Evading the Issues: 
Progressives' Political Taboos

by Amitai Etzioni

Addressing a Unitarian group in a ritzy suburb, I found liberals and moderate conservatives (or progressives) quite keen to discuss the plight of the homeless, the American poor, the starving in Africa, and the beleaguered Nicaraguans. However, my invitation to consider another set of issues—the future of the American middle-class family, the ways to curb crime and drugs and to fortify character in the young—was politely ignored. I was advised privately that these are “right-wing issues.”

On similar occasions I have heard progressive-thinking people concede that the Moral Majority has raised important social issues but reject the latter’s policy solutions as unduly authoritarian and religious, as well as unrealistic. Requiring prayer in public schools typified their concern: it would be imposed by school boards; its moral/social “message” would stand on traditional religious grounds; and it would do little to mend the nation’s social fabric and moral fiber. Fair enough. But asked what they would do to instill important virtues such as honesty and respect into the younger generation, the secular, progressive groups in our community too often lapse into uncharacteristic silence.

One reason is discomfort with issues so close to home: it is easier for people with one house in the city and another by the seashore to talk about the homeless than to face the problems in their own living room. It is less threatening for them to talk about what they ought to do for the poor than to explore what they are not doing for their own children. It is less troubling to condemn South Africa than to face the de facto segregation even in our integrated colleges.

I came upon another reason that progressives avoid the “other” social agenda—not social justice but moral order—in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A participant in a faculty discussion group on the ethical condition of America raised the question point blank: Why talk only about corruption in Washington, greed on Wall Street, oppression in the Soviet Union—and not about the moral upbringing of children, the community’s prerogative to call upon members with AIDS to disclose voluntarily their sexual contacts, the ACLU’s excessive battle against expelling drug-running youths from high schools, and so on? The group ignored the question twice. Finally, a long-time member explained that the group feared that voicing a moral claim—for example, that the First Amendment does not entail unlimited access to pornography for children—would lead to coercive imposition of moral taboos. Further, she was concerned that such a law would lead down a slippery slope to the erosion of liberties. First you censor children’s books, next...

In fact, the historical record suggests that laws swell, their reach expands, when the moral community fails to motivate people to do voluntarily what is considered decent and right. Thus, environmental laws became necessary only as people and corporations disregarded the sanctity of their surroundings. Likewise, there was no need for traffic laws, cops, and courts when most citizens drove responsibly, and these measures remain little used in parts of America where local communities are strongly intact. Excessive expansion of rules and regulations alone should drive progressives to intensify their search for a moral/social voice.

Unity through Opposition

There is yet another explanation for the limits of the progressive social platform: it is easier to unite in opposing injustices than to build a positive agenda. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sharply different responses to two books by Betty Friedan. Her powerful criticism of institutional sexism in America, The Feminine Mystique, has been widely hailed. But Friedan’s call for The Second Stage, a positive program moving women and men toward a new togetherness, a new family, in which both genders would modify their roles, had much less of a following. Rather than women joining the existing man’s world on equal ground, she envisioned both sexes shedding the non-caring, highly competitive way of life. Both men and women would learn to find joy in balancing their work and family lives, raising children, sharing housekeep-
ing responsibilities, and so on. Friedan brought dissent and criticism, not broad-based acclaim.

Above all, progressives frequently seem to disagree with each other. They can unite in blasting the old family; but what kind of new family do they envision? A single parent? Two parents, working outside the home, subscribing to a child-care center? Further, can a gay couple raise children properly? And what are the duties of parents to their children and to one another if "until death us do part" is now history? How about the duties of the young to the old—beyond paying for social security?

Take educational reform. Commissions have come and gone, studying what is wrong with our schools and what ought to be done. They tend to focus on the need to pump more skills and knowledge into our youngsters and recommend, accordingly, more focus of schools, more technologically qualified teachers, more math, science, foreign languages. Typically overlooked is the role of a social/moral agenda. As a result, reforming educational policies tend to disregard that, in order to acquire skills and knowledge, pupils must first have certain personality traits such as self-discipline and the ability to concentrate and to control their impulses. Recent reforms have focused on pumping more math, science, and foreign languages into students. Adding science teachers, labs, computers, and so on will achieve little, however, if students are not psychologically willing and able to learn.

In the United States, however, we labor under a great parenting deficit. Millions of parents now work outside the household, are often absent when their young children come home, and at the end of the day, parents are often too exhausted physically and psychologically to educate. Only a small part of the parenting deficit has been assumed by grandparents, child-care centers, and so on. The result is that youngsters begin primary school psychologically undeveloped. While the character development associated with acquiring basic work habits is what young students need most, there is little the public or the business community can do about restoring the ability or willingness of American families to discharge this mission (although businesses could provide more flex-time, parental leaves, etc.). Primary schools hence must assume more of this task than in the past.

**Unity in Diversity**

Progressives shy away from these internally divisive, hot issues; they prefer to unite in disparaging "reactionaries." But formulating a new set of moral/social virtues and institutions does not require unanimity. There may be several ways to find a basis for progressive agreement on moral issues. One is to allow for a plurality of viewpoints within a shared frame of mind and moral community. A model might be found in the long-established American view of ethnicity: we are quite tolerant of, even welcome, diversity as long as it does not cut into the basic shared foundation of American life. If all acknowledge that they are loyal Americans first, they can follow not only their own culinary and subcultural traditions but also maintain their own history, secondary language (from German to Vietnamese), even support politically their country of origin (Poland, Ireland, Italy, Israel).

In the same vein, progressives may agree that we must live up to commitments to our children and yet still allow for a variety of ways to fulfill these obligations. Or, alternatives may be ranked without making any of them taboo. Thus, we need not treat divorced people and "spinster" as inferior the way we did until quite recently in order to express moral/social support for sustaining marital commitments and opposing the easy breakup of the family, especially when young children are involved. In short, pluralism within unity might be a stance progressives could encourage, allowing legitimate diversity without opening the door to moral anarchy. Progressives can thus provide alternative limits to the narrow, often unjust, confines imposed in the past.

There is a new movement afoot that seeks to redefine the values of the community, the social/moral order. Interestingly, these communitarians—philosophers, social critics, and writers—themselves reflect this dilemma of diversity. Some call for accepting a specific set of societal virtues that smack of medieval dogma. Others are so reluctant to speak of community values, claims, and rights that they can only embrace the procedural ideas of "processing" public policies through local communities and "empowering" their members, while seeking to avoid discussion of the substance of these policies. These communitarians would, for example, prefer to have each community work out its own school desegregation policy rather than introducing busing into all communities. Still, the very existence of the communitarian movement, and the growing references to family and values within the progressive parts of America (politically motivated in part, to be sure), indicates a gaping moral/social vacuum. Growing attempts to fill it with positive, substantive, yet democratic ideas and dialogue, eventually leading to a new broad consensus, we can hope are not far behind.

**Restoring the I-We Balance**

While economies may thrive if everyone is just out to promote his self-interest, societies require a delicate balance between the forces that sustain the commons (commitment to defense, public safety, civic duties, morality), the sense of a We, and the forces of individual initiatives, rights, and liberties. When societies lose (Continued on page 53)
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this balance, it is the task of intellectuals and civic leaders to make the case and build support for restoring the I-and-We balance. In Communist societies, from China to Albania, from the U.S.S.R. to Afghanistan, the forces of individualism, finally, seem to be making some significant gains while oppressive collectivism is clearly still dominant. In the United States the sixties and seventies have left a strong wake of excessive individualism.

Me-ism has been documented in many ways. Young Americans have been shown to be much more preoccupied with their rights and entitlements than with their duties and civic obligations. They insist they have the right to be tried by a jury of their peers, should the need arise, but are quite reluctant to serve on a jury. Americans favor defense but would much rather have someone else serve in the Armed Forces (hence, the strong aversion to a draft) and are increasingly reluctant to pay for a stronger defense. While the heydays of self-actualization, even at the cost of one's family, are over, preoccupation with career, combined with neglect of parenting, is common.

In the public arena it has been often noted that special-interest groups dominate. Indeed, in some circles it is now fashionable to argue that there is no such thing as "the public interest," only the claims of various groups that "give-me" will serve the commonwealth. Attempts to reassert the rights and needs of the common frequently run into the ACLU itself or the individualistic ideology it fosters. There are numerous specific public policy issues that await correction. None, by itself, will correct the imbalance; all will help to a limited extent. Above all, they illustrate why the I-and-We balance must be restored.

A reporter for the Los Angeles Times and an editor of The Washington Post were asked whether they would publish a report on the inner working of an American reconnaissance satellite even if this would allow the U.S.S.R. to blind it, and even if the United States was dependent on it for early warning of a Soviet nuclear attack. Both stated they would because news is their duty; security is the Pentagon's job.

Despite some redress in the Reagan years, the rights of criminals are still much better protected than those of the victims—or of the public. For instance, convicted child abusers, doctors with revoked licenses, and serial killers can readily move from one part of the country to another and set up shop again.

In schools we must find ways to preserve the civil rights of students without endangering learning and even elementary order when due process becomes so cumbersome that schools dare not try to expel highly destructive students. In matters of public health we must find ways to protect the privacy of AIDS patients while encouraging them to disclose their sexual contacts. In short we must move away from the notion that attempts to explicate community rights and moral obligations to the commons are reactionary forms of government intrusion or coercion. Dichotomies often are the bane of good thinking. We must outgrow the simplification that one is either for individual rights or an arch-conservative; there is a crying need for a sensitive, caring balance of individual rights and the institutions of a viable community: family, education, character, and above all, social/moral order.

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