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KITSCH AND COMMUNITY

Kathryn Abrams*


Kitsch, Milan Kundera has written, is the dazzling, insipid smile human beings use to cover what is "essentially unacceptable in human existence."1 Unwilling to confront the banality or brevity of life, people reach for sunnier images to capture their experience. They picture children romping in the grass; monolithic crusades to end injustice; warm hearths surrounded by happy families. No less important than the luminous character of these images is their universal accessibility. The power of kitsch lies in the reassurance it provides that the viewer is at one with the rest of the world in grasping the essential meaning of the human condition.

Academics do not customarily traffic in kitsch. Its tendency to foreclose questions seems antithetical to the task of discovering answers.2 Yet scholars are hardly immune. When a lengthy assault fails to resolve a problem, they too may be tempted to offer a vague panacea or a wry lament about the difficulty of the task.3 Such palliatives ease the desire for an answer, and help persuade them that their efforts have not been pointless.

The problem of preserving community in American life is poised on the brink of kitsch. Popular concern with its erosion, inflamed by

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2. Cf. id. at 254. Speaking of totalitarian kitsch, Kundera observes that "all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions."

3. The latter may be a rare example of a distinctively academic form of kitsch. The comfortable, passive lament about the difficulty of the problem permits the speaker to feel a sense of affiliation with the scholarly task, though his effort at any serious inquiry into the question may long since have ceased.

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the political retreat of the 1970s, entered academic circles through commentators such as Christopher Lasch and Hannah Arendt. Though scholars may, in fact, have exaggerated the problem, they have been frustrated by their inconclusive struggle with isolation and apathy. Consequently, some have begun to reach for an easier answer. Calls for a return to the simple connections of small town life have begun to slip into the literature, as have laments about the uncontrollable growth of American individualism. The challenge of reanimating public spirit risks becoming enmired in a deepening layer of communitarian kitsch.

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_Habits of the Heart_ reflects the precarious state of the current inquiry into community. Based on extensive fieldwork by a team of respected sociologists and philosophers, it surveys the causes and extent of American individualism and offers suggestions for the revivifi-

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4. See T. Bender, _Community and Social Change in America_ 3 (1978). In a thought-provoking work that resists the temptations of communitarian kitsch, Bender observes that fears about the decline of community have recurred throughout modern history, often following periods of political or technological change. Despite such concerns, Bender claims, community has not actually disintegrated, but has simply changed its locus and form over time. Bender also argues against the fallacy of the "conservation of historical energy," see id. at 30 (citing J. Hexter, _Reappraisals in History_ 26, 40-44 (1962)), which assumes that a growth of individualism automatically results in a decline in community; he points out that the two patterns can coexist in different groups and activities within the same society.


6. H. Arendt, _Between Past and Future_ (1961); H. Arendt, _The Human Condition_ (1958) (expounding idea of "political" realm devoted to debate on public issues). Though Arendt's most important works on the public or "political" realm were written earlier, her works were rediscovered in both academic and popular circles in the late 1970s.

7. The social commentators' rediscovery of the problem of community has been paralleled by a debate in the philosophical literature. Responding to a rights-based theory of liberalism revived by such works as Rawls' _Theory of Justice_ and Dworkin's _Taking Rights Seriously_, a number of philosophers have reasserted the importance of community in defining personal identity and in shaping social and political values. See, e.g., M. Sandel, _Liberalism and the Limits of Justice_ (1982); A. Macintyre, _After Virtue_ (1981). This dialogue in the philosophical literature will not be the primary focus of this essay, because the books reviewed address the problem of community at a different level of abstraction: they are more concerned with altering sociopolitical arrangements than with reexamining the assumptions of liberal metaphysics. I will, however, refer to the philosophical debate wherever it sheds light on the more concrete problems of community explored by Bellah and his coauthors, by Barber, and by Walzer.

8. Both _Habits of the Heart's_ emphasis on the bonds of the small town, see text accompanying notes 20-22 _infra_, and Barber's focus on the neighborhood as the center of political activity, see note 29 _infra_ and accompanying text, reflect this pattern. A related development has been an outpouring of recent fiction that contrasts the simpler norms of life in small-town America with the challenges and tragedies of a more complex society. See, e.g., B. Mason, _In Country_ (1983); J. Phillips, _Machine Dreams_ (1984); A. Tyler, _The Accidental Tourist_ (1985).

cation of communitarian impulses. Through the medium of the recorded interview, the authors have captured authentic voices of American self-involvement. Yet their lack of focus in identifying the barriers to community and their reliance on vague, yet strongly evocative solutions are disturbing. These weaknesses suggest that the authors would rather don the empty smile of comfortable affiliation than make continued battle against the problem.

*Habits of the Heart* begins with the American way of growing up: a pell-mell process of self-examination that consists of trying on all the attitudes and associations one has inherited or acquired and discarding any which no longer suit. This process, which may continue inconclusively for years, is an apt prelude to the life of self-absorption and attenuated connections that follows. Four facets of this life provide the subject of the book’s discussion: two, family and therapy, are described as private; and two, community participation and political involvement, are described as public. In a brief postscript, the authors discuss possibilities for strengthening the communitarian impulse in American culture.

Home is the first arena in which adults confront the conflict between individual impulse and obligation to a wider community. Home life bears a complicated relation to career and success, the prototypical objects of individual interest. The family is at once the justification for and the haven from the wage earner’s exhausting, competitive struggle. Yet it reaps few of the benefits. The taxing conditions under which many professionals work mean that they have little time for their families. And they often prefer to devote the time that is left to restful pursuits, rather than the intense or conflict-ridden efforts that help to strengthen family relationships.

In therapy, the authors find a comparatively new activity which serves the self as it diserves the interests of the larger community. Therapy confuses intimacy and work, and generates attitudes that make active membership in a larger community increasingly difficult. The experience of therapy makes those forms of interaction which do not take place through face-to-face dialogue seem staggeringly complex. And the therapeutic tendency to view all choices as the product of subjective judgment militates against the formulation of collective moral or political values. The prevalence of therapy as a means of resolving conflicts or exploring one’s personality both reflects and enhances the sway of individualism in society.

The discussion of community involvement provides the centerpiece of the book; in this context individuals confront most regularly and starkly the choice between pursuing their private interests and committing themselves to some collective enterprise. The authors describe numerous forms and styles of participation: the “town father,” who rallies the residents of the small American town; the denizen of a
"lifestyle enclave," who assembles intermittently with others for the peaceful enjoyment of common interests; the "activist," who joins in the politics of her community as a partisan or a mediator among competing interests. Many of these participants express a tension between a desire to belong and contribute to a group larger than the immediate family and a sense of the futility and individual cost of collective action. Others have difficulty describing the motives for or objects of their activities in the community. Both are highlighted as evidence of the authors' claim that communitarian commitments have become so attenuated that Americans lack even the language necessary to express them.

Although the authors essay a tone of neutral observation, they do not refrain from making judgments about the groups described. Groups united by opposition to a common enemy lack an affirmative program or vision; those united by a common lifestyle or interest function less as communities than as aggregations of individuals, pursuing their pastimes in the company of others. Preferable from the authors' viewpoint are "communities of memory," whose members share a common characteristic, experience, or perspective, not chosen by them but transmitted from past generations. Such groups, united by bonds of history and tradition, have a durability and comprehensiveness that others lack.

The authors also discuss participation in national or regional political affairs, a type of communitarian involvement that seems even more precarious than the local activities surveyed. Not only do Americans perceive many kinds of politics as cynical exchanges of goods between partisans willing to compromise any principles they hold. But their individualistic perspective prevents many Americans from understanding the inequalities of wealth, power, and organization that may be politically determinative but less susceptible to individual control. There are some who attempt to rectify these inequalities, educating and politicizing socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. But even these participants encounter difficulties. Many have a clear idea of the powerlessness their group seeks to ameliorate; but, because they are less certain about the objects or goals they will pursue once polit-

10. This ambivalence is equally prevalent in the sphere of religion, which might be expected to provide a reliable means of transcending the self. While some find in religious communities a way to leave behind the concerns of daily life or to ameliorate the hardships of the disadvantaged, others retreat into mysticism or permit their individualism to take over their religious lives. One young woman named Sheila describes the central tenet of her religion, "Sheilaism" (a form of spirituality replete with voices and visions) as "just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself." Almost as an afterthought, she adds "[y]ou know, I guess, take care of each other." P. 221.

11. The authors offer as an example one woman whose commitment to her community grew out of the feelings of mutual concern and support she experienced as a child while witnessing the solidarity in her father's labor union. Pp. 160-61.

12. The authors focus on Santa Monica's Campaign for Economic Democracy and Philadelphia's Institute for the Study of Civic Values. P. xi.
ical power is attained, they are limited in what they can offer their beneficiaries.

In the final section of the book, the authors reflect on the fragmentation of American culture. To ameliorate the atomism they have described, Bellah and his colleagues offer two general suggestions. First, they propose that society “reduce the ‘punishments of failure and the rewards of success’” (p. 287) connected with work. This broad proposal is intended to reduce the competitive character of work and increase the time and energy workers could devote to their families and neighbors. It is also intended to restore the idea of work as a vocation or calling — a lifetime task connected with the betterment of the lives of others. The second proposal advanced by the authors is the “reappropriation” of the “republican and biblical traditions” in American thought, and the use of such traditions in shaping and directing community life. They argue that some of those engaged in strengthening the “second language” of communitarian commitment have drawn their orienting principles from biblical and philosophical literature. If secondary schools and universities would “help . . . to make [this] tradition a vital resource in our lives” (p. 294), productive communitarian impulses could be built and strengthened.

*Habits of the Heart* succeeds in illuminating one portion of the contemporary American psyche. The urgent concern felt by the authors about the erosion of communitarian impulses is captured with immediacy by the profiles they present. Who would not be alarmed by a man who explains his moral system with the statement, “if you’ve got the money, honey, you can do your thing” (p. 7)? Or a woman who labels her faith with her own name and sees religion as synonymous with loving oneself (p. 221)? These portraits leave no doubt that, for a certain stratum of the population, atomism and self-involvement have become a problem.

Yet the authors’ attempt to generalize from these observations is frustrated by their narrow focus on the white middle class. Any such study must have limits; and the importance of this group to the nation’s self-image and public institutions is uncontested. But it provides an inadequate basis for the comprehensive conclusions about self-involvement and public spirit that comprise most of the book. The authors may overestimate the extent of atomism, as many of the causes they cite occur predominantly, if not exclusively, among the

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13. The authors rely on these two general rationales in justifying their decision to limit themselves to white, middle-class subjects. P. ix. Some of their arguments along these lines appear more credible than others. It is not difficult to believe that the middle class, which can easily provide for needs such as food and shelter, has the time and energy for “the active public participation that makes free institutions work.” *Id.* More dubious, however, is the authors’ unsupported assertion that “[e]veryone in the United States thinks largely in middle-class categories, even when they are inappropriate.” *Id.*

14. The draining, competitive character of work appears to be primarily a problem of mid-
middle class. Yet they also neglect salient crises of community that have emerged among nonwhite, lower-income Americans. Much could have been learned by comparing the "get ahead" individualism of the middle class to the perspectives of a single welfare parent on family or a barrio resident on political power and complexity. While the emotional force of many of the portraits is undeniable, the narrowness of the authors' focus forfeits the opportunity to make a more useful and original statement.

More disappointing are the authors' efforts to analyze the data they compile. First, they fail clearly to identify those attitudes that prevent Americans from making communitarian commitments. This weakness is evident in their exploration of work, an activity thought to sap time and energy that could be devoted to communitarian pursuits. Although the quest for professional "success" is a dominant theme of the interviews, the authors' questions do not permit us to understand their subjects' feelings about their work. The authors rarely probe the reasons that subjects value their work, or attempt to determine whether these reasons have changed in recent years. Nor are subjects asked to compare the kind of self-esteem that is derived from work with the kinds that may be derived from participation in family, political, or community activities. Without answers to these questions, we can do little more than hypothesize about the effect of work on community; we are also unable to appraise the authors' suggestion that altering the "rewards" and "punishments" (presumably monetary) associated with work would enhance communitarian impulses.15

More importantly, the authors fail to derive, from the attitudes they survey, a plausible response to the problem of community. In insisting that Americans are so indoctrinated in the norms of individualism that they lack even a language for articulating communitarian commitments,16 the authors exaggerate the isolation and naiveté of their subjects.17 Yet when they consider the proper bases for commu-
nitarian commitment, the authors seem to absorb the very perspective they critique. They describe communities as collections of diverse individuals, whose goal is to combat the individualistic impulses and ease the isolation of those who make them up. Other substantive ends and organizational principles are not accorded equivalent attention. This orientation is self-defeating because it causes the authors to misjudge those communities they examine, and to abandon persistent inquiry for nostalgic, imagistic solutions. But more importantly it leads them to neglect the crucial possibility that identifying those principles that justify the formation of particular communities may be an effective way to persuade even radical individualists to join them.

The few suggestions that are offered about the proper bases of community are illustrative of the authors’ problems. One is puzzled, at the outset, by the types of communities singled out for praise or blame. The community united by opposition to a common enemy is condemned as unstable; once the group gains the victory that it seeks (a voice in the political process, equal rights under law, etc.), the absence of an affirmative program may bring the effort to a grinding halt. Yet the civil rights movement, to which the authors offer lengthy tribute, demonstrates that a community which does not become a permanent fixture on the political landscape may nonetheless be capable of transforming laws, attitudes, and norms.

The “lifestyle enclave” is criticized for not being a community at all, and for encouraging simultaneous rather than collective action. The authors make this point by focusing on the most banal examples of such groups: the local bridge group or tennis club. Yet such groups need not be static, nor must the similarities of their members be limited to hobbies or recreational interests. The characteristics shared by such a group may become the building blocks of a social or political program, which reaches out to comprehend dissimilar participants as well. The suffragettes and early feminists began as small groups of women who were socioeconomically similar and took an interest in politics and history; this attribute did not prevent either from initiating a movement whose program reached far beyond the insular group with which it began. These histories support Tocqueville’s observa-

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18. Many of the subjects interviewed by Bellah and his colleagues combine a longstanding habit of independence with a desire for more enduring connections with others. Although they may sometimes emphasize one aspect of this combination over the other, the authors suggest that a well-constituted community should respond to both.
tion, oddly neglected by the authors, that by working with others with whom one feels salient similarities, one develops the understanding of and confidence in collective action that permits later cooperation with those who are dissimilar to oneself. 19

The authors' support for the "community of memory" is also misplaced. The surface appeal of this vision is evident, particularly for those concerned by anomie. Its enveloping, familial character offers a comforting antidote to contemporary isolation. Its ties of history, mythology, and tradition seem proof against the strains of individualism. Yet a glimpse at the reality behind these reassuring images suggests that their promise may be empty.

First, it seems unlikely that most individuals currently reaching adulthood will be able to identify a "community of memory" of which they are a part. Even attributes such as hometown, religion, and ethnicity, which provide the basis for these communities, are reexamined and discarded during the process of growing up the authors describe. 20 The bonds of sports, music, and popular culture that create the primary ties among contemporary youth hold little promise as substitutes, for they offer neither a much-told history nor a comprehensive set of traditional practices to their members.

Even if every individual had a vital, inherited tradition to which she could lay a claim, "communities of memory" would fall prey to a second problem. Using unchosen characteristics or experiences as indices of group membership breeds intolerance as well as affiliation. Focusing on such traits raises barriers to access by sympathetic nonmembers; it also exaggerates differences among members and may create tensions with those outside. These tendencies are readily apparent in the "community of memory" which is subjected to closest scrutiny in the book: a small New England town (pp. 170-77). Howard Newton, one of the "town fathers" interviewed by the authors, is passionately committed to the welfare of his community, but his goodwill does not extend to outsiders, or even to all who reside there. He is quick to express his antagonism to the local Chevrolet dealership, which has "been in town only about twenty years" (p. 171), and the "special interest groups," usually comprised of the "new people in town" (p. 173), who wield too much influence at town meetings. 21


20. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of the examples the authors cite are middle-aged Americans rediscovering a tradition which had been a vital part of their youth. While it is conceivable that a younger individual could "adopt" such a tradition, much of the claimed advantage would be lost; the histories and legends that create the communities' bonds would have played no part in the individual's personal past.

21. The authors pass no judgment on this darker side of the "community of memory." They report the attitudes of Howard Newton and others like him, yet while they suggest that insularity
The "community of memory" may attain stability only at the price of inflaming the intolerant, coercive side of community life.22

Yet such practical drawbacks are less of a threat to the "community of memory" than its own conceptual emptiness. The authors suggest, at the outset, that a well-founded community provides moral or behavioral guidance for its members. Their definition encompasses not only social interdependence but the sharing of ethical practices that "both define the community and are nurtured by it."23 Yet as the authors survey the isolation and anomie of their subjects, their focus begins to waiver. They become less concerned with the moral or constitutive aspects of community than with the power it wields against individualism and the sense of connection it provides its members. The "community of memory" reflects this emphasis in full flower. Although such communities embody practices24 that should shape the conduct or self-concept of their members, the genesis and content of these norms are rarely explored. The authors focus almost exclusively on the feelings of unity and belonging the group inspires. A member of an evangelical church gains from his experience "a new family-like anchor for his life, a new bond to other people through the shared celebration of a 'personal relationship with Jesus Christ' " (p. 155); a woman raised in the labor movement acquires "a solidarity with working people and 'the have-nots' " (p. 162). Even when these experiences lead individuals to political action, they are moved more by a feeling of connectedness with others than by any discrete or articulable collective value.25

may make it difficult for a town to adjust to the changes and dislocations that occur in the nation as a whole, they make no comment on the evident intolerance implicit in these remarks.22

22. It seems unlikely, moreover, that the failings of these groups would be mitigated by exposure to a "biblical and republican" tradition. Religion provides a potent unifying force for many groups not examined by the authors: black Americans, working class ethnic groups, middle class residents of the South and Southwest. But among the anomic, urban middle class, its pull, by the authors' own account, is weaker and its influence more equivocal. The body of "republican" literature holds no greater promise. A literary tradition - much of it inaccessible to those beyond the middle class surveyed - creates too diffuse a bond to constitute a community in any practical sense. And while the works to which the authors refer can be a valuable resource in learning about community, one must first ask the hard questions about the tools and purposes of different types of community which the authors avoid.

23. See p. 333 (glossary of relevant terms). Although the authors do not cite his work, this definition recalls in many respects the kind of community described by Sandel, who argues that individuals are "implicated in the purposes and ends of [their] communities" and that these communities are therefore "partly constitutive of the persons [they] are," Sandel, Morality and the Liberal Ideal, New Republic, May 7, 1984, at 17; see also M. SANDEL, supra note 7, at 143-44, 173 (1982).

24. The authors' ambivalence is reflected in their definition of such "practices" themselves. The authors describe them as "shared activities that are not undertaken as a means to an end but are ethically good in themselves," p. 335, which suggests that their purpose is to instill values; but the authors also characterize them as "practices of commitment," which suggests that their function is to bind individuals together.

25. Speaking of her recent efforts in the political realm, the woman who came of age in the labor movement, see note 11 supra, describes her goal as bringing "people away from concern
Yet even the more constitutive view of community to which the authors allude is flawed by its reliance on the individualistic perspective they critique. It assumes that the proper starting point for developing a vision of community is the feelings, perceptions, or values of the individual. It fails, therefore, to comprehend a second, important aspect of community life: the potential of collective action to produce societal change or other public benefits. Reflecting on those objects or goals a collectivity can unite to achieve is another way of encouraging community, one which seems not only more consistent with the communitarian perspective, but more likely to ameliorate the individualism the authors lament. A discrete goal or set of goals might be ardently shared, even by diverse individuals accustomed to making their own way. Those who came together for the purpose of promoting those goals would be unhindered by the potentially coercive demands of a more comprehensive collectivity, and would be free to pursue other individual or shared projects. This limited coalescence would not always be the end of the story. Participants might find that a spirit of belonging, or community, emerged as a natural by-product of their efforts toward a particular end, predisposing them toward further collective action. Group members might also develop a systematic set of goals that made a more continuous and comprehensive community appropriate. But this bounded, end-oriented form of community would produce public goods, as well as nurturing public spirit, without the drawbacks attending the authors’ proposals.

That Habits of the Heart neglects this possibility, and abandons even its own, fuller vision of community, is a measure of its central weakness. Having gazed into the abyss of contemporary anomie, the authors strive to restore a sense of connection and security. They offer a single, all-encompassing bond that ties the future to the past and a world of separate stragglers to each other. That so firm a bond might entail costs of its own, or that it might be improved by affiliation with specific substantive purposes, is of lesser concern. For reassurance is their primary weapon against that which they find unacceptable. Behind their ministrations, one glimpses the dazzling, empty smile of kitsch.
It is perhaps fitting that the contributions to *Habits of the Heart* should be eclipsed by those of two recent books which form a part of the "biblical and republican" tradition. Neither book is explicitly addressed to the problem of community in American life: Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* examines the enduring political message of the Exodus story, and Barber's *Strong Democracy* proposes a transformation in the liberal democratic norms of political participation. But because both discuss the genesis of a new politics — and the relationship of that politics to the impulses of individualism — they finish by addressing the question of community as well. Perhaps because they arrive at this destination by a more indirect route, they avoid much of the facile reassurance that cripples *Habits of the Heart*.

Barber claims that liberal democracy, as Americans know it, is too liberal and not sufficiently democratic. In an unusual hybrid analysis, he explores this failing as a problem of democratic theory and as a problem of practical political participation. Barber identifies three interrelated strains or "dispositions" in liberal democratic thought which combine to reduce the size of government and the extent of participation. The "anarchist" disposition views human beings as radically separate, autonomous agents, whose needs and wants "can (at least in the abstract) be satisfied outside of coercive civil societies" (p. 6), and whose freedom imposes a constraint on any political system which must be established. The "realist" disposition regards the protection of private liberty as the goal of political power, but views governmental sanctions as instruments through which human impulses can be modified. The "minimalist" disposition attempts to strike a balance between the chaotic and authoritarian tendencies implicit in the preceding strains; by acknowledging a skeletal government as a necessary mediating force, it adopts an agnostic position of tolerance toward both conflict and political power.

The "thin democracy" that arises from these conflicting dispositions places little value on popular participation. Citizens elect their representatives,27 who engage in a limited amount of public discussion and decisionmaking, leaving all free to spend the greater part of their time in conflict, collaboration, or more frequently, independent action. The absence of salient public dialogue encourages the fragmentation fostered by liberal autonomy; the lack of any shared purpose robs human action of meaning. Self-direction, Barber argues, is not freedom, but "mere impulse and appetite," unless "it is associated with

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27. In a wonderfully original reflection on voting and representation, Barber compares the fundamental act of political participation to the discrete and isolated act of using a public toilet: "we wait in line with a crowd in order to close ourselves up in a small compartment where we can relieve ourselves in solitude and in privacy of our burden, pull a lever, and ... go silently home." P. 188.
intention and purposes that by their nature can only arise within the
guiding limits of a society and a culture" (p. 100).

Liberal atomism also exposes a political society to the threat of
despotism, or to the more familiar danger of totalitarian government.
Each of the prevalent strains of liberal democracy contains the seeds of
its own destruction in its vulnerability to despotic or totalitarian
forces. Anarchic "freedom," which leaves human beings uncon­
strained but also unconnected, makes them vulnerable to the solidarity
promised by a totalitarian regime. Realism, which begins by viewing
governmental power as a necessity, may slide imperceptibly toward
viewing it as an end in itself. And proponents of minimalism, who can
remain agnostic in the face of competing "interests" presented as such,
may encounter difficulty maintaining their tolerant indifference when
faced with totalitarian claims of "truth." The spiritual and political
vacuum created by liberal individualism, in short, may easily be filled
by a despotic or totalitarian government.

Barber's solution to liberal atomism is to rethink the central prem­
ises of democratic politics. Government must no longer be a skeletal
structure superintended by a small number of representatives, while
the majority of citizens battle inconclusively over their private inter­
ests. It must become an activity in which all participate, and which
helps citizens replace their individual impulses with a shared will.

The realm of action occupied by Barber's "strong democracy" is
limited: the principles elaborated apply only in those circumstances
that impose "a necessity for public action, and thus for reasonable
public choice, in the presence of conflict and in the absence of private
or independent grounds for judgment" (p. 120). This definition re­
fl ects an acceptance of some of the central norms of liberal politics:
the notion of a limited political sphere, the persistence of conflict
among individuals over the proper course for collective action, the
absence of any independent framework for evaluating political outcomes.

Yet in many ways Barber's approach diverges radically from lib­
eral politics. Representative democracy at the national level is supple­
mented by a direct, participatory form of local politics. Citizens meet
in neighborhood assemblies to discuss topics of both local and national
importance. On local matters, they proceed to decision without re­
course to a vote: through extended discussion they arrive at a con­

28. Barber does not seem to consider the nature of the legislative decision to be made in
determining whether "strong democracy" is appropriate. Not only does he pass up an intelligent
means of allocating issues between "thin" and "strong" democratic systems; but he also neglects
recent scholarship suggesting that some types of substantive issues cannot profitably be addressed
(decentralized democratic decisionmaking ideal for issues amenable to trial-and-error resolution,
unsuitable for decisions where costs of error are high); Gillette & Krier, Risk and Hubris (unpub­
lished manuscript) (decisions concerning public risks which carry substantial external effects can­
not be handled by decentralized decisionmaking).

29. Voting, according to Barber, restricts the crucial process of formulating a public agenda


sensus, which accommodates or integrates their preferences, rather than simply aggregating them. The two principal features of local decisionmaking, "talk" and "public willing," also reflect a departure from the tenets of liberal democracy.

Political "talk," the verbal and nonverbal exchange among participants that frames the course of collective action, forms the center of Barber's conception. "Talk" involves listening to others as well as expressing oneself, with an ear to identifying those features of the positions expounded that speak to some common good or shared interest of all participants. It has an affective as well as a cognitive component, which helps highlight the connections among those involved and build a sense of common purpose. Finally, "talk" is characterized by what Barber describes as "intentionalism": it is neither the unconstrained impulse of the isolated individual nor the pure reflection of the philosopher. "Talk" is intended to result in action, capable of transforming the conversants' world.

A second salient characteristic of Barber's "strong" democracy is "public willing," the act of political judgment that draws upon and consummates political "talk." When members of a democratic community decide on a course of political action, Barber explains, they do not determine what "I want," but what "we will" (p. 200). Ultimate political judgments thus incorporate both the collective and the intentionalist characteristics of political "talk": the participants do not decide "I want X" but rather "X will be good for us"; they will their choices rather than simply wanting or wishing them because they recognize that they have the power to change their common world.

Although Barber's proposal focuses on local politics, it includes a series of regional and national reforms that serve similar goals. Meetings of city, state, or regional assemblies are to be televised over monitors installed in each home, so citizens can view and respond to the deliberations of those bodies in which they cannot directly participate. The recommendations of neighborhood assemblies on regional or national matters may be passed on to these bodies, or presented to the nation through the mechanism of initiative and referendum. While referenda must ultimately be decided by recourse to some type of vote, Barber provides for multichoice balloting and two-stage voting to eliminate some of the distortions that inhere in contemporary American voting schemes.30

and creates the illusion that a narrow set of broadly supported alternatives already exists. It also reduces public choices to aggregations of individual preferences, and fails to reflect the intensity of support for any proposed alternative. Pp. 198-99.

30. Barber also proposes a series of expedients — such as mandatory service in a domestic version of the Peace Corps (which would rebuild and extend the nation's infrastructure and conduct programs of civic education) and lottery voting for local offices — to accompany the primary features of his plan. He notes that all of these institutional reforms must be regarded as "inseparable features of an integrated agenda," p. 263, to be implemented together, much like the economic and social programs of the Great Society.
Barber's proposal displays little of the concern with the spectre of individualism that haunts Habits of the Heart. For Barber, the individualistic tendencies on which "thin" democracy is premised are the product not of human nature but of the philosophical edifice constructed around it. Liberal political theory has created the myth that the human being is a solitary creature irrevocably committed to his individual advantage. The first step toward strong democracy lies in recognizing that human beings are "social by nature," so that citizenship is not merely an artificial role but "the only legitimate form that man's natural dependency can take" (p. 217). Once one has abandoned the myth of a static, solitary human nature, it is possible to make the further discovery that "man is a developmental animal . . . with a compound and evolving telos whose ultimate destiny depends on how he interacts with those who share the same destiny" (p. 215). Barber admits the possibility of short run problems initiating change from the status quo, but he insists that the selfishness or altruism of human impulses, over the long run, depends on the context in which human beings are placed.

Thus liberated from any persistent concern with individualism, Barber is free to focus on the political community as an entity in itself. He identifies both the substantive goals which "strong democracy" serves and the organizational principles according to which it proceeds. Barber's new politics averts the danger of despotism, a goal that he might be said to share with the authors of Habits of the Heart, though their argument is less distinct; but Barber cites distinct affirmative benefits as well. "Strong democracy" improves the substantive outcomes of political decisionmaking by facilitating a broader process of agenda formation, and by altering the criteria according to which participants evaluate substantive proposals. Perhaps more importantly, it enriches the character of individual action by requiring each individual's impulses to be measured against and informed by the judgments of a larger group.

Barber's solutions have none of the soothing, imagistic flavor of Bellah's "communities of memory." They provide not vague reassurance, but fine-tuned provocation to the uneasy self-involvement of the reader. The precision of Barber's proposals may arise from his professional training: his empiricism and emphasis on political institutions are shared by many contemporary political scientists. But

31. See pp. 264-67 and text following note 35 infra.

32. It should be noted that Barber's empiricism has an eclectic character. As opposed to Bellah and his colleagues, who rely on anecdotal examples, Barber meticulously catalogues a variety of institutional experiments that attempt to enhance popular participation. He is less rigorous, however, in recording the results of these experiments, or any contemporaneous appraisals of their ongoing operation.

33. It is an interesting reflection of the differences between the two books that Barber draws guidance from the political institutions of the Great Society, while Habits of the Heart cites the
Barber's decision to challenge political premises rather than respond to personal sentiments arises from his definition of the problem. Anomie and individualism are not the causes, but merely the symptoms of the malady — which is alternately defined as a failure of democratic theory or of institutional design. Consequently Barber refuses to focus on the isolation and apathy that prevail in the present, or the sense of belonging that could arise in the future. Barber values the feeling of kinship, as a source of strength for the individual and as a spur to concerted action in the community. Yet evoking it is less important than creating an animated politics based on informed, popular participation. The principles and structures he proposes are directed to this goal, and to the discovery of more immediate political objects that will make participation attractive.\(^{34}\)

If focusing on collective goals rather than individual sentiments helps Barber to avoid one type of communitarian kitsch, other dangers await. While Barber’s program presents a provocative alternative to political passivity, many of the claims he makes for it have a suspiciously hollow ring. One example is his claim that “strong democracy” will improve the substantive outcomes of decisionmaking. Barber assails “thin democracy” as “far less hospitable to such primary Western values as freedom, equality and social justice than thin democrats might wish” (p. 145). He suggests that an extended process of agenda formation, and the opportunity to express intensity of preference, may result in improvement. Yet such improvement is assumed by definition, rather than demonstrated or even hypothesized. Values such as justice and equality do not turn out to have substantive content, according to which future enactments can be judged. On the contrary, Barber suggests that they are “political values” that “depend for their theoretical coherence and practical efficacy on self-government and citizenship” (p. 146). His equation of procedural regularity with substantive merit is not, moreover, confined to the realm of theoretical speculation. Discussing court-ordered busing programs, which he describes as “‘right’ by every legal standard” (p. 146 n.8), Barber

spirit of that movement as exemplary. Neither book adequately explores the importance of the movement’s substantive agenda of equality and opportunity in generating community and reform.

34. One expedient that will contribute to the identification of these short-range goals is the use of the neighborhood as the basic unit of political activity. Barber insists on the primacy of the neighborhood assembly, although he does not seem to understand the source of its advantage. He describes the neighborhood as a natural gathering place that evokes strong spontaneous feelings of affiliation, a position which may be inapplicable to many urbanites, and he fails to explain why people would express such feelings through political action. The real advantage of the neighborhood as a base for political action is that the local concerns that residents share are sufficiently immediate to make concerted political action an attractive course. Cf. A. De Tocqueville, supra note 19, at 511 (local associations permit each individual to see relationship between individual interest and goals pursued by collective action). Even Manhattan apartment dwellers who would not otherwise recognize each others’ faces can get together to protest building code violations or seek rent stabilization.
observes that "the principle of right collides with the principle of participation, and the damage done to the latter imperils, in the long run, the possibility of sustaining the former by democratic means" (p. 146 n.8). Barber's definition of political values, and his willingness to sacrifice substantively meritorious enactments to procedural regularity, suggest that his claim of substantive improvement may simply be a restatement of his procedural argument.

Also suspect is Barber's claim that "association with [the] intentions and purposes" (p. 100) of a "strong democratic" community will improve or elevate the moral character of individual action. Participation in "strong democracy" would surely produce changes in individual action: individuals might become more inclined to cooperate with others; they might become adept at listening as well as speaking; they might also become mistrustful of individual judgment and initiative. Yet Barber's claim of a consistent, salutary influence relies less on these effects — which are demonstrably a mixed lot — than on his position that self-direction is merely "impulse and appetite" (p. 100), until it is affiliated with "intentions and purposes that by their nature can only arise within the guiding limits of a society and a culture" (p. 100). Once again Barber makes his point by means of a controversial redefinition, rather than by documenting or even explaining the advantages he claims.

The most glaring attempt at persuasion by redefinition, however, is Barber's description of individualism as the ephemeral brainchild of liberal theory. Though Barber's program makes a partial accommodation to self-involvement, even the obligation to participate on "some issues some of the time" imposes a sturdy demand on the energies of citizens. Its promise, therefore, depends on Barber's claim that individualism will "wither" with the rejection of liberal premises, and a new communitarian spirit will emerge in its place. This claim is logically convenient but not particularly plausible.35 One can exaggerate the solitary, self-interested aspect of human nature; yet historical experience and our physical separateness suggest that individualism is not merely an intellectual construct. Even Barber seems to have doubts in the final section of his book, where he questions whether one "can expect either the self-interested or the apathetic to identify with a program of participation and civic renewal in the short run" (p. 265). It is not clear whether Barber's insistence on the contingent character of individualism is a disingenuous shortcut to his solution, or the product

35. Barber makes no effort to provide empirical support for his claims about human nature. On the contrary, he relies on a claim of false consciousness. We perceive human nature in the terms we do solely because we have looked at the world through the lens provided by the liberal theorists; our resistance to his claim is presumably also a product of that education. See generally pp. 68-79, 213-17. Of course, the same criticism can be applied to Barber's perspective. What is needed to break the cycle is some support from outside the realm of assertion and counter-assertion. None appears to be forthcoming.
of an unreasonable optimism. But in making this argument, he settles for sanguine assurances instead of the clear-eyed analysis that is required.

Barber may ultimately be the victim of a danger with which he is intimately familiar: that of making philosophical inquiry the instrument of practical political goals. In the critique that opens the book, Barber explains:

The trouble, clearly, is that the liberal notion of freedom was designed to answer a set of philosophical questions but has been put to work as a starting point for solving practical political problems. What was a useful fiction in formal argument has become a dangerous illusion in a real world where the rules of formal argument are beside the point.

[p. 100]
The hazard is even greater when the same writer who is addressing the practical problems has also assumed the task of confronting the philosophical questions. Though he selects a laudable destination, Barber succumbs over the course of the march to the comforts of kitsch.

III

A more successful journey toward community is described by Michael Walzer in *Exodus and Revolution*. Walzer takes as his point of departure the centrality of the Exodus story in the mythology and practice of political change. This narrative defines the terms in which people view their struggle to free themselves from oppression and to forge a new way of life. Walzer returns to the story to illuminate those features that have made it a “paradigm of revolutionary politics” (p. 7). Yet his intended audience extends beyond those who would study the overthrow of oppressive governments. The Exodus story is not just about liberation, but about creation as well. The subject of the “march” to the Promised Land, Walzer points out, is the “people of Israel,” a phrase first used in the first chapter of the Book of Exodus. Genesis is a collection of stories about individual men and women; they are mostly members of one family, a family, moreover, with a singular destiny; but we are focused on individuals. Exodus, by contrast, is the story of a people, hence not a story simply but a history.

[p. 12]
Revolutionary politics presents only the most radical example of a project that recurs throughout political life: the challenge of creating and directing a new political community. Those in a variety of circumstances can draw guidance from these lessons of political generation: or as Walzer concludes, “wherever you live, it is probably Egypt” (p. 149).

Walzer examines four phases of the Exodus story: the “House of Bondage” from which the Israelite slaves were liberated; the “Murmurings” of the slaves in the desert against Moses, God, and their new way of life; the “Covenant” between God and the Israelites
that began their transformation into a people; and the "Promised Land" at which they finally did, and did not, arrive. While each contains elements that are incontrovertibly unique to the Exodus itself, all convey insights into the creation of political community.

In the first chapter, bondage is presented as having a disturbing dual character: it oppresses, yet exerts a seductive force on those who would go forth from it. Subjection weakens the Israelites individually and collectively, burdening them with labor and depriving them of their own community without making them part of Egyptian life. Yet this condition has its peculiar comforts. Living even on the margin of an opulent society gives the slaves the opportunity to "[s]it by the fleshpots and . . . eat bread to the full" (p. 33); there is also a certain ease in having no responsibility for directing one's life and no obligation to one's fellows. It is precisely these comforts that weigh on the minds of the former slaves as they begin their journey into the desert. They find that they must live under harsh physical conditions with no familiar patterns of activity or conduct to guide them. They experience the inevitable frustration and anxiety of having to commit themselves, at great cost, to a new way of life before they can be sure of the benefits it will bring them.

These feelings culminate in the orgy of the Golden Calf, which occurs after Moses, whose leadership has provided the only rule and inspiration since their departure, ascends to Mount Sinai. In worshipping the calf, the former slaves restore both the opulence and the pattern of enslavement to authority that had defined their lives in Egypt. When Moses returns and witnesses the crisis, he smashes the tablets and rallies the Levites to kill the idol worshippers. Although this is one instance in which tolerant leadership gives way to force and violence, it also yields benefits for the emerging community. Not only does it curtail an incipient restoration, but it creates a core of Israelites who stand with God and for the new people. It also reflects only one facet of the perspective of God and Moses who, as Walzer puts it, "take the long view" (p. 51). They recognize that the creation of a people is long, hard work; it will take years, and perhaps generations; it requires the efforts not only of those who went forth from Egypt, but of some who never knew its attractions. The forty-year march through the desert provides the time and the space through which this work can be done.

The covenant is perhaps the feature most ineluctably specific to this history: the covenant is made with God, and God is the author of the principles that constitute the new community. Yet in other re-

36. Concerned lest his portrait "invite a revolutionary politics in which oppressed men and women are treated with the same contempt by their liberators as by the oppressors," Walzer adds that the very fact of their departure indicates that the Israelite slaves "still possessed some idea of themselves as free or potentially free men and women." P. 48. Yet he emphasizes that "the biblical text never underestimates popular fearfulness, and that is its great strength." P. 49.
spects it conveys a more universal message. The Israelites' covenant is not only with God but with each other; and the conditional character of the covenant pervades the story. This conditionality derives partly from the terms of the pact entered into with God: "[I]f ye will obey my voice indeed and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me . . . ."37 But it also reflects the precarious state of any political community; it is a collectivity only so long as its members heed and serve those principles that unite them as a people.

This precariousness, albeit in muted form, marks the final march of the new people into the Promised Land. They come to the end of their travels and each among them receives some part of the bounty he was promised: the Israelites win the tangible pleasures of a more congenial homeland; Moses and the Levites gain the opportunity to found a holy society. Yet the result is also anticlimactic. While the new land is not ravaged by scarcity, it is not the "land of milk and honey" the Israelites believed they would find. And the new people, while sufficiently observant of the covenant to avert God's disapprobation, are not truly a holy nation. They lapse, and they dissent; they must constantly be lectured and cajoled, by Moses and those leaders who succeed him, toward a better way of life.

The incompleteness of the transformation inclines some toward a form of absolutism Walzer refers to as "millenarianism" or "messianism": they wish to start over and reenact the Exodus, initiating a series of conflicts and cataclysms that will yield a final, more complete triumph. Walzer firmly rejects this approach, arguing at length in his epilogue that it is an illegitimate child of the Exodus tradition. Not only does Messianism sanction intolerant and destructive acts as the means to an elusive end. But it fails to come to terms with the stubborn intransigence of the human spirit, which makes the holy society an impossibility and the partial community that is achieved a touching victory.

Walzer's narrative of community clearly bears the mark of its biblical setting. He describes a society simple enough to be joined by a single bond, with a potent recent history to unite it and few conflicting commitments to divide it. There is nonetheless much to be learned from his account: the persistent attraction of a familiar pattern of bondage, despite its practical harshness; the difficulty of demanding individual sacrifice for a collective future that cannot yet be seen or understood; the uneven emergence and perpetual fragility of commitment to a common goal.

One lesson that underlies these observations is the importance of leadership to the task of political creation. A disparate group of people, Walzer suggests, can rarely mold themselves into a community.

37. Exodus 19:5, quoted at p. 78.
They require a leader who does not share their appetites, and who can see beyond the particularities that divide them, to direct the transformation. Not every type of leadership, moreover, is suitable to the task. Highlighting the example of Moses, Walzer argues for a blend of patience, realism, and toleration. While a leader must demand the best from the members of her group, she must harbor no illusions about human nature. She must meet the diffidence and resistance that arise with firm direction, accepting a slow march forward and refusing to yield to the temptation of force.

Although Walzer displays skill in deducing the case for tolerant leadership, he falters disappointingly at the episode of the Golden Calf. This rebellion represents a crucial crossroads for Walzer's view of leadership, for Moses' slaughter of idol worshippers seems to depart from the norms of patient direction. Yet instead of analyzing Moses' choice or exploring the limits on his theory, Walzer retreats in confusion. Shying first from a discussion of Moses, he ruminates on other factors that may have played a role in the episode. He considers God's fury (calmed by Moses) at the orgiastic behavior of the Israelites, and the possibility that God issued the command attributed to him by Moses. He muses on the zealotry of the Levites, and the recurrent role of extremist sects in political change. He speculates that an episode of resistance that must be put down by force is inevitable in the history of any community. The question of Moses' responsibility creates a nagging counterpoint to these reflections, yet Walzer avoids confronting it directly.

When he finally returns to Moses, Walzer does not dwell on the Golden Calf. He asks the reader to balance Moses' behavior in this instance against his contribution to the Exodus as a whole. He paints a careful portrait of "Moshe rabenu, Moses our rabbi" (p. 68) who teaches, cajoles, and leads the reluctant Israelites across forty years of desert. Conceding, uncomfortably, that there was "purging" as well as teaching in Moses' approach, Walzer holds the teaching responsible for the ultimate success:

[A]t some point, I suppose, the counterrevolution must be defeated if Egyptian bondage is ever to be left behind. It is important to stress, however, what the text makes clear, that the counterrevolution has deep roots; it cannot be defeated by force alone. Indeed, God and the Levites could easily kill all the people who yearn for the fleshpots (or the idols) of Egypt. But then the Levites would arrive in the promised land virtually alone, and that would not be a fulfillment of the promise. The promise is for the people, and the people can only move in gradual stages from bondage to freedom. [p. 69]

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38. "And [Moses] said unto [the Levites], Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor:" Exodus 32:26-28, quoted at p. 56.
One can only puzzle at the defensive tone of Walzer's discussion. For the reader is less interested in judging Moses than in understanding the choices he made, and their implications for Walzer's view of leadership. It may be imprudent to demand that the tolerant leader forbear in the face of massive, destabilizing resistance. Yet if it is true that every community faces a few instances of "counterrevolution" that demand coercion rather than persuasion, further questions spring to mind. One wonders if such episodes can be readily identified, for an amorphous exception threatens to consume the rule. And one wonders if they uniformly require resort to lethal force, for some groups might do better — despite Walzer's admonitions — to struggle forward alone than to expose themselves to the violence of a leader. Walzer would have been wiser to confront the limits on tolerant leadership than to leave his readers with such lingering doubts.

A more successful lesson about the founding of community is framed by the choice between "Exodus politics" and "messianic politics." Walzer's frequent references to the messianic streak in contemporary Zionism make clear that his argument has a practical political purpose, yet it also communicates a crucial message about establishing priorities to those who would build a collectivity.

Walzer introduces this argument at the conclusion of the Exodus story, as the reader begins to realize that the Israelites did not reach, and never will reach, the "land of milk and honey." Unruliness still erupts from time to time, and individuals desire to abandon their complex framework of obligations for an easier bondage. The vast assemblage of "I's" only sometimes appears as a "we." The reader looks, and hopes, for some set of insights that will transform these resistant individualistic impulses into communitarian spirit. Instead of providing such teachings, Walzer confronts the reader with a choice between two regimes, neither of which appears to contain the desired wisdom: the "Exodus" paradigm, which counsels persistent battle with and patient understanding of these disorderly impulses; and the "messianic" paradigm, which takes full advantage of them in hopes of catalyzing the changes that will produce complete transcendence. Walzer's juxtaposition of these paradigms, and his subsequent rejection of the "messianic" approach, reflects not only his impatience with political theories that refuse to take human beings as they are. It reflects the larger message that building a people is not just about inspiring a sense of unity and belonging; it is about perpetuating those principles for which the people stands.

Individualism, Walzer's argument suggests, will persist, and with it the selfish and solitary impulses that make community perpetually fragile. All energies should not be expended on the seemingly impossible task of eradicating this intransigence; nor should communities be structured solely to minimize it. Those who would create a commu-
nity should instead identify and focus attention on its organizing principles, those purposes or goals for the sake of whose achievement the community exists. Keeping these principles before the eyes of the people will provide a steadier direction for collective efforts; and it may help to remind the rebellious of the reasons for their commitment. If this was true for the Israelites, whose constitutive principles were predetermined, and who only later faced a situation that required choice, it is doubtless true for groups that must exercise choice even in their beginnings.

* * * *

Walzer's work, and in some respects that of Barber, provide sound examples to students of community. Their substantive prescriptions are provocative, but their tone is perhaps most deserving of emulation. Resisting facile optimism and hasty despair, and reflecting on those objects that can inspire collective action, promise no quick or easy answers. Yet Walzer teaches the virtues of the slow march, particularly when its subject is as complex and various as the human race. The comforts of kitsch are only a screen we use to hide — and hide from — the imminent abandonment of our efforts.