



Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life

Robert N. Bellah , William M. Sullivan , Steven M. Tipton , Richard Madsen , Ann Swidler

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Meanwhile, the authors' antidote to the American sickness—a quest for democratic community that draws on our diverse civic and religious traditions—has contributed to a vigorous scholarly and popular debate. Attention has been focused on forms of social organization, be it civil society, democratic communitarianism, or associative democracy, that can humanize the market and the administrative state. In their new Introduction the authors relate the argument of their book both to the current realities of American society and to the growing debate about the country's future. With this new edition one of the most influential books of recent times takes on a new immediacy.

Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life Details

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Katya Littleton says

This book made me want to bash my head in. Boring, repetitive, and I was forced to finish it for class. If the bookstore doesn't buy it back, I'm setting it on fire and laughing maniacally.

David Hurley says

A contemporary classic of religious sociology. Recommended for anyone sincerely interested in understanding the role of religion in American society and culture.

Bruce says

This multi-authored sociological study, first published in 1985 and updated in 1996, posits a common core belief among Americans, “the belief that economic success or misfortune is the individual’s responsibility, and his or hers alone.” This individualism “values independence and self-reliance above all else.” I thought about this recently after experiencing Verdi’s early opera, “Ernani,” in which the governing virtue was honor, little thought or spoken about today in our country and culture. Core beliefs powerfully determine not only our attitudes but also our actions in ways that we are little aware of and consequently infrequently reflect upon. It is these issues that the authors of this book intend to explore.

Pointing fingers of blame particularly at neoconservatism (ironic as this posture is, since the authors turn out to have remarkably traditional and conservative convictions), the authors attribute to this perspective the great problem that they see facing this country today - the intensification of increasingly disparate economic classes and the consequent tendency for those at the top to look out only for themselves and to cease working for the common betterment. At the root of this issue lies the tension between individualism and community solidarity that has always been present, the authors’ contention being that the former has become so predominant that the latter is no longer able to curb the destructiveness of individualism when carried to its extreme, the present challenge being to preserve the advantages of individualism while moderating its excesses and facilitating greater community solidarity, thus preserving the republic from increasing fragmentation and demise.

The preface reveals that the book is based on a number of sociological research studies by the authors, and one is inevitably reminded how “soft” sociological research is, how weakly controlled these studies are, how non-representative population groups often are, and how easily conclusions can be influenced by authorial interests and preconceptions. I find myself, for example, uncomfortable with such evaluative editorializing as in the following sentence (*italics mine*): “As mass phenomena, the *nervous* search for the true self and the *extravagant* conclusions drawn from that search are probably relatively recent in our society.” The book is rife with such statements. Inherent in any such book are countless caveats. Interesting anecdotes do not necessarily justify broad generalizations, and just because the anecdotes are indeed interesting does not give them added significance.

Just what does “Living Well” mean? What are the criteria, and on what are they based? Simply personal preference, perhaps added to the concept of not harming others? Are there, in fact, such things as eternal verities, or is that very concept passé?

The authors argue that over the past four hundred years in this country, there has been a gradual shift to seeing the “world” in terms of one’s own particular and individual self, away from the former perspective of seeing it in a larger societal and cultural context. They acknowledge that a central part of the cultural heritage of America is that of leaving tradition behind, of breaking with the past and thus leaving homes, churches, and careers in order to begin anew. But they clearly are profoundly uncomfortable with the lack of universal criteria for behavior, of innate moral values that are not provisional or individual and thus not apparently arbitrary and relative. They wrestle, somewhat unsuccessfully, with the perennial question of whether there is, in fact, a fundamental “self” or whether the individual self is an artificial construct, more than the individual roles and perceptions of each person, in contrast to some sort of universal or cosmic Self that each individual manifests. While not resolving this continuing question, as one would not expect them to be able to do, they make clear where their sympathies lie.

The paradox at the heart of this book is that while the authors attribute what they view as undesirable current cultural characteristics to an enduring individualism in this country, they are themselves profoundly conservative and traditional in their own views, idealizing the past in ways that seem blatantly erroneous. Their solution seems to be to go back to a past that ignores fundamental changes that have occurred in society and culture, changes that cannot be “undone.” Always, throughout history, culture has only fundamentally changed (and incrementally at that) by going forward, by developing new patterns, visions, and paradigms. The authors seem never to have read Hegel.

The authors badly misread Emerson, misunderstanding what he meant by self-reliance, falsely claiming that he expounds a philosophy leading to “the dead end of radical individualism” against the assumption “that at the core of every person is a fundamental spiritual harmony that links him or her not only to every other person but to the cosmos as a whole.” But this latter is in fact exactly what Emerson does say, and his use of the term “self-reliance” really means “soul-cultivation.” By setting up straw men and whipping boys, the authors undermine their own positions. In this, as in many other areas, the authors insist on caricaturing the trends they seem to see in modern American society, and this weakens their argument.

In this book the authors have raised interesting and provocative questions, questions that any thinking citizen should and probably does share. However, their failure to present details of their research and data, their tendency to misunderstand or misrepresent the ideas of other thinkers, their habit of intruding their own biases into their discussions, and their tendency to rely on anecdotes and to over-generalize to the entire population limit the value and usefulness of their presentation and eviscerate their arguments. Why so many people have acclaimed this book mystifies me. We still await an adequate and satisfying analysis and discussion of our culture, its evolution and its trajectory.

Chris J says

One of those rare examples of academic writing that escaped to the hoi polloi. The title comes from a phrase used by Tocqueville in his observations of American culture. Bellah, et al., examine modern therapeutic culture and how it contrasts with the deepest, in some ways subconscious desires of society and ideas of the "good life."

In 1985 I'm certain this was paradigm-shifting stuff and I'm also certain it inspired much of the reappraisals of modernity as well as those committed, long-standing proponents of tradition.

If you can persevere through the ground-laying first chapter, it's a good read and well worth the time.

Ken says

Every American should read this book. It perfectly explains why our society has reached the current fractious, even destructive point it has.

Jilz says

I am intrigued. More and more lately, I find myself questioning my lifelong premise that there is a particular purpose for my life, and that it is my duty to discover and fulfill that purpose. One may even be hard pressed to prove conclusively that there is any particular purpose, at all, to our individual lives. It may be that my life has whatever purpose and meaning I choose to assign to it. I'm not particularly comforted by that, but now that I have made it through the Preface to the 2008 Edition, and the Preface to the 2006 Edition, and the Preface to the First Edition, and 8 little pages into the first chapter, I read "American cultural traditions define...the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation." I think that I may be reading this book at just the right time.

Nils says

A canonical text of American sociology in the 1980s, sure to be at the center of reading lists about the 1980s. A quintessential examination of the mental space of middle class white America, in the late Cold War years, the book is a curiously normative document framed as a piece of positive sociology. Its immense popularity stems probably from precisely this balancing act, as well as the great learning wrapped up within Bellah's mellifluous if curiously relaxed and at times repetitive prose. Despite the nuances, at the end of the day, the argument is quite simple: that the narcissistic pursuit of material abundance (what Bellah in an earlier phase of his career had celebrated as "modernization") has revealed itself to Americans as quite empty (the book refuses the Marxist language of "alienation" though it could well be rewritten in that frame), and the choice over how to move forward is between what they refer to as the "therapeutic model," on the one hand, and a return to communitarian integration, focused around family and religion.

Certainly the critique of therapeutism is sound. Basically, therapy is designed to make people accept the purely individualistic premises of American social life that are the primary target of HotH: "The problem with therapy is not that intimacy is tyrannically taking over too much of public life. It is that too much of the purely contractual structure of the economic and bureaucratic world is becoming an ideological model for personal life.... The prevalence of contractual intimacy and procedural cooperation, carried over from the boardroom to bedroom and back again, is what threatens to obscure the ideals of both personal virtue and public good." (127) "While the emphasis on connectedness and community would seem to be an advance over 'noncaring self-actualization,' one must ask whether the relentless emphasis on self-interest does not raise doubts as to whether there has really been a shift." (135).

This quotes shows why HotH typifies one of the main directions that people could go as the invested

technocratic hopes for what is here referred to as "the Administered society" fade away, especially if they refused to embrace what was not yet being called neoliberalism (e.g. the contractual structure of the economic as an ideological model for personal life) -- e.g. communitarianism, of which it is the great representative. Turning away from technocratic managerialism, the book also offers a deep critique of the enduring American cult of individualism, both in its "utilitarian" form (the rush to get ahead and/or keep up) and in its "expressive" form (the desire to "find oneself" by define one's own private ethics and system of belief).

So what should Americans do once they give up on these materialistic and personalized conception of fulfillment? At every page, the book reinforces the notion that the proper cure to what ails the American soul (here called "heart") is to return to republican political values and the communal integration, especially those offered by tolerant religious sects. The book closes with a methodological call for sociology to reassert itself as "public philosophy," that is, as the profession of norms: the assertion of belief and moral advocacy.

In other words, to be slightly anachronistic, HofH is "1000 points of light" for liberals. The text is highly symptomatic of that worldview for all the things it doesn't do, and for all the things it doesn't acknowledge not doing. It barely acknowledges that it is not about all of America, but specifically about white middle class, suburban America. It remains completely uninterested in any broader transnational context for the struggles it talks about. Its critique of contemporary economic life focuses more on what corporate practices does to the interior lives of workers, rather than on social injustices perpetrated or reinforced by these structures. It shamelessly blends fact and value, claiming that all Americans yearn for the solutions that they pose, whether or not they quite realize it (again, while they studiously avoid Marxist jargon, the shadow of "false consciousness" shrouds much of the argument). There is no acknowledgement of the darker aspects of the American soul, not just in the vicious inter-communal hatreds (these are treated as having faded), but also in the intra-communal repressiveness which is essential to the integrating function that communities serve. Bellah implicitly assumes that there is a basic compatibility between community and individual, that is, that communal endeavor is the best way to achieve individual fulfillment, rather than the abnegation of the same. To which one can only say, that really depends on what your community makes of your individual desires.

Finally, there is a curious note about the anxiety of influence: while Bellah returns obsessively to Tocqueville as the touchstone for the communitarianism he calls for, the book barely acknowledges (except via brief, largely dismissive footnotes) other sociological investigators who have plowed the same terrain with striking different results, notably the Lynds, David Riesman, and Christopher Lasch.

Mckinley says

Individualism in opposition to civic membership.
- overclass, underclass, anxious class.

Dan Gorman says

Thought-provoking read! Robert Bellah and his coauthors argue that individualism, both in capitalistic/utilitarian and personal-expression ways, has run amok. Our participation in civic life is declining across the board, income inequality's soaring, and free-market solutions aren't cutting it. What we need, according to the authors, is a revival of solidarity and communal spirit. This doesn't negate individualism;

rather, citizens should recognize something greater. The authors cite "Biblical religion" derived from the Puritans and "civic republicanism" derived from Jefferson as good starting points, for religion and republicanism offer a moral foundational, connecting the individual to other people and recognizing their shared dignity. Yes, Bellah et. al. play up the Puritan roots of America, when there were a lot of other Christianities at work, and they have a fanboy attitude toward Jefferson (albeit a very restrained, Ivory Tower kind of fanboying). Yet I respect the fact that Bellah et. al. think your foundational belief could be religious OR secular.

The authors' central claim, that a society needs a shared foundation, is persuasive. The authors' discussion of an ascendant individualism, which is then used to justify everything from foolhardy tax cuts to welfare reductions to class divisions, is disturbing. Many of the interviews whiz by with the pithy quotes and aw-shucks moralizing of vintage Newsweek articles. This book is kind of a work of academic journalism — not the strongest on historicizing problems, but observant and making some fair criticisms of American society. The book's interview sample has serious structural problems, notably its complete omission of the Midwest, South, and the parts of the West that aren't California, and its focus on white Americans to the exclusion of people of color. Like David Riesman's "The Lonely Crowd," Elaine Tyler May's "Homeward Bound," and similar books reliant on sociological data, the findings in "Habits of the Heart" apply to segments of America, not the whole. Bellah and his collaborators acknowledge there are social groups they didn't study, but they don't give a persuasive rationale for omitting people of color. The fact is, there is no rationale for omitting minorities from a study of American civic life. At least the authors believe that white flight and residential segregation are some of the worst embodiments of individualism.

So: Read with several grains of salt, and keep searching for a strong historical explanation of the transition from a proto-industrial 19th-century culture to a consumer-oriented 20th-century culture. Bellah and his team still point out the dangers of individualism in public life. This book is best read in tandem with Alan Trachtenberg's "The Incorporation of America," Riesman's "The Lonely Crowd," and maybe Roland Marchand's "Advertising the American Dream." I'm still learning the literature about capitalism and its effects on public life, but that's a start.

Michael says

This is an exceptional sociological examination of American society. The authors use Democracy in America as an interpretive horizon for the evolution of American Society in the late 20th century. Where de-Tocqueville's America was politically and socially engaged, the socio-economic factors that have emerged in the last 40 years have worked to undermine communal opportunity. The authors provide a nice balance between case studies and social science. An exceptional read.

Derek Wright says

Enlightening and shocking and overwhelming. One gets every indication this is a sociological masterpiece. The opposite of a 'light summer read', yet spending the summer underlining, circling, and contemplating the sentences in this book was as demanding as it was satisfying. There is too much to summarize here, but one day, maybe.

John Henry says

To become a missional community in our culture, we need this instruction from a cultural anthropologist's view. This book outlines how Americans are living as products of their surrounding culture. It helps us see the forest through the trees.

Bob Prophet says

As a former student of sociology with intense curiosity about modern social/political/economic phenomena, I really enjoyed this book and would probably give a copy as a gift to student friends. What I especially liked was the ending where the six (3 pairs) American visions of the public good are outlined, ending with the Administered Society vs. Economic Democracy, neither of which sound pleasant.

I especially like how this analysis unfolds from a "classical republican" perspective and maintains a distance from current partisan stances. The authors' critique of what's being peddled as "therapeutic" was refreshing, challenging the increasingly popular mindset that we need so-called "experts" to teach us how to live and cope.

This is a worthwhile read for those interested in a sociological perspective on shifting American values alongside systemic changes occurring in our society. As a non-religious individual interested in ethics and morality, this book proved a valuable addition to my collection.

Nadya says

Bellah (et al) are primarily concerned with discussing the inevitable overlap of private and public life in American society. Based on 200+ interviews with a representative population of white middle-class America, Bellah draws the conclusion that, as much as Americans are focused on attaining self-reliance and individualism, individualism (i.e. private life) is most meaningful when it is complemented by engagement with society (i.e. public life). He asserts, "individuality and society are not opposites but require each other" (p. 246-7). This interlinking reciprocal relationship, he suggests, is demonstrated through an individual's involvement in a [conservative Christian] church community.

Bellah uses case studies to demonstrate his point, but his conclusions are not justified by his method. As mentioned, Bellah limits his sample population to white middle-class Americans ..but then goes on to speak of an allegedly singular American identity...

Though impeccably dense, this (at times) reads like a self help book. I would not have finished the book had it not been a required reading for one of my graduate seminars. I am surprised it has such a high rating.

Margaret Sankey says

1985 sociological study which offers some genuinely profound insights into how Americans talk themselves into narratives of self-made people and idealized small towns, although markedly biased by its date (amazingly, women were starting to not see men as "permanent meal tickets" and small town companies

were civic minded and hadn't off-shored all the jobs yet).

Miguel Soto says

¿Cómo es vivir en Estados Unidos? Esta parece ser la pregunta fundamental que los autores de este gigantesco estudio trataron de responder. A través de una gran cantidad de entrevistas y testimonios, pero especialmente, de un fino sentido crítico, los autores nos plantean un detallado retrato de la vida norteamericana, del ciudadano común, el que vive en una ciudad cualquiera de una región cualquiera de los Estados Unidos, pero sin la pretensión de querer describir una especie de "individuo promedio". Por el contrario, con ejemplos vívidos de experiencias particularísimas, nos enseñan lo vivido por la gente, en sus distintos ámbitos de lo cotidiano, de lo más estadounidense cotidiano: crecer, salir de casa, escoger una carrera, casarse (y quizás separarse), practicar una religión, ejercer la ciudadanía. Una gran tarea, el lograr dar una imagen de todo esto, imagen que, hasta donde los investigadores encontraron, no resulta tan coherente como los participantes creen, y de cuya fundamental incoherencia los propios ciudadanos no logran dar cuenta con suficiente articulación.

Su enorme esfuerzo se refleja en esta obra, que muestra y cuenta sobre la vida cotidiana de los norteamericanos, y que me parece, nos habla cada vez más a los habitantes de algunas regiones mexicanas.

Jonathan says

The gist: Individualism (whether economic or spiritual) cannot provide meaning, however worthy the freedom it offers may be. Nor can the weak forms of association found in "lifestyle enclaves," inhabited as they are only by similar people who join seeking personal fulfillment. A meaningful life can only be lived in a community, sustained by tradition and by service to others.

Benjamin Hill says

Some interesting points that may help some people to lead a better life. But I've heard this all before and it's a bit convoluted.

John P. Mueller says

Relevant for Our Times

Using interviews of a wide cross section of people, Bellah dissects the problems we face in the post-modern world, relates them to the findings of Tocqueville ~150 years earlier, provides historical continuity and context with the development of the US and finally offers an approach for change that would need to be of the magnitude of the civil rights movement. It really blew my mind, in a good way.

Landon says

Sociological study...with a focus upon Christianity and American individualism...not my style. This was a class assignment, and the sociology in the book is quite the turn-off. It is dryly written and unengaging, for the layman. It provides the reader with analysis of all of America's problems in regards to individualism, but offers no solutions - highly frustrating.
