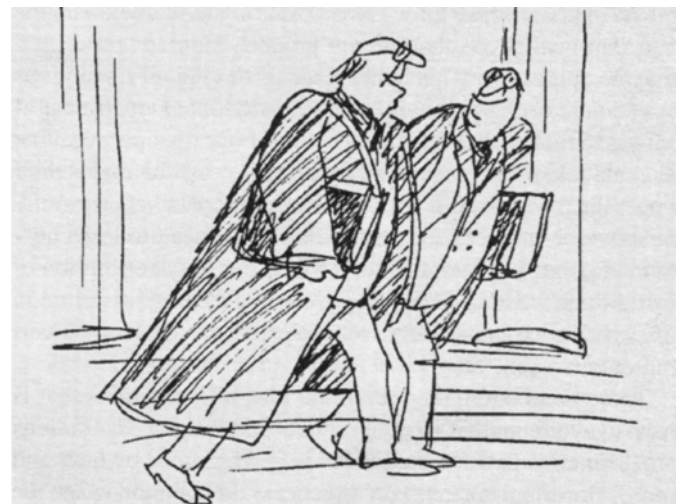
The problem of homelessness, like many of our problems, was created by social choices. The market-driven conversion of single-room occupancy hotels into upscale tourist accommodations, government urban-renewal projects that revitalized downtowns while driving up rents and reducing housing for the poor, economic changes that eliminated unskilled jobs paying enough to support a family, the states' "deinstitutionalization" of the mentally ill, and reduced funding of local community health programs have together created the crisis of homelessness. But with this issue, as with many others, we tend to feel helpless to shape the institutional order that made these choices meaningful—or meaningless.

It is tempting to think that the problems that we face today, from the homeless in our streets and poverty in the third world to ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect, can be solved by technology or technical expertise alone. But even to begin to solve these daunting problems, let alone problems of emptiness and meaninglessness in our personal lives, requires that we greatly

improve our capacity to think about our institutions. We need to understand how much of our lives are lived in and through institutions, and how better institutions are essential if we are to lead better lives.

One of the greatest challenges, especially for individualistic Americans, is to understand what institutions are—how we form them and how they in turn form us—and to imagine that we can actually alter them for the better.

In *Habits of the Heart* (University of California Press, 1985) we offered a portrait of middle-class Americans and of the cultural resources they have for making sense of their society and their lives. We described a language of individualistic achievement and self-fulfillment that often seems to make it difficult for people to sustain their commitments to others, either in intimate relationships or in the public sphere. We held up older traditions, biblical and civic republican, that had a better grasp on the truth that the individual is realized only in and through community; but we showed that contemporary Americans have difficulty understanding those traditions today or seeing how they apply to their lives. We called for a deeper understanding of the moral ecology that sustains the lives of all of us, even when we think we are making it on our own.



"Thank you. You're pretty damn 'august' yourself!"

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“Moral ecology” is only another way of speaking of healthy institutions, yet the culture of individualism makes the very idea of institutions inaccessible to many of us. We Americans tend to think that all we need are energetic individuals and a few impersonal rules to guarantee fairness. Anything more is not only superfluous but dangerous—corrupt, oppressive, or both. Americans often think of individuals pitted against institutions. It is hard for us to think of institutions as affording the necessary context within which we become individuals; of institutions as not just restraining but enabling us; of institutions not as an arena of hostility within which our character is tested but an indispensable source from which character is formed. This is in part because some of our institutions have indeed grown out of control and beyond our comprehension. But the answer is to change them, for it is illusory to imagine that we can escape them.

We need to understand why the very idea of institutions is so intimidating to Americans and why it is so important to overcome this anxiety and think creatively about institutions. In its formal sociological definition, an institution is a pattern of expected action of individuals or groups enforced by social sanctions, both positive and negative. For example, institutions may be such simple customs as the confirming handshake in a social situation, where the refusal to respond to an outstretched hand might cause embarrassment and some need for an explanation; or they may be highly formal institutions such as taxation upon which social services depend, where refusal to pay may be punished by fines and imprisonment. Institutions always have a moral element. A handshake is a sign of social solidarity, at least a minimal recognition of the personhood of the other. Taxation, especially in a democracy, is for the purpose of attaining agreed-upon common aims, and is supposed to be fair in its assessment.

Individualistic Americans fear that institutions impinge on their freedom. In the case of the handshake this impingement may give rise only to a very occasional qualm. More powerful institutions seem more directly to threaten our freedom. For just this reason, the classical liberal view held that institutions ought to be as far as possible neutral mechanisms for individuals to use to attain their separate ends—a view so persuasive that most Americans take it for granted, sharing with liberalism the fear that institutions that are not properly limited and neutral may be oppressive. This belief leads us to think of institutions as efficient or inefficient mechanisms, like the Department of Motor Vehicles, that we learn to use for our own purposes, or as malevolent “bureaucracies” that may crush us under their impersonal wheels. It is not that either of these beliefs is wholly mistaken. In modern society we do indeed need to learn how to manipulate institutions. Yet if this is our only conception of institutions we have a very impoverished idea of our common life, an idea that cannot effectively help us deal with our problems but only worsens them.

There is an ambiguity about the idea of institutions that is hard to avoid but that we will try to be clear about. Institutions are normative patterns embedded in and enforced by laws and mores (informal customs and practices). In common usage the term is also used to apply to concrete organizations. Organizations

certainly loom large in our lives, but if we think only of organizations and not of institutions we may greatly oversimplify our problems. The corporation is a central institution in American life. As an institution, it is a particular historical pattern of rights and duties, of powers and responsibilities, that make it a major force in our lives. Individual corporations are organizations that operate within the legal and other patterns that define what a corporation is. If we do not distinguish between institution and organization, we may think that our only problem with corporations is to make them more efficient or more responsible. But there are problems with how corporations are institutionalized in American society, with the underlying pattern of power and responsibility, and we cannot solve the problems of corporate life simply by improving individual organizations: we have to reform the institution itself.

If we confuse organizations and institutions, then when we believe we are being treated unfairly we may retreat into private life or flee from one organization to another—a different company or a new marriage—hoping that the next one will treat us better. But change in how organizations are conceived, changes in the norms by which they operate—institutional changes—are the only way to get at the source of our difficulties.

The same logic applies throughout our social life. There are certainly better families and worse, happier and more caring families and ones that are less so. But the very way Americans institutionalize family life, the pressures and temptations that American society presents to all families, are themselves the source of serious problems. So just asking individual families to behave better, important though that is, will not get to the root of the difficulties. Indeed there is a kind of reductionism in our traditional way of thinking about society. We think in the first place that the problem is probably with the individual; if not, then with the organization. This pattern of thinking hides from us the power of institutions and their great possibilities for good and for evil.

What is missing in this American view of society? Just the idea that in our life with other people we are engaged continuously, through words and actions, in creating and re-creating the institutions that make that life possible. This process is never neutral but is always ethical and political, since institutions (even such an intimate institution as the family) live or die by ideas of right and wrong and conceptions of the good. Conversely, while we in concert with others create institutions, they also create us: they educate us and form us—especially through the socially enacted metaphors they give us, metaphors that provide normative interpretations of situations and actions. The metaphors may be appropriate or inappropriate, but they are inescapable. A local congregation may think of itself as a “family.” A corporate CEO may speak of management and workers all being “team-players.” Democracy itself is not so much a specific institution as a metaphoric way of thinking about an aspect of many institutions.

In short, we are not self-created atoms manipulating or being manipulated by objective institutions. We form institutions and

they form us every time we engage in a conversation that matters, and certainly every time we act as parent or child, student or teacher, citizen or official, in each case calling on models and metaphors for the rightness and wrongness of action. Institutions are not only constraining but also enabling. They are the substantial forms through which we understand our own identity and the identity of others as we seek cooperatively to achieve a decent society.

The idea that institutions are objective mechanisms that are essentially separate from the lives of the individuals who inhabit them is an ideology which exacts a high moral and political price. The classical liberal view has elevated one virtue, autonomy, as almost the only good, but has failed to recognize that even autonomy depends on a particular kind of institutional structure, and is not an escape from institutions altogether. By imagining a world in which individuals can be autonomous not only from institutions but from each other, it has forgotten that autonomy, valuable as it is in itself, is only one virtue among others and that without such virtues as responsibility and care, which can be exercised only through institutions, autonomy itself becomes an empty form without substance.

The policy analyst David Kirp, in his book *Learning by Heart* (Rutgers University, 1989), gives moving examples of a richer conception of institutions. He and his associates studied a number of instances where public school systems were faced with the challenge of admitting children with AIDS. In a situation of extraordinary anxiety, superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents were called upon to decide what kind of school and what kind of community they wanted to have. The speech and behavior of institutional authorities took on enormous importance, as did the capacity of the parents to respond. Doctors could explain that the risks were exceedingly small but school administrators and parents had to decide whether any risk at all should be taken to extend the moral community to include a child in great need. Finding the right metaphor—seeing the child primarily as a human being in need of special compassion, or as a source of dangerous contamination—was critical to the outcome.

These stories illustrate the truth that the anthropologist Mary Douglas expressed in these words: “The most profound decisions about justice are not made by individuals as such, but by individuals thinking within and on behalf of institutions.” We can extend her insight by saying that responsibility is something we exercise as individuals but within and on behalf of institutions. The character of certain individuals, particularly superintendents and principals, significantly influenced the outcome in school districts confronting AIDS panic. But that very character in part reflected the history and moral resources of the community as a whole. Administrators and parents changed the institutional definition of their schools and communities by how they responded to this major challenge. Those for whom the virtues of responsibility and care were determinative (and it is important that those virtues were located not only in them as individuals but in their sense of themselves as institutional representatives) thought not only that they had done the right thing but that they

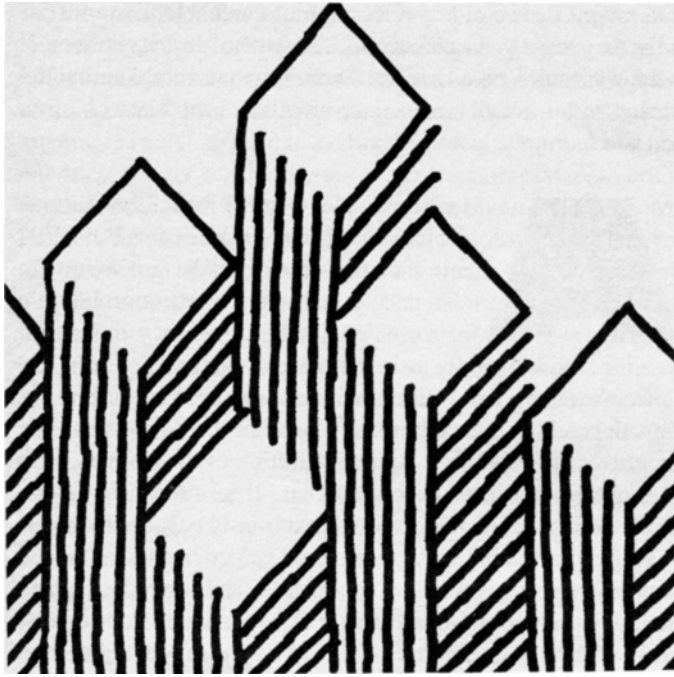
had taught their children a lesson more valuable than most of what they learn in the classroom. Those who, desiring to protect what was theirs, opted to reject the stigmatized child, remained closed, bitter, and defensive long after the event. Their children too had learned a lesson.

As we have said, the very idea of institutions is often repugnant to Americans. But whatever their conscious attitude, Americans are also deeply fascinated by the moral drama of institutions, at least when they understand them, or think they do, as in the case of sports.

Consider baseball, the national pastime. Tens of millions of fans depend for the excitement of a season not only upon the practice of the sport but on the institution of the leagues, with their complex athletic, economic, and legal rules. The drama of the annual pennant races is what it is only because the skills of players and teams are supported and guided by the less visible structure of coaches, umpires, accountants, and contracts. Equally crucial is the moral infrastructure of collective honor, loyalty, and devotion to the sport. For many fans the drama of baseball is heightened at those moments when the larger institutional patterns come into view—especially in moments of crisis, as when a team is separated from a city long identified with it, or when scandal shocks the public’s sense of the honor and propriety that ought to govern the sport.

It is expected that star players are extraordinarily well paid; but when they allow their own image or their own self-indulgence to become more important than their contribution to the team, the enjoyment of the game changes to moral outrage, as it does when owners appear to be acting for private gain at the expense of the honest life of the sport. Why this indignation? At such moments the public acknowledges that moral norms are woven throughout baseball; shared indignation expresses the fans’ tremendous moral identification with the sport as an institution. Clearly baseball in such moments is not being understood as a neutral device for individual satisfaction—if it were, who would care about scandals? Rather, baseball, with its purposes, codes, and standards, is a collective moral enterprise, an institution in the full sense, and many Americans care deeply about it. As an institution, baseball is more than the actual players and organizations who play the game during any given season. That is why we can see the sport as sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing, in becoming what baseball really ought to be. This understanding of things was beautifully expressed by the late Baseball Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti in his statement of August 10, 1989, concerning his decision to banish from the game for life the former baseball star and then-manager of the Cincinnati Reds, Pete Rose, as a result of Mr. Rose’s gambling activities:

I believe baseball is a beautiful and exciting game, loved by millions—I among them—and I believe that baseball is an important, enduring American institution. It must assert and aspire to the highest of principles—of integrity, of professionalism of performance, of fair play within its rules. It will come as no surprise that like any institution composed of human beings, this institution will not always



fulfill its highest aspirations. I know of no earthly institution that does. But this one, because it is so much a part of our history as a people and because it has such a purchase on our national soul, has an obligation to the people for whom it is played—to its fans and its well-wishers—to strive for excellence in all things and to promote the highest ideals.

I will be told that I am an idealist. I hope so. I will continue to locate ideals I hold for myself and for my country in the national game as well as in other of our national institutions. And there will be debate and dissent about this or that or another occurrence on or off the field, and while the game's nobler parts will always be enmeshed in the human frailties of those who, whatever their role, have stewardship of this game, let there be no doubt or dissent about the goal of baseball or our dedication to it. Nor about our vigilance and vigor—and patience—in protecting the game from blemish or stain or disgrace.

Sports fans intuitively understand things important for all Americans to know. Their enthusiasm for institutionalized sports enables them to recognize that individual excellence depends on collectively maintained codes of honor and discipline. As generations of coaches have claimed and athletes have affirmed, sports teach and form character. But so do all institutions: in this they are not so much unique as exemplary.

Institutions are patterns of social activity that give shape to collective and individual experience. An institution is a complex whole that guides and sustains individual identity, as a family gives sense and purpose to the lives of its members, enabling them to realize themselves as spouses, parents, and children. Institutions form individuals by making possible or impossible certain ways of behaving and relating to others. They shape character by assigning responsibility, demanding accountability, and providing the standards in terms of which each person rec-

ognizes the excellence of his or her achievements. Each individual's possibilities depend on the opportunities opened up within the institutional contexts to which that person has access. Without the collective effort represented by the teams on the field, there could be no grand slams.

Institutions, then, are essential bearers of ideals and meanings; yet in the real world the embodiment is imperfect. The achievement of individual ends, like the carrying out of patterned social activity on which it always depends, requires material resources. It also involves the use of power. For this reason all institutions—armies, teams, and even families—are necessarily involved to some degree with both wealth and power. These means all too easily become ends in themselves. Institutions become corrupt, some more so than others. The enormous amount of money at stake in professional sports has introduced an element of corruption so profound that many fans are deeply cynical about the sport that at the same time they also deeply love. Indeed, it is just at the point where the relative clarity of the game is clouded over by purely business considerations and power conflicts that disillusionment sets in. Suddenly an institution we thought we understood well begins to look like the institutions we don't understand at all. What seemed morally clear is now morally ambiguous. It is no wonder that Americans have an often-noted allergy to large institutions—though, as in the case of sports, even in our cynicism we continue to depend on them.

But corruption can be recognized and criticized. If the ideals embodied in an institution are not totally dead, they stand as a judgment against the corruption of their embodiment. This is something we often overlook. The heroic individual who cleans up the corrupt institution is a staple figure of our lore in movies and television. It is easy not to notice that the honest cop and the crusading reporter, in the very act of resisting corruption, are drawing upon and enacting norms and ideals at the core of the institutions with which they struggle. When heroism has a lasting effect, it is because it has worked catalytically to reignite the dedication of others to the highest codes of the police or of journalism. That is, it must find expression in reformed institutions.

Sports help us to see that at the core of any viable institution there is a moral code which must be periodically reinvigorated so that the institution may survive and flourish. Sports do not help us to see when our institutions are in such serious difficulty that drastic institutional innovations are required. Family and sports often serve us well as institutional metaphors to help us make sense of our world. But the problems our society faces today require that we expand our repertory beyond these familiar examples, that we think hard and critically about what has too long been taken for granted.

A successful life in American society depends on the ability to negotiate competently a series of requirements, primarily to show technical competence and secondarily to demonstrate the ability to deal effectively with other people. The educational system dovetails with the occupational system in maintaining these emphases. Socialization in the middle-class family rein-

forces this pattern through its emphasis on doing well in school, being competitive (in sports as well as studies), and getting along with others. In family, leisure, school, and work the fine calculation of the relation of means to ends is emphasized, and this gives rise to the pattern of utilitarian individualism which we described in *Habits of the Heart*, a pattern moderated only partly by the attention to human relations—expressive individualism—for the emphasis here, too, is heavily strategic.

Life in this paradigm is a competitive race to acquire the objective markers (College Boards, admission to the right school, GPA, LSAT, advanced degree, entry into the right organization, promotion to higher-echelon positions) that give access to all the good things that make life worthwhile (attractiveness to a desirable mate, purchase of an appropriate home, American Express Gold Card, vacations in Europe). But what this form of life minimizes, if it does not neglect it altogether, is any larger moral meaning, any contribution to the common good, that might help it to make sense. So while there are many rules, and the rules operate so as to put great pressure on us to conform to them, there are few reasons. In short, it is not just the “big institutions” that don’t make sense but our own lives. Beyond following the rules that tell us how to get ahead, we have trouble making moral sense of our immediate actions.

From the individual point of view, the educational and occupational systems appear to have an objective givenness that puts them beyond question. Failure or refusal to adapt to them has the inevitable consequence of depriving a person of access to precisely the rewards that in this paradigm make life worthwhile. The presence of large numbers of people in our society who have failed in these regards serves as an admonition to make sure one does not join them, but it also, even if subliminally, raises questions about the legitimacy of the whole pattern. Part of the problem is that we do not bring the sense of institutional meaning that we intuitively have about baseball to bear on the educational, economic, and administrative institutions that demand so much from us. We think what is required here is only a high level of competence, of expertise, of “professionalism,” not the moral wisdom that should be at the basis of any good institution. And when things go wrong, we tend to blame individuals, we decry their lack of “ethics,” but we don’t question the morality of the institutions themselves.

There is a profound gap in our culture between technical reason, the knowledge with which we design computers or analyze the structure of DNA, and practical or moral reason, the ways we understand how we should live. We often hear that only technical reason can really be taught, and our educational commitments from primary school to university seem to embody that belief. But technical reason alone is insufficient to manage our social difficulties or make sense of our lives. What we need to know is not simply how to build a powerful computer or how to redesign DNA but precisely and above all what to do with that knowledge. As the power of our ability to manipulate the world grows, the poverty of our understanding of what to do with that knowledge becomes more apparent. Even when we see that the solution must have something to do with institutions, we once again look for a technical solution in some kind of “management science”

rather than in trying to understand the inherently moral nature of institutions themselves.

Ironically, the confusion and nihilism that threaten us are related to the commitment to reason, knowledge, and education that has always been central to American success. This country has rightly celebrated the intelligence of an educated citizenry, the common sense of the merchant or tinkerer, and, more recently, the scientific and technical leader. But just at the point when our citizens depend more and more on knowledge, we face a crisis about the purposes and meaning of that knowledge.

It is easy to see this as a personal problem, to say that Americans have become selfish, self-indulgent, spoiled by affluence and readily available consumer goods; or as a cultural problem, to say that we have lost the work ethic and have come to believe that the good life is a life of hedonism and comfort. But it is also, and perhaps primarily, an institutional problem. Our institutions today—from the family to the school to the corporation to the public arena—do not challenge us to use all our capacities so that we have a sense of enjoyable achievement and of contributing to the welfare of others. We tend to accept our institutions as they come, passively, and we do not see clearly enough how some of them operate to encourage that passivity. In the case of dysfunctional institutions, we have simply tried to escape from them and have allowed them to fall apart rather than reform and revitalize them. In the case of coercive institutions, we have submitted to them as though they were unchangeable natural forces. And the malaise is palpable: a loss of meaning in family and job, a distrust of politics, a disillusion with organized religion.

American culture has focused relentlessly on the idea that individuals are self-interest maximizers and that private accumulation and private pleasures are the only measurable public goods. We have been blind to the way that institutions enable or cripple our capacity to be the persons we most want to be. We need to understand historically how we came to think that individual freedom is the highest good, that institutions stand in the way of our freedom. We need to understand how we failed to see that the virtue in autonomy, in the sense of personal freedom, can be realized only along with other virtues, such as care and responsibility. Our present problems are the result of historical conditions, not of some inevitable historical law. They are the result of actual choices that people have made in history, choices made without awareness of what the consequences would be if everyone made similar choices.

We hope to renew earlier efforts to create an American public philosophy less trapped in the clichés of rugged individualism and more open to an invigorating, fulfilling sense of social responsibility. But responsible social participation, with an enlightened citizenry that can deal with moral and intellectual complexity, does not come about just from exhortation. It is certainly not enough simply to implore our fellow citizens to “get involved.” We must create the institutions that will enable such participation to occur, encourage it, and make it fulfilling as well as demanding. □