
How to Re-Moralize America

by Francis Fukuyama

In 1994, William J. Bennett published a book called *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, which brought together a variety of statistics about American social trends. Between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s, Bennett showed, there was a shocking deterioration of America's social health. By the 1990s, one American child out of three was being born to an unmarried mother, nearly a third of African American men between the ages of 20 and 29 were involved in some way with the criminal justice system, and scores on standardized tests of educational achievement had dropped America to the bottom of the pack among industrialized countries. While we were materially richer than at any time in history, Bennett argued, we were becoming morally poorer at an alarming rate.

In the brief period since Bennett's *Index* appeared, we have experienced what seems to be a remarkable turnaround. Crime, including violent crimes and those against property, has decreased by more than 15 percent nationally; the murder rate in New York City has declined to levels not seen since the mid-1960s. Divorce rates, which had already begun a downward trend in the 1980s, continue on that path. Starting in 1995, the illegitimacy rate ceased its upward climb and began to decline slightly. The teenage pregnancy rate dropped eight percent between 1991 and 1996; among black teenagers, it fell 21 percent. Welfare caseloads have dropped by as much as a quarter nationally, and states at the forefront of welfare reform, such as Wisconsin, have seen astonishing reductions of up to 75 percent. Americans' general level of

trust in their institutions and in one another, though difficult to gauge, has risen. In 1991, for example, only 15 to 20 percent of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time; by the end of the decade that percentage had rebounded to between 25 and 30 percent.

What are we to make of these improvements? Are Americans at century's end being blessed not only with a booming stock market and a near full-employment economy but a restoration of cultural health as well? Many conservatives, notably social scientist Charles Murray and historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, don't think so. The changes, they argue, are too shallow and recent; they may be the product of more jails and stiffer sentencing rather than any true improvement in moral behavior. One conservative activist, Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation, was thrown into such despair last summer by the public's refusal to repudiate President Bill Clinton despite a sex scandal and impeachment proceedings that he publicly declared that Americans have never been more degenerate than they are today.

But conservatives are wrong to dismiss the good news contained in the social statistics. In fact, there has been a shift back to more traditional social values, and they should take credit for helping to bring it about. It would be a mistake to become complacent, or to think that our

social and cultural problems are now behind us. But there is good reason to think that American society is undergoing a degree of moral regeneration. There is still a great deal of confusion over the sources of moral decline, however, and over the nature of moral renewal. Liberals need to confront the reality of moral decline and the importance of socially beneficial, less self-centered values. Conservatives have to be realistic and recognize that many of the developments they dislike in contemporary society are driven by economic and technological change—change brought about by the same dynamic capitalist economy they so often celebrate.

Moral decline is not a myth or a figment of the nostalgic imagination. Perhaps the most important conservative achievement over the past couple of decades was to convince the rest of American society that these changes had occurred, that they reflected a disturbing shift in values, and that consequently not every social problem could be addressed by creating a new federal program and throwing money at it.

This reconception of social problems began with two large government-funded studies published in the mid-1960s: Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), and James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966). Moynihan, then working for the U.S. Department of Labor, argued that family structure, and in particular the absence of fathers in many African American homes, was directly related to the incidence of crime, teenage pregnancy, low educational achievement, and other social pathologies. Coleman's study showed that student educational achievement was most strongly affected not by the tools of public policy, such as teacher salaries and classroom size, but by the environment a child's family and peers create. In the absence of a culture that emphasizes self-discipline, work, education, and other middle-class values, Coleman showed, public policy can achieve relatively little.

Once published, the Moynihan report was violently attacked. Moynihan was accused of "blaming the victim" and seeking to impose white values on a community that had different but not necessarily inferior cultural norms. Liberals at first denied the reality of massive changes in family structure, and then fell back on the argument that single-parent households are no worse from the standpoint of child welfare than traditional ones—the kind of argument Moynihan was later to label "defining deviancy down." By the early 1990s, however, conservatives had largely won the argument. In 1994, the publication of Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur's book *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (1994) made the social science community's shift more or less official. The two well-respected sociologists found that a generation's worth of empirical research supported Moynihan's basic conclusion: grow-

ing up in a single-parent family is correlated with a life of poverty and a host of other social ills.

Few Americans understand that they were not alone in experiencing these changes. All of the industrialized countries outside Asia experienced a massive increase in social disorder between the 1960s and '90s—a phenomenon that I have called the Great Disruption of Western social values. Indeed, by the 1990s Sweden, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand all had higher rates of property crime than the United States. More than half of all Scandinavian children are born to unmarried mothers, compared with one-third of American children. In Sweden, so few people bother to get married that the institution itself probably is in long-term decline.

While conservatives won their case that values had changed for the worse, they were on shakier ground in their interpretation of why this shift had occurred. There were two broad lines of argument. The first, advanced by Charles Murray in his landmark book *Losing Ground* (1984), argued that family breakdown, crime, and other social pathologies were ultimately the result of mistaken government policies. Chief among them was Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which in effect subsidized illegitimacy by paying welfare benefits only to single mothers. But there were other causes, such as new court-imposed constraints on police departments won by civil libertarians. In this interpretation, any improvement in social indicators today must be the result of the unwinding of earlier social policies through measures such as the 1996 welfare reform bill.

The second conservative line of argument held that moral decline was the result of a broad cultural shift. Former federal judge Robert Bork, for example, blamed the 1960s counterculture for undermining traditional values and setting the young at war with authority. Others, such as philosopher John Gray, reached further back in time. They revived the arguments of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, tracing moral decay to an Enlightenment commitment to replacing tradition and religion with reason and secular humanism.

While there is more than a germ of truth in each of these interpretations, neither is adequate to explain the shift in values that occurred during the Great Disruption. Detailed econometric studies seeking to link AFDC to illegitimacy have shown that although there is some causal connection, the relationship is not terribly strong. More important, illegitimacy is only part of a much broader story of family breakdown that includes divorce, cohabitation in place of marriage, declining fertility, and the separation of cohabiting couples. These ills cut across the socioeconomic spectrum and can hardly be blamed on a federal poverty program.

The second line of argument, which sees moral breakdown as a consequence of a broad cultural shift, is not so

much wrong as inadequate. No one who has lived through the last several decades can deny that there has been a huge shift in social values, a shift whose major theme has been the rise of individualism at the expense of communal sources of authority, from the family and neighborhood to churches, labor unions, companies, and the government. The problem with this kind of broad cultural explanation is that it cannot explain timing. Secular humanism, for example, has been in the works for the past four or five hundred years. Why all of a sudden in the last quarter of the 20th century has it produced social chaos?

The key to the timing of the Great Disruption, I believe, is to be found elsewhere, in changes that occurred in the economy and in technology. The most important social values that were shaken by the Great Disruption are those having to do with sex, reproduction, and the family. The reason the disruption happened when and where it did can be traced to two broad technological changes that began in the 1960s. One is the advent of birth control. The other is the shift from industrial to information-based economies and from physical to mental labor.

The nuclear family of the 1950s was based on a bargain that traded the husband's income for the wife's fertility: he worked, she stayed home to raise the family. With the economy's shift from manufacturing to services (or from brawn to brains), new opportunities arose for women. Women began entering the paid labor force in greater numbers throughout the West in the 1960s, which undid the old arrangement. Even as it liberated women from complete dependence on their husbands, it freed many men from responsibility for their families. Not surprisingly, women's participation in the labor force correlates strongly with divorce and family breakdown throughout the industrialized world.

The Pill reinforced this trend by shifting the burden of responsibility for the consequences of sex to women. No longer did men need to worry greatly if their adventures led to pregnancy. One sign of this change was found by economists Janet Yellen, George Akerlof, and Michael Katz. Between the 1960s and '90s, the number of brides who were pregnant at the altar declined significantly. The shotgun wedding, that ultimate symbol of male accountability, is increasingly a thing of the past.

Humans share a fundamental trait with other animal species: males are less selective in their choice of sexual partners than females, and less attached to their children. In humans, the role that fathers play in the care and nurture of their children tends to be socially constructed to a significant degree, shaped by a host of formal and informal controls that link men to their families. Human fatherhood is therefore more readily subject to disruption. The sexual revolution and the new economic and cultural independence of women provided that disruption. The perfectly reasonable desire of women to increase their autonomy became, for men, an excuse to indulge themselves. The vastly increased willingness of men to leave

behind partners and children constitutes perhaps the single greatest change in moral values during the Great Disruption. It lies at the core of many of the period's social pathologies.

What are the chances of a moral renewal? What are its potential sources? Renewal must be possible. While conservatives may be right that moral decline occurred over the past generation, they cannot be right that it occurs in every generation. Unless we posit that all of human history has been a degeneration from some primordial golden age, periods of moral decline must be punctuated by periods of moral improvement.

Such cycles have occurred before. In both Britain and the United States, the period from the end of the 18th century until approximately the middle of the 19th century saw sharply increasing levels of social disorder. Crime rates in virtually all major cities increased. Illegitimacy rates rose, families dissolved, and social isolation increased. The rate of alcohol consumption, particularly in the United States, exploded. But then, from the middle of the century until its end, virtually all of these social indicators reversed direction. Crime rates fell. Families stabilized, and drunkards went on the wagon. New voluntary associations—from temperance and abolitionist societies to Sunday schools—gave people a fresh sense of communal belonging.

The possibility of re-moralization poses some large questions: Where do moral values come from, and what, in particular, are the sources of moral values in a postindustrial society? This is a subject that, strangely, has not received much attention. People have strong opinions about what moral values ought to be and where they ought to come from. If you are on the left, you are likely to believe in social equality guaranteed by a welfare state. If you are a cultural conservative, you may favor the authority of tradition and religion. But how values actually are formed in contemporary societies receives little empirical study. Most people would say that values are either passed along from previous generations through socialization (which fails to explain how change occurs) or are imposed by a church or other hierarchical authority. With the exception of a few discredited theories, sociologists and cultural anthropologists haven't had much to contribute. They have had much more success in describing value systems than in explaining their genesis.

Into this breach in the social sciences have stepped the economists, who have hardly been shy in recent years about applying their formidable methodological tools to matters beyond their usual realm. Economists tend to be opponents of hierarchy and proponents of bargaining—individuals, they say, act rationally on their own to achieve socially productive ends. This describes the market. But Friedrich A. Hayek (among others) suggested that moral rules—part of what he called the “extended or-

der of human cooperation”—might also be the product of a similar decentralized evolutionary bargaining process.

Take the virtues of honesty and reliability, which are key to social cooperation and that intangible compound of mutual trust and engagement called “social capital.” Many people have argued that such virtues have religious sources, and that contemporary capitalist societies are living off the cultural capital of previous ages—in America, chiefly its Puritan traditions. Modern capitalism, in this view, with its amoral emphasis on profits and efficiency, is steadily undermining its own moral basis.

Such an interpretation, while superficially plausible, is completely wrong. A decentralized group of individuals who have to deal with one another repeatedly will tend as a matter of self-interest to evolve norms of honesty and reliability. That is, reputation, whether for honesty or fair dealing or product quality, is an asset that self-interested individuals will seek to acquire. While religion may encourage them, a hierarchical source of rules is not necessary. Given the right background conditions—especially the need for repeated dealings with a particular group of people—order and rules will tend to emerge spontaneously from the ground up.

The study of how order emerges spontaneously from the interaction of individual agents is one of the most interesting and important intellectual developments of the late 20th century. One reason it is interesting is that the study is not limited to economists and other social scientists. Scientists since Charles Darwin have concluded that the high degree of order in the biological world was not the creation of God or some other creator but rather emerged out of the interaction of simpler units. The elaborate mounds of some species of African termites, taller than a human being and equipped with their own heating and air conditioning systems, were not designed by anyone, much less by the neurologically simple creatures that built them. And so on, throughout the natural world, order is created by the blind, irrational process of evolution and natural selection. (In the 1980s, the now famous Santa Fe Institute was created to support studies of just this type of phenomenon, so-called complex adaptive systems, in a wide variety of fields.)

Indeed, there is a good deal more social order in the world than even the economists’ theories would suggest. Economists frequently express surprise at the extent to which supposedly self-interested, rational individuals do seemingly selfless things: vote, contribute to charities, give their loyalty to employers. People do these things because the ability to solve repeated dilemmas of social cooperation is genetically coded into the human brain, put there by an evolutionary process that rewarded those individuals best able to generate social rules for themselves. Human beings have innate capabilities that make them gravitate toward and reward cooperators who play by

the community’s rules, and to ostracize and isolate opportunists who violate them. When we say that human beings are social creatures by nature, we mean not that they are cooperative angels with unlimited resources for altruism but that they have built-in capabilities for perceiving the moral qualities of their fellow humans. What James Q. Wilson calls the “moral sense” is put there by nature, and will operate in the absence of either a law-giver or a prophet.

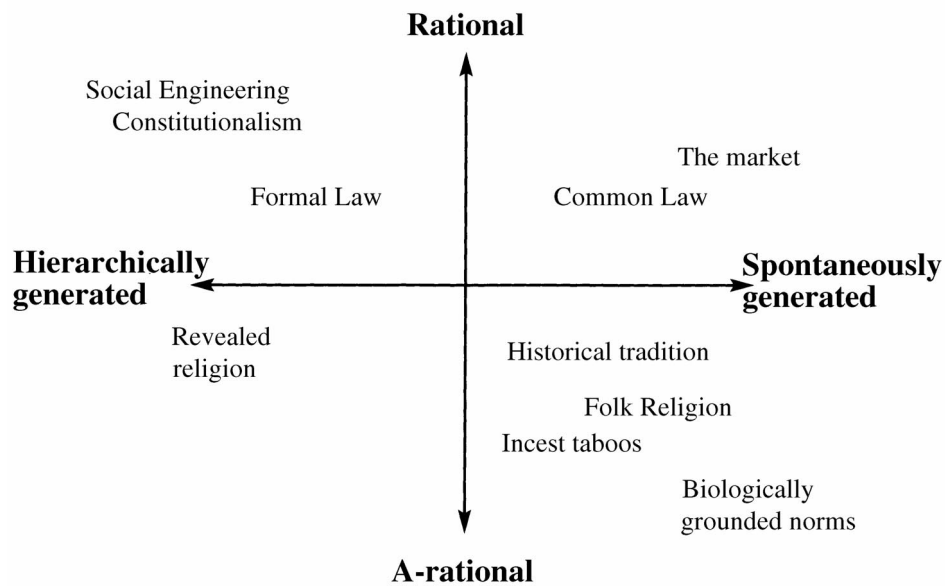
If we accept the fact that norms have spontaneous as well as hierarchical sources, we can place them along a continuum that extends from hierarchical and centralized types of authority at one end to the completely decentralized and spontaneous interactions of individuals at the other. But there is a second dimension. Norms and moral rules can be the product of rational bargaining and negotiation, or they can be socially inherited or otherwise a-rational in origin.

In order to clarify the origins of re-moralization, I have constructed a matrix (next page) that organizes these alternatives along two axes. Different types of moral rules fall into different quadrants. Formal laws handed down by governments belong in the rational/hierarchical quadrant; common law and spontaneously generated rules concerning, say, honesty in market relations, fall in the rational/spontaneous quadrant. Because, according to most recent research, incest taboos have biological origins, they are a spontaneous, a-rational norm. Revealed religion—Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, for example—occupies the a-rational hierarchical quadrant. But folk religions—a cult of rock worshippers, for example—may be a species of spontaneous, a-rational order.

This taxonomy gives us a basis for at least beginning a discussion of where norms in a postindustrial society come from. Economists, following their rational, nonhierarchical bent, have been busy populating the upper-right quadrant with examples of spontaneously generated rules. A case in point is the database of more than 5,000 cases of so-called common pool resource problems compiled by Elinor Ostrom. Such problems confront communities with the need to determine rules for sharing common resources such as fisheries or pastureland. Contrary to the expectation that the self-interest of each individual will lead to the depletion of the resources—the famous “tragedy of the commons”—Ostrom finds many cases in which communities were able to spontaneously generate fair rules for sharing that avoided that result.

Max Weber, the founder of modern sociology, argued that as societies modernize, the two rational quadrants, and particularly the hierarchical quadrant, tend to play a strong role in the creation of norms. Rational bureaucracy was, for him, the essence of modernity. In postindustrial societies, however, all four quadrants continue to serve as

The Universe of Norms



important sources of norms. Modern corporations, for example, have discovered that they cannot organize complex activities and highly skilled workers in a centralized, formal, top-down system of bureaucratic rules. The trend in management is to reduce formal bureaucracy in favor of informal norms that link a variety of firms and individuals in networks.

We now have a framework in which to discuss how the socially corrosive effects of the Great Disruption are being overcome, and what continuing possibilities for change there might be. In the quest for the source of authoritative new rules, one starting point is the rational-hierarchical quadrant, which is the sphere of public policy. Crime rates are down across the United States today in no small measure because government is embracing better policies, such as community policing, and spending more on law enforcement, prisons, and punishment.* But the fact that tougher policies have brought crime rates down would not be regarded by most people as evidence of moral renewal. We want people to behave better not because of a crackdown but because they have internalized certain standards. The question then becomes, Which of the three remaining quadrants can be the source of moral behavior?

Many cultural conservatives believe that religion is the sine qua non of moral values, and they blame the Great Disruption on a loss of religious values. Religion played a powerful role in the Victorian upsurge during

the second half of the 19th century, they note, and, therefore, any reversal of the Great Disruption must likewise depend on a religious revival. In this view, the cultural conservatives are supported (in a way) by Friedrich Nietzsche, who once denounced the English “flathead” John Stuart Mill for believing that one could have something approximating Christian values in the absence of a belief in the Christian God.

Nietzsche famously argued that God was on his deathbed and incapable, in Europe at least, of being resuscitated. There could be new religions, but they would be pagan ones that would provoke “immense wars” in the future. Religious conservatives can reply that, as an empirical matter, God is not dead anywhere but in Europe itself. A generation or two ago, social scientists generally believed that secularization was the inevitable byproduct of modernization, but in the United States and many other advanced societies, religion does not seem to be in danger of dying out.

Some religious conservatives hope, and many liberals fear, that the problem of moral decline will be resolved by a large-scale return to religious orthodoxy—a transformation as sudden as the one Ayatollah Khomeini wrought 20 years ago by returning to Iran on a jetliner. For a variety of reasons, this seems unlikely. Modern societies are so culturally diverse that it is not clear whose version of orthodoxy would prevail. Any true form of orthodoxy is likely to be seen as a threat to important groups and hence would neither get very far nor serve as a basis for widening the radius of trust. Instead of integrating society, a conservative religious revival might only increase social discord and fragmentation.

It is not clear, moreover, that the re-moralization of society need rely on the hierarchical authority of revealed

religion. Against Nietzsche's view that moral behavior inevitably rests on dogmatic belief, we might counterpose Adam Smith, the Enlightenment philosopher with perhaps the most realistic and highly developed theory of moral action. Harking back to a kind of Aristotelian naturalism, Smith argued that human beings are social and moral creatures by nature, capable of being led to moral behavior both by their natural passions and by their reason. The Enlightenment has been justly criticized for its overemphasis on human reason. But reason does not have to take the form of a bureaucratic state seeking to engineer social outcomes through the wholesale rearrangement of society. It can also take the form of rational individuals interacting with one another to create workable moral rules, or, in Smith's language, being led from a narrowly selfish view of their interests to the view of an "impartial spectator" exercising reasoned moral judgment.

Religious conservatives, in other words, underestimate the innate ability of human beings to evolve reasonable moral rules for themselves. Western societies underwent an enormous shock during the mid-20th century, and it is not surprising that it has taken a long time to adjust. The process of reaching a rational set of norms is not easy or automatic. During the Great Disruption, for example, large numbers of men and women began to behave in ways that ended up hurting the interests of children. Men abandoned families, women conceived children out of wedlock, and couples divorced for what were often superficial and self-indulgent reasons. But parents also have a strong interest in the well-being of their children. If it can be demonstrated to them that their behavior is seriously injuring the life chances of their offspring, they are likely to react rationally and want to alter that behavior in ways that help their children.

During the Great Disruption, there were many intellectual and cultural currents at work obscuring from people the consequences of their personal behavior for people close to them. They were told by social scientists that growing up in a single-parent family was no worse than growing up in an intact one, reassured by family therapists that children were better off if the parents divorced, and bombarded by images from the popular culture that glamorized sex. Changing these perceptions requires discussion, argument, even "culture wars." And we have had them. Today Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's controversial 1993 assertion that "Dan Quayle was right" about the importance of families no longer seems radical.

What would the re-moralization of society look like? In some of its manifestations, it would represent a continuation of trends that have already occurred in the 1990s, such as the return of middle-class people from their gated suburban communities to downtown areas, where a renewed sense of order and civility once again makes them

feel secure enough to live and work. It would show up in increasing levels of participation in civil associations and political engagement. And it would be manifest in more civil behavior on college campuses, where a greater emphasis on academics and more carefully codified rules of behavior are already apparent.

The kinds of changes we can expect in norms concerning sex, reproduction, and family life are likely to be more modest. Conservatives need to be realistic in understanding how thoroughly the moral and social landscapes have been altered by powerful technological and economic forces. Strict Victorian rules concerning sex are very unlikely to return. Unless someone can figure out a way to un-invent birth control, or move women out of the labor force, the nuclear family of the 1950s is not likely to be reconstituted in anything like its original form.

Yet the social role of fathers has proved very plastic from society to society and over time, and it is not unreasonable to think that the commitment of men to their families can be substantially strengthened. This was the message of two of the largest demonstrations in Washington during the 1990s, the Nation of Islam's Million Man March and the Promise Keepers' rally. People were rightly suspicious of the two sponsors, but the same message about male responsibility can and should be preached by more mainstream groups.

There is also evidence that we are moving into a "post-feminist" age that will be friendlier to families and children. Feminism denigrated the work of raising children in favor of women's paid labor—an attitude epitomized by Hillary Clinton's dismissive response to questions about her Arkansas legal career that she could have just "stayed home and baked cookies." Many women are indeed now working—not as lawyers or policymakers but as waitresses and checkers at Wal-Mart, away from the children they are struggling to raise on their own after being abandoned by husbands or boyfriends. Many women like these might choose to stay at home with their children during their early years if the culture told them it was okay, and if they had the financial means to do so. I see anecdotal evidence all around me that the well-to-do are already making this choice. This does not represent a return of the housewife ideal of the 1950s, just a more sensible balancing of work and family.

Women might find it more palatable to make work and career sacrifices for the sake of children if men made similar sacrifices. The postindustrial economy, by undermining the notion of lifetime employment and steady movement up a career ladder for men, may be abetting just such a social change. In the industrial era, technology encouraged the separation of a male-dominated workplace from a female-dominated home; the information age may reintegrate the two.

Religion may serve a purpose in reestablishing norms, even without a sudden return to religious orthodoxy. Religion is frequently not so much the product of dogmatic belief as it is the provider of a convenient language that allows communities to express moral beliefs that they would hold on entirely secular grounds. A young woman I know does not want to have sex until she is married. She tells her suitors that she follows this rule out of religious conviction, not so much because she is a believer but because this is more convincing to them than a utilitarian explanation. In countless ways, modern, educated, skeptical people are drawn to religion because it offers them community, ritual, and support for values they otherwise hold. Religion in this sense is a form of a-rational, spontaneous order rather than a hierarchical alternative to it.

Re-moralizing a complex, diverse society such as the United States is not without pitfalls. If a return to broad orthodoxy is unlikely, re-moralization for many will mean dropping out of mainstream society—for example, by home-schooling one's children, withdrawing into an ethnic neighborhood or enclave, or creating one's own limited patch of social order. In his science fiction novel *The Diamond Age*, Neal Stephenson envisions a future world in which a group of computer programmers, realizing the importance of moral values for economic success, create a small community called New Atlantis. There they resurrect Victorian social values, complete with top hats and sexual prudery. The "Vickies" of New Atlantis do well for themselves but have nothing to say to the poor, disorganized communities that surround them. Re-moralization may thus go hand in hand with a sort of miniaturization of community, as it has in American civil society over the past generation. Conversely, if these

small communities remain reasonably tolerant and open, they may light the way to a broader moral revival, just as Granges, Boy Scout troops, immigrant ethnic associations, and the other myriad small communities of the late 19th century did.

The reconstruction of values that has started in the 1990s, and any renorming of society that may happen in the future, has and will be the product of political, religious, self-organized, and natural norm building. The state is neither the source of all our troubles nor the instrument by which we can solve them. But its actions can both deplete and restore social capital in ways large and small. We have not become so modern and secularized that we can do without religion. But we are also not so bereft of innate moral resources that we need to wait for a messiah to save us. And nature, which we are constantly trying to evict with a pitchfork, always keeps running back.

Note

- * A highly salient issue often is not what the government does, but what it refrains from doing, since an overly large and centralized state can rob individuals and communities of initiative and keep them from setting norms for themselves. During the 1960s and '70s, the American court system decriminalized many forms of petty deviance such as panhandling and public drunkenness. By limiting the ability of urban middle-class neighborhoods to set norms for social behavior, the state indirectly encouraged suburban flight and the retreat of the middle class into gated communities. To the extent that these kinds of policies can be limited or reversed, social order will increase.

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