

THE LIMITS OF LIBERTY: INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND SOCIAL DISORDERS

by William A. Donohue

In 1986, Dr. David A. Hamburg, president of the Carnegie Corporation, announced the launching of a new national council on adolescent development. "An alarming proportion of America's teen-agers drop out of school, commit crimes, become pregnant, abuse drugs or alcohol, commit suicide or die from injuries and become disabled mentally and physically," Dr. Hamburg said. As an index of problems facing young people, Dr. Hamburg's assessment is excellent. But to get a handle on the magnitude of the level of social problems facing American society in general, mention also must be made of the high rates of child abuse, runaways, homelessness, separation, divorce, herpes, and AIDS. The final tally is not encouraging.

Not coincidentally, there has been an explosion in the number of men, women, and children seeking professional help. Indeed there are more people paying more money for advice, analysis, counseling, and treatment than ever before. In response to the demand, an entire industry has taken root: the Helping Professions. Something has gone wrong.

Liberty to be Enjoyed. The enormity of the psychological and social disorders affecting the United States threatens to undermine the political and economic progress that has been made toward creating a free and democratic society. If people do not have the psychological means to enjoy their rights or their bounty, freedom becomes an empty gesture, worthy of little respect or vigilance. Liberty was meant to be enjoyed, not endured.

Politically, it can be said that the American experiment in democracy has been a success. Individual rights have been extended to virtually every segment of the population. Those who govern continue to do so with the consent of the governed. Our system of checks and balances has been repeatedly tested and found solvent. Economically, Americans enjoy a standard of living that is the world's envy. Despite the recurrent problems of inflation, recession, and budget deficits, the state of the economy has proved to be more resilient and capable of reform than that in other Western nations. Our technology continues to advance, solving what only yesterday was thought unsolvable. But all this is not enough if social relationships come undone, personal problems mount, and social discord flourishes.

The Unravelling Social Fabric. There are social and cultural requisites of a free and democratic society as well as political and economic ones. Our mistake has been to sorely neglect the social and cultural context in which individual liberty can be meaningfully exercised. We have assumed, falsely, that a republican form of government and a market economy are all that is needed to make freedom a reality. The price we pay for this misjudgment is evident in the unraveling of the social fabric.

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Self-government cannot be ordered into being. A written constitution that provides for a separation of powers is the beginning, not the end, of free society. Self-government is predicated on civic responsibility, on a willingness of the citizenry to participate in the chores of community. They are not likely to do so if saddled with their own personal problems.

Alleged Causes. The reason that U.S. society suffers from a surfeit of psychological and social disorders has little, if anything, to do with such popular explanations as income inequality, competitiveness, or the trials and tribulations of youth. Yet the appeal of these arguments seems almost irresistible. The point cannot be made too strongly that neither economic analysis nor psychological inquiry better explains why the U.S. suffers from such a high degree of social disorder. And neither offers a compelling case for understanding why the rates of disorder have jumped precipitously since the 1960s.

Thirty, fifty, or a hundred years ago, when the level of social pathologies was quite low, income distribution was more unequal than it is today. And if non-cash transfer benefits are counted, there is even less inequality today. Moreover, we always have been a competitive people and are arguably less so today than we were a hundred years ago: the 1880s was the heyday of unbridled capitalism and laissez-faire economics. Yet families remained intact and social problems were manageable. In short, trying to pin the blame on capitalism just does not work. Japan is also a capitalist country, yet it has only a fraction of the social problems we have. It is culture, not the economy, that best explains the characterological outcomes of individuals in any society.

As common sense ought to inform, the travails of youth are not unique to our age. Raging hormones is surely an expression of the 1980s, but it no more accurately describes a phenomenon of youth today than in the past: hormones raged with just as much intensity among young people in the 1950s, the difference being, however, that social pressure kept them from being recklessly ventilated. Similarly, short time horizons, impulsiveness, and risk-taking were not invented in the 1980s. They have historically been properties of youth in any age. What has changed is the degree to which these tendencies have gone unchecked.

The New Freedom. My thesis is that the wide range of psychological and social disorders that plague American society are traceable to a flawed conception of freedom. Since the late 1960s, American culture has defined freedom as the abandonment of constraint. While this concept of freedom as something inherently adverse to the social order is quite old in philosophical terms, it was in the 1960s that it took hold as the dominant viewpoint of our cultural elites: the universities, media, entertainment industry, and publishing world. Therein lies the genesis of our psychological ailments, moral failings, and social problems.

Americans have always prized liberty; it is the most defining characteristic of what it is to be an American. But only in recent years has freedom come to mean freedom from constraint. Beginning in the 1960s, an increasing number of Americans began to interpret burdens of any kind as an unjust infringement on their liberty. The new freedom sees the idea of limits as an unfair abridgement of human liberty. Inescapably, such logic views the normative order, loaded as it is

with dos and don'ts, as repressive. Moral codes, which are by their very nature restrictive, are cast as the enemy of freedom. In this environment, appeals to responsibility and restraint are greeted with cynicism and derision.

It would be a mistake to suggest that all Americans share this idea of freedom. They do not. But it is the ascendant idea, the one that screams the loudest and grabs the most attention. Those who choose not to embrace this "value system" (or lack thereof) are required to reject it. No one escapes its influence.

The contemporary idea of freedom is evident in art, music, TV, movies, plays, books, and magazines. It finds expression in the home, at school, and on the job. It colors relationships between men and women and among children and adolescents. It affects our values as well as our behavior. It defines our society. It is not a viewpoint struggling to influence the establishment: it is the establishment.

Freedom in the West was never defined as promiscuously as it is today. Beginning with the Greeks, to be free meant to be free from arbitrary and capricious rule. It did not mean freedom from social sanctions. It meant that individuals could freely pursue their own interests, consistent always with respect for the rights of others and in deference to the general interests of society. The principle of constitutional government and rule by law, it was decided, would be the model on which the Western idea of freedom would be based.

Freedom for Freud. The new freedom bears little resemblance to this time-honored interpretation. The contemporary definition has much in common with Freud's preference. Freud argued that, as civilization progressed, human liberty regressed. Freedom for Freud was freedom from all cultural strictures and man-made codes of conduct. "Primitive man," he maintained, "was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct." But he knew all too well that society was not possible without the exercise of restraint. He therefore concluded that "Integration in, or adaptation to, a human community appears as a scarcely avoidable condition which must be fulfilled...." He couldn't help but add: "If it could be done without that condition, it would perhaps be preferable."

The reigning conception of freedom is Freudian insofar as it defines the existence of cultural prohibitions as obstacles to freedom. It regards such inexplicably human characteristics as defense mechanisms, taboos, guilt, shame, stigma, anxiety, and stress as standing in the way of true emancipation. This perspective sees tradition, custom, and social convention as unwarranted social pressure. It is fundamentally hostile to the psychological and social trappings of what it is to be human.

The Ultimate Revolution. This amounts to a revolution--a revolution against society itself. Previous revolutions have been waged against persons held to be oppressors: slave against master; peasant against lord; working-class against upper-class; new elite against old elite. This revolution is different: it is man against society. Previous revolutions have been motivated out of despair against poverty, misery, and injustice. This revolution is different: it is motivated out of despair against the limitations of the human condition. It is the ultimate revolution.

It will not work. Man is not suited to endure such a reckless idea of freedom. It is one thing to imagine a state of freedom, quite another to live it. The mind is capable of painting freedom as infinity, but no one has the emotional staying power to realize it. By throwing off tradition, custom, and social convention as the yoke of repression, man is essentially going to war against himself. It is a war he cannot hope to win.

It is not as though there has been no warning. Most students of freedom have emphasized that "true" freedom consists in doing what is right and good, that is, it is dependent on virtuous action. Aristotle said it best: "Every man should be responsible to others, nor should any be allowed to do just as he pleases; for where absolute freedom is allowed there is nothing to restrain the evil which is inherent in man."

The idea of absolute freedom is a canard, a cruel hoax sold to men and women in search of self-fulfillment. "The extreme of liberty (which is its abstract perfection, but its real fault)" wrote Edmund Burke, "obtains nowhere, nor ought to obtain anywhere; because extremes...are destructive both to virtue and enjoyment." Exactly. But for many people, such admonitions are tantamount to heresy. They sincerely believe that the road to freedom is marked by the number of "experiences" one can endure; the more extreme the experience, the greater the sense of exhilaration and emancipation. Nothing is off-limits to today's free spirits. This is what the new freedom is all about.

Freedom, Civility, and Community. The new freedom is made manifest in two principal ways: a) in our monistic fixation on individual rights and b) in our embrace of the doctrine of moral neutrality. Individual rights have always been central to any Western definition of freedom, but only in the late 20th century have they been seen as a sufficient cause of freedom. Similarly, freedom from excessive social scrutiny has always been indispensable to any concept of individual liberty, but never has it been defined more radically than today. What makes the new freedom unique is its insistence that every individual has a right to be totally liberated from everything that constrains him.

The new freedom creates its many problems because it cuts against the grain of society. No society, free or unfree, can exist without a modicum of civility and community. As sociological analysis confirms, both of these properties are dependent on the subordination of individual needs to social needs--on the willingness of the individual to submit to the interests of society. But the new freedom is predicated on precisely the opposite principle: it elevates the individual above all else, paying lip service, at best, to the needs of society. In short, the pursuit of individual freedom is on a collision course with the public weal. Hence, the unprecedented level of social pathologies.

Without Standards. The number of social problems a society has is a reflection, in part, of the degree of civility it is able to achieve. For example, if enough people in any society refuse, for whatever reason, to act in a civil manner toward their fellow man, order descends to anarchy and society is harmed, perhaps irreparably. Society is based on rules, on norms that must be observed. Without standards of right and wrong, each person does as he pleases, following the dictates

of his own interests and passions. Civility ceases to exist, and chaos reigns. Freedom is ruled out for everyone.

Community is important for two reasons: it is the key to social well-being and to psychological health. Both society and the individual will fall apart unless some measure of community is achieved. Community is the essence of the social bond: it binds one person to another, transforming aggregates of individuals into coherent social groups. But community is also the staple ingredient of a well-balanced person, in that psychological health is to a large extent a function of social relations; the more social supports an individual possesses, the less likely he is to exhibit psychological disorders.

When the Scottish philosopher Thomas Hobbes wondered how society was possible, he had in mind how it could come to pass that men would live together in some semblance of civility and community, since their natural wont was to follow their own interests. The great French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, was struck by a similar observation: man naturally inclines toward the pursuit of his own interests, yet cannot live except in society, which demands that he yield to the interests of others. The trick is to find the most palatable way of making society possible.

A Demand for Constraints. Society can be created either through coercion or consensus. The former being unacceptable to a people who have chosen freedom as their paramount want means that the U.S. is consigned to adopt the latter. Consensus, however, demands constraints. By defining freedom as the liberation of all constraints, we have undermined the ability of society to cohere, thereby deprecating both wants and needs. It is a no-win proposition.

Man can live without freedom, but he cannot live without civility and community. If in the pursuit of freedom he destroys civility and community (and with it, all prospects for freedom), a chorus of demands will quickly surface. All of them will be directed at restoring order, none of them will insist on freedom. As Plato was the first to warn, an excess of liberty will lead directly to tyranny. The choices, then, should be clear: 1) to maximize order and dispense with liberty or 2) to have some freedom and some order. Our problem has been in thinking there is a third way: maximizing freedom while neglecting order. It is a sociological impossibility.

By defining rights as the *sine qua non* of liberty, we have been driven to conclude that the more rights an individual has, the freer he is. So the pattern has been to pile one right on top of the other, as if the higher the stack, the greater the degree of freedom. It is precisely this logic that motivates civil libertarians to lobby for a new round of rights each time they score a victory in the courts. To them, rights are a sufficient cause of freedom.

A Fetish of Rights. Ironic as it might seem to some, a value is not enhanced when maximized. It is corrupted. Take rights. Push one person's rights too far, and the result is the emasculation of someone else's rights. Elevate rights to the status of an absolute, and the result is the destruction of other values. Expand the definition of rights to include all desirable ends, and the result is a diminution of interest in those rights that really matter. Extend the idea of rights to every

conceivable animate and inanimate subject and the result is a depreciation of human rights. In short, the attempt to maximize rights insures their minimization.

Another problem with the freedom-as-rights equation is that the social bond short-circuits when there is a rights overload. When every individual interprets his quotient of freedom by dividing the number of claims he has made against others by the number of claims against himself, the end product is a disinterest in the rights of others and a lack of concern for the common good. Individual responsibility cannot help but diminish in such an environment. Indeed a society that makes a fetish of individual rights will inevitably view individual responsibilities as an unfair burden, to be disposed of as quickly as possible.

When freedom is seen only in terms of rights, a blind spot develops with regard to other competing values. It becomes difficult to see that negative social consequences emerge as a direct result of pushing individual rights to extremes. Yet this is precisely what has happened, especially in big cities. Newly won individual rights have been brazenly and defiantly exercised to the detriment of the public good. In this context, unreflecting citizens may be forgiven for concluding that rights have become the enemy of freedom; the quality of public life seems to diminish with the awarding of additional individual rights.

Individualism and the Public Good. The public good is further undermined when the freedom-as-rights mentality is conjoined with a belief in the doctrine of moral neutrality. Once again a good idea, in this case pluralism, has been carried to extremes, thereby corrupting its value. When moral pluralism is pushed to extremes, there is no such thing as the public good--there are only private goods. When people abandon a concern for the public interest in favor of a preference for strictly personal matters, the quality of public life suffers as society fractionates into disparate and conflicting spheres. This is a world in which people pretend to be totally unaffected by the values of their neighbors. More significant, it is a world in which people are pretending to be free.

"Different strokes for different folks." "Do your own thing." "If it feels good, do it." These have become the standard cultural cliches of our time, accurately expressing the reigning conception of freedom. Freedom is purely an individualistic exercise, one that celebrates autonomy and castigates compliance. On a scale of one to ten, with ten as the maximum degree of freedom, those who rate a ten are individuals who experience the fewest social constraints, while those at the bottom of the scale experience the most. The road to freedom, then, is paved by distancing oneself from the norms and values of others. It is a solitary road, one without comfort or relief.

Biblical and Republican Strands. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and associates outlined two sets of traditions that are evident in American history. On one side, there are the Biblical and republican strands; on the other, there are the utilitarian and expressive varieties. The Biblical tradition, epitomized by John Winthrop, represents the contribution that religious beliefs and institutions have made to the dominant culture. Thomas Jefferson symbolizes the republican strand; a consensus about the public interest, to be achieved via the active participation of the citizenry, is the key to this tradition.

At the other end of the spectrum lies individualism. Benjamin Franklin is identified with utilitarianism, reflecting as he did the quest for self-improvement, measured largely in material ways. Expressive individualism, as seen in the work of Walt Whitman, places a priority on feelings, on the ability to experience life without limits.

It is the utilitarian and expressive tradition that clearly dominates contemporary American culture. As Bellah sees it, "Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. 'Being good' becomes 'feeling good.'" This is a society that firmly rejects the appeal of John F. Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." In today's milieu, the republican notion of doing good for one's country is practically incoherent: the public good has no meaning.

The utilitarian and expressive individualism that characterizes American society goes hand in hand with the popular belief in moral neutrality. To be morally neutral about the values, beliefs, and sentiments of others is seen as a badge of open-mindedness. Better not pass judgment on the ideas, even the conduct, of others, lest one be labeled closed minded. Those who truly believe in freedom never indulge in value judgments. They simply "let it be."

Turning Against Tradition. To profess a belief in moral neutrality is to profess a contempt for tradition. It is to say that all that came before us is without value, and that nothing is in need of preservation. Tradition, of course, is anything but value-less; is the accumulation of values that constitutes tradition. By turning our back on tradition, by casting off the trappings of social and cultural conventions, we seek to free ourselves of moral sanctions and propel ourselves toward self-liberation. It is as though freedom can be achieved by running from society. Strange thing is, though, the faster we run, the less good we feel about ourselves. This is a race without a finish line.

"Tolerance" has become the ruling mantra of the new freedom. Everywhere we are told to be tolerant of others, tolerant of diversity and tolerant of change. Scholars tell us how respectful we are of civil liberties by measuring how tolerant we are of the beliefs and lifestyles of others. Psychotherapists advise us to practice tolerance in dealing with loved ones, counseling that conflict can be avoided when concessions are granted. And peace activists propose we be more tolerant in understanding the rhetoric and behavior of our adversaries. There is virtually no aspect of living that cannot benefit from more tolerance.

The idea of a moral hierarchy is positively repulsive to the ethos of the new freedom. Different but equal is the usual response to inquiries concerning deviance. There are some behavioral patterns that are "bizarre," but none that are abnormal. If someone says that a person who defecates in public is engaged in abnormal behavior, he will be quickly answered by some contemporary sage, of open mind and nothing else, that such judgments reflect middle-class values. (Are lower-class values to be preferred?) This is to be read as an indictment, the purpose of which is to close the discussion. In one swoop, middle-class values have been emptied of significance and assigned a purely sectarian role.

Tolerance or Indifference? Social observers are often ecstatic when they read that a new survey reveals Americans to be more tolerant than they were ten or twenty years ago. They interpret such findings as confirmation of the dawning of a new day, a day in which individual liberties can be maximized. It seldom occurs to them that beneath the veneer of tolerance lies exhaustion, a total collapse of caring about what others do to themselves. Scratch tolerance hard enough, and indifference will surface. Not always, but in many more cases than we are willing to admit.

Is tolerance in the eye of the beholder? When syndicated columnist Michael Kinsley learned that a 1985 poll of Nebraskans indicated that 75 percent thought it was "all right" for their divorced governor to have an actress friend stay at his mansion, Kinsley instantly concluded that this "heartwarming testimony" was proof of greater tolerance and declining "prudishness." But why is it "heartwarming" to learn that people approve of fornication? And was it approval that people were registering, or downright disinterest? Judging from the reaction to Gary Hart's adventures, it may very well be that public tolerance of a politician's immorality is indexed to the level of office that is in question: the higher the office, the higher the standards. If so, then Mr. Kinsley's reasons for celebration seem premature.

A Double-Edged Sword. Similarly, when sociologist Theodore Caplow and associates examined Muncie, Indiana, in 1975, they boasted that there was a significant increase in tolerance in the fifty years that separated their study from the earlier ones conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd in 1925 and 1935. The Middletown (as Muncie is referred to in the studies) researchers also noted a stark increase in divorce, illegitimacy, drugs, and pornography. They were largely reticent about the possibility that the increase in moral decay was occasioned by the increase in tolerance. Tolerance, in the modern worldview, has only good effects.

That tolerance might signify something negative--a retreat from commitment--seems to be understood by Bellah. But he is unsure and, given his faith in the positive effects of tolerance, unable to find much fault with growing levels of tolerance. He applauds the "new atmosphere" of tolerance for creating "more sensitive, more open, more intense, more loving relationships...it is an achievement of which Americans can justly be proud." But wait, tolerance is a double-edged sword. He adds: "To the extent that the new atmosphere renders those same relationships fragile and vulnerable, it threatens to undermine those very achievements." Well said, but the implications are generally ignored.

More Is Not Necessarily Better. The upshot of all this is not that rights, pluralism, or tolerance are undesirable. On the contrary, no society can claim to be free without a great deal of all three. But that doesn't mean that a society achieves maximum freedom by maximizing these values. That would only be true if there were no competing values that mattered. But since that is not the case, since social well-being counts for something, as does public order, it cannot be said that the more rights, pluralism, and tolerance we have, the more freedom we have.

American society has been operating under the opposite assumption: we have taken it as an article of faith that "the more, the better." But just as having too much good food sours the stomach, too much individualism sours society. George

Will once said that the four most important words in politics are "up to a point." Lots of things are good "up to a point." But drawing the line, even acknowledging the need to draw one somewhere, is not an idea that registers well with those who have embraced the new freedom.

