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CHAPTER 4

Individualism but Not to Excess

In the American cultural lexicon, individualism is always good. When it is “excessive,” however, it becomes “selfishness,” which is not good. Contrary to culture war stereotypes of individual licentiousness being advocated on the progressive side and deference to larger purposes on the orthodox side, elite opinion on both sides of the cultural divide supports individualism and individual rights while condemning their excesses. Both sides reject “selfish” individualism in favor of the “greater good”—whether that is defined in terms of justice, liberty, and the social welfare or of spirituality, human dignity, and the sanctity of life and family. All sides wish to support the “community,” which is also a good in the American cultural vocabulary. Here too, however, excesses are likely to be criticized. In the past, the excesses of community were dubbed conformity; more recently, they have been called tribalism.

Regardless of the issue under discussion, all contenders in the culture wars seek to show respect for both individual rights and the welfare of the larger community. In the case of multiculturalism, however, much confusion arises about how it relates to individualism. Is multiculturalism an expression of individualism or a corrective to it? Are individuals empowered by their cultures or enslaved by them?

Celebrating Individualism and Community

Because individualism is perhaps the quintessential American value, commentators on all sides accuse their opponents of squashing individualism. As seen by a conservative, the Left attacks individualism by seeking to impose its own cultural views and by its devotion to class struggles. "The Left wishes to use culture to remold man and society on radical lines, with destruction of individual autonomy and reason" (Lipman 1991b, 38); it prefers "proletarian community" to "bourgeois individualism" (Lipman 1991a, 40). From the perspective of progressives, the Right seeks to crush individualism with its "attack on free expression" (Editorial 1995a, 152), its "distrust of creativity in all spheres of life other than those of corporate profitability" (Mattick 1990, 358), and its "discrediting of the idea of a pro-freedom, pro-pleasure revolution in everyday life" (Willis 1996, 22).

Yet attacks on "rank" or "radical" individualism appear across the political spectrum, too. Both opponents and supporters of abortion declare their cause to be a matter of more than individual rights. For opponents of abortion, those who support abortion rights represent a "radical individualism that recognizes no restraints such as family or community." They believe that "all relationships—family, church, community, as well as motherhood—are barriers to self-fulfillment, unless the individual actively chooses them" (Cunningham 1992, 46). The pro-choice forces, says another abortion opponent, have "seized the liberal banner for a radical individualism that, in the pursuit of self-actualization, acknowledges no bonds of community or duty to others" (Neuhaus 1989b, 40). But some abortion advocates argue that abortion rights should be viewed not as "a civil liberties struggle for individual privacy" but rather as a matter of social rights. Society has a responsibility to help women with abortion and child rearing, and "the bearers of this right are not so much isolated individuals as they are members of social groups with distinct needs" (Petchesky 1990, 734).

Conservative commentators see excessive individualism as fostered by an "elite" that must be displaced (Cunningham 1992, 47). The family, for example, is under attack from "the individualism and hedonism of much of our popular and elite culture" (Muller 1995, 28). But some progressives view contemporary portraits of selfish individualism as greatly exaggerated. They argue that "moralistic images of hedonistic adults who place selfish emotional, erotic and 'career' ambitions above the needs of neglected children"

do not accord with the realities of working America (Stacey 1994, 121). The Right equates feminism with individualism, as in the idea that “feminism—and radical individualism generally—is a bust outside academia and the activist groups” (Cunningham 1992, 48). But all sides disavow the exercise of merely selfish pleasures.

Excessive individualism or selfishness in the economic sphere also comes under attack. The Left assails the conservative culture for its “possessive individualism, ideological narrowness, social meanness, and Social Darwinist arrogance” (Howe 1984, 29), while a leading conservative spokesman argues the need for “a new conversation about the common good,” since self-aggrandizement alone is “empty, ignoble, and in the end, profoundly unsatisfying” (Hyde 1990b, 54). The latter idea is certainly shared by the Left, where one feminist warns that the women’s movement must not lose its idealistic vision of reform lest it end up “degenerating into a scramble for personal advancement” (Ehrenreich 1990, 15).

Writers from across the political spectrum suggest that Americans need to cultivate more of “the sense of what the individual owes to his community.” They need to remember that “in many other cultures, individual is a pejorative, suggesting an antisocial elevation of one’s own welfare above the welfare of everyone else” (Morrow 1981, 74). Individualism alone is insufficient to hold a society together. Without a common sense of what is good, without a common culture, constant battles over policy will erupt (O’Sullivan 1994b, 41).

Conservatives and liberals alike feel discomfort when they must choose between protecting individual rights and freedoms on the one hand and protecting the social good and exercising moral judgment on the other. Such dilemmas arise in connection with censorship of offensive or morally suspect popular culture. As one conservative puts it, “We must recognize that in a free society, private choices in culture must be subject to minimum restraint. But we must also be careful not to confuse rights with virtues: the exercise of the right to free cultural choice is not a good in itself, but rather must be subject to moral criticism and judged by the content of the choice” (Lipman 1991b, 53). An editorial in *The New Republic* suggests that while songs such as “Cop Killer” should not be censored, liberals should be concerned with such lyrics just as they were justifiably upset by the Willie Horton ads (used by Republicans to convey racist notions of blacks as criminals). The message is that “the contents of American cul-

ture cannot be hidden behind the freedom of American culture. For culture brings news." Therefore, "we must hear the news that culture brings. But then we must engage it, and challenge it" (Editorial 1992, 7).

Whether one gives preference to individual rights or to the welfare of the community hinges on the specific issue at hand. For all their attachment to laissez-faire economics and to individual self-sufficiency, conservatives are likely to condemn individualism if it appears to be wreaking havoc with certain institutions. The family is, of course, a prime example. Yet even here, unanimity is not present, as one conservative writer points out. For all the conservative desire to strengthen and preserve marriages, the *Wall Street Journal* is leery of changes in the tax code that would constitute "a marriage bonus" (Gallagher 1999, 40).

Whether or not feminists are ultimately "pro-family" is a matter of some dispute among progressives—again largely because of the individualist/communitarian split. Thus, one progressive has argued that feminist-backed measures such as child care support, flexible work schedules, parental leave, health care, and housing assistance can only help the family (Connell 1986, 106). But another progressive contends that such measures may be pro-family but will not necessarily produce the family stability so valued by the Right. After all, socialized medicine and day care would make women less dependent on their husbands' benefits and thus might encourage some young mothers to stray. By the same token, cutting off legal aid for divorce is pro-family but not progressive (Ehrenreich 1982, 303–4). One should affirm "individual desire and imagination" because "they are not disruptive, or selfish, but prefigurative of a happier World." This idea means, among other things, that "spouses whose lives are depleted by sexual boredom ought to be able to consider alternatives to monogamy" (306). Americans' classic ambivalence about family issues—wanting to protect the family while guarding individual rights—is to some extent reflected in the "neoliberal" or communitarian arguments that emerged in the early 1990s. This movement sought to bolster the family, arguing that individuals were happier within intact families. As seen by one progressive, these arguments exploited a yearning for "simpler family times" while offering a "gesture toward gender equality" (Stacey 1994, 120).

In addition to the family, conservatives see the military as another institution whose well-being is more important than the rights of individuals. In writing about the controversy concerning gays in the military, one

conservative bemoans the waning of the “old” military culture, which is of much greater significance than “the posturing by both sides in the controversy over gays.” The old military culture was conservative and was committed to the supremacy of society over the individual, unlike the liberal orthodoxy and individualism of the surrounding culture. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the military sought to recruit new people and thus to become less “different” from the larger culture. That movement, unfortunately, continues (Bacevich 1993, 30–31). For many on the left, the military represents a rather different cultural institution, one that “stands entirely against the humanistic values behind the gay rights movement.” Thus, while gays must fight to remove the ban on their presence, they must also oppose “militarism” (Editorial 1993c, 157).

American Individualism: Complexities and Controversies

If the idea of juggling individual versus collective rights and well-being often lies at the heart of culture wars issues, the question of just how individualistic Americans are is a contentious one. In one respect, the evidence is clear: Americans are more supportive of economic individualism than are citizens of any other nation and are more likely than others to believe that individuals’ fates lie in their own hands. Beyond this, however, there is considerable room for debate. Survey data reveal ambivalences and inconsistencies. Historians and sociologists offer varying portraits of individualism and its relationship to American society, both past and present.

Americans have consistently and unambiguously supported the values of free enterprise and competition. More than 75 percent of Americans in four different national surveys during the 1970s and 1980s supported the value of free enterprise and endorsed “the right to one’s own opinion” and the view that “what happens to me is my own doing” (Inkeles 1990–91, 109). Of the sixteen nations included in the 1990 European Values Study, the United States ranked highest in preferring personal freedom to equality, blaming the individual for being poor, and favoring jobs that encourage individual initiative over those in which everyone works together (van Elteren 1998). To be sure, if one asks Americans questions about “social responsibility” rather than “economic individualism”—that is, beliefs about the obligation to meet the basic needs of all people in society and to redress

unfair levels of social inequality—one finds substantial agreement here as well. Using National Opinion Research Center data from 1984, Bobo found that 49 percent of Americans were ambivalent, scoring close to the mean on measures of both social responsibility and economic individualism, while 20 percent were individualists and 30 percent were collectivists (1991, 86).

Historians have debated the degree to which economic individualism (or Lockean liberalism) has been the dominant philosophy in the United States. In the middle of the twentieth century, observers generally assumed that the Lockean tradition prevailed, but by the 1970s, some historians argued that republicanism was a better description of the philosophy of the American revolutionary generation. Republicanism rests on the idea of the public good as opposed to the sway of individual interests. It entails a commitment to an active civic life rather than concentration on individual rights. By the end of the 1980s, the idea of republicanism “had passed into general intellectual currency” as one of the “core traditions of American culture itself” (Rodgers 1992, 32).

The issue is a contentious one, however, with both the prevalence and the merits of republicanism a matter of dispute. While the much-discussed *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985/1996) celebrated republicanism as a worthy competitor or complement to the more familiar individualism, some historians allege that it was a philosophy of the elite and not appropriate to the needs of ordinary Americans. One historian has pointed out that “although the Founding Fathers never self-consciously conceived of classical republicanism as the coherent tradition we’ve created, they at least talked about ‘republicanism’ and invoked ‘republican principles,’” whereas they never used the term *liberalism* (Wood 1987, 634). Nevertheless, the eventual domination of American life by liberalism represented a victory for democracy, “since a leisured gentry and an aristocratic disdain for direct market interests and working for profit were at the heart of classical republicanism” (640). Another historian has suggested that while elite views permeated all classes, competing views were not excluded and “in time exercised greater interpretive powers for those differently positioned in society” (Appleby 1985, 468–69). It is thus plausible that as economic issues became more important, Americans embraced the need to be “industrious,” and with industriousness came the emphasis on individualism and liberalism (Barkalow 2004, 498). If republicanism and liberalism coexisted in the days of the early republic without either attaining “ideological hegemony,”

there is probably a consensus among historians that liberalism had achieved the ascendancy by the Jacksonian era (1830s–40s) (Curry and Valois 1991, 26).

While Americans have long noted their devotion to individual advancement, they often fail to take note of the flip side: the respect for authority and morality that also characterizes American culture. Bellah has argued that from the days of early New England, “Calvinist ‘individualism’ only made sense within the collective context. Individual action outside the bounds of religious and moral norms was seen . . . as the very archetype of sin” (1975, 18). Another scholar has noted similarly that in “positing a direct relationship between God and each recipient of Christian grace,” Evangelicals “created a powerful spiritual individualism.” But mindful of the “sinful nature of individuals, they sought to encapsulate the heightened self-consciousness of individuals within a community of believers that constrained individualism” (Calhoon 1991, 53).

In American cultural lore, however, the ideal is an individualism that struggles against both the conformity imposed by groups and the unwarranted exercise of authority by government and other institutions. We have often been told that “Americans, from the days of the Revolution on, have resisted authority” (Lipset 1990, 44). Lipset repeatedly notes that Americans have reacted more strongly than have Canadians to the imposition of governmental authority. Yet he reproduces without comment survey results showing that Americans conform more than Canadians do to the authority exercised by their employers: 68 percent of Americans, 57 percent of English Canadians, and 45 percent of French Canadians reported that “they followed their ‘superior’s instructions on a job’” (1990, 128).

Americans see themselves as individualists in part because “the rights of the individual are balanced against the authority of the state. But there is no way to refer to the authority of the welter of intermediate groups between the individual and the state” (Fukuyama 1995, 278–79). With regard to the authority of such groups, comparative survey data reveal that Americans defer to family and church at least as much and often more than other Westerners do (Fischer 2000, 13–14). Americans are more supportive than are British, Canadian, and Australian respondents of established authority and are less likely to favor serious forms of civil disobedience, such as participating in unofficial strikes and occupying buildings (Baer et al.

1995, 184). Americans strongly favor following a supervisor's instructions even when they are perceived to lack merit and strongly believe in the existence of absolute standards of good and evil (Halman 1996).

More than any other nationality in the European Values Study, Americans view the family as very important and support the idea that more emphasis on the family would be a good thing (van Elteren 1998). Perhaps, as Gans has concluded, "many values of popular individualism are familistic" (1988, 3). In Gans's depiction, "middle American individualism"—the individualism of the lower-middle and working classes—blends personal freedom with commitments to family and friends. It is about freedom from unwelcome constraints but not about separation from groups or society. And it is not concerned with individual uniqueness.

Americans are not just more familistic than others but are also more likely to defer to church and to nation, and they are among the least likely of seventeen nationalities to reject the idea of "my country right or wrong" (Fischer 2000). Perhaps, as Fischer suggests, "voluntarism" might more appropriately characterize American responses than "individualism." Individuals join groups voluntarily, but defer to the group while they are members. One can choose to join or to leave, but while a member, one must be loyal, whether the group be a family, a church, or the nation (Fischer 2008, 368). One scholar goes so far as to suggest that "the United States, like Japan and Germany, has historically been a high-trust, group-oriented society, despite the fact that Americans believe themselves to be rugged individualists" (Fukuyama 1995, 10). Another observer maintains that a "persistent tension between authoritarianism and individualism" has always existed in American history (Kammen 1972, 292).

As Gans has suggested, differences may exist between popular and elite understandings of individualism. Individualism, either in its classically liberal form or as tempered by social responsibility, may have been a philosophy held by the national elite (Grabb, Baer, and Curtis 1999). In this view, the population at large was dominantly communal or familistic in orientation, even while the elites offered individualist or republican ideas.

The American literary canon endorses strong individualism, while popular or best-selling writing does not. A study of canonical and best-selling novels in the United States and Canada finds the best sellers to be quite similar in both countries, while the literary works are different. In the formation of the literary canon, national elites undertake a conscious effort to

mold the nation's identity. American canonical novels focus on strong and autonomous self-definition. They "stress the dangers of social identity, the constraints of human connection." This "emphasis on individualism, the freedom of each man from his family, birthplace, and ancestry was one of the central myths" in the effort to construct an American nation. By contrast, in the development of Canadian identity, the need was rather to differentiate Canadian culture from those of the United States and Great Britain (Corse 1995, 1288).

Elite culture thus represents Americans as the highly individualistic beings they imagine themselves to be. International comparisons indicate that Americans place a high value on individual self-expression, although the United States does not lead the world in the self-expression dimension of Inglehart's postmaterialism scale, an honor that goes to Sweden and the Netherlands (Inglehart and Baker 2000, 31). Then, too, ambiguities and ambivalences exist in American attitudes toward self-expression. When asked about child rearing, Americans rank near the top among seventeen nations in endorsing the desirability of children's "independence." But they are simultaneously among the highest in approving of "obedience" (in separate questions) (Fischer 2000, 6).

Americans are also the "least likely among citizens of large Western nations to agree that 'right or wrong is a matter of personal conscience'" and are among "the most likely to agree that the church provides answers to moral problems" (Fischer 2008, 366). As Alan Wolfe has noted, there really are not two mutually exclusive categories of people: those devoted to God and those devoted to the self (2001, 12). Americans combine the two. They defer to authority and respect self-expression.

Indeed, one might ask why critics of American life have recently focused exclusively on the negative qualities of self-expression despite the fact that it coexists with traditional morality and obedience to authority. Wolfe has observed that in both the Victorian and the contemporary periods, American "moralists tend to think that self-discipline is a virtue and self-indulgence is a vice. Yet over and over again, Americans told us that they agreed with the first half of that sentiment—but not the second." Some forms of self-indulgence are seen as humanizing people (Wolfe 2001, 75–76). Are late-twentieth-century critics of American individualism such as Christopher Lasch (1979) and Robert Bellah et al. (1985/1996) who focus

on the narcissistic self-indulgence of contemporary Americans also engaging in “moralism” (Goodhart and Curry 1991, 202)?

Critiquing Multiculturalism

The animus against expressive individualism often stems from an underlying assumption that strong individualism necessarily detracts from the collectivity, that there is an inherent conflict between the individual and the larger society. Much of the commentary about multiculturalism partakes of such conflict imagery. The individual and by extension the individual's intimate groups are often seen as harboring needs and desires that conflict with those of the society as a whole. But is conflict always or necessarily present? And are the ethnic and cultural groups that form the basis of multiculturalist arguments an asset or a detriment to the health of the larger society?

In the 1930s and 1940s, some analysts saw virtue in “the cultural vigor of different ethnic groups” because such cultural pluralism could counter the dangers of mass politics—dangers that arose from individual isolation and alienation (Gerstle 1994, 1072). As one mid-twentieth-century sociologist viewed it, “If we look at the city of the twenties from the perspective of the city of the fifties, the widespread ‘marginality’ caused by exposure to diverse sub-cultures appears almost attractive when compared with the superficial homogeneity of . . . modern city life” (M. Stein 1960, 43–44). At least one contemporary observer has also seen the search for distinct cultural identities as a response to standardization: “as people feel threatened by standardization, they search out and cultivate differences. This should not be disparaged, as if individual choice and commitment were irrelevant. Nor should it be fetishized” (R. Jacoby 1994, 159).

To be sure, the fraternal organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that appeared to represent fellowship and communal engagement may in fact have impeded members' ability to integrate into the larger society (Kaufman 2002). But perhaps the earlier communities were seen as but transitory—a way station on the road to eventual assimilation—whereas the cultural associations in a multiculturalist society appear to be more permanent and hence more threatening.

The newer cultural associations also seek public rather than merely pri-

vate recognition. And to its critics, this public quality renders multiculturalism undesirable. Multiculturalism represents “not just an empirical description of culturally diverse societies, but also a normative claim that cultural difference is to be publicly recognized and instituted, and thus to be made the business of state rather than of private initiative” (Joppke 1996, 487).

If, in the early or mid-twentieth century, cultural groups were viewed as a healthy counterweight to standardization or “mass society,” by the late twentieth century they were more likely to be seen as an undesirable form of “social capital.” Putnam’s “social capital”—the trust and reciprocity necessary for a healthy society—was divided into two categories, bonding and bridging social capital. “Bonding” entails strong in-group ties that may generate out-group hostility or lack of concern with the larger society, as compared with the societal involvements of “bridging” social capital. The examples of bonding social capital Putnam cites include “ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women’s reading groups, and fashionable country clubs”; examples of bridging social capital include “the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations” (2000, 22).

Thus, ironically, while those commentators who fear the decline in social capital are concerned about individuals’ withdrawal from participation in group life, they also fear the kind of intensely meaningful participation that binds individuals into tightly knit groups. Tight-knit groups are not as socially constructive as those that are less well integrated. It appears, then, that the fear of excessive individualism has come to include a fear of excessively individualistic—or “selfish”—groups (Thomson 2005). Hence the dominant concern in our sample of political commentary is to counter the antisocial or selfish tendencies of the groups that gather under the multiculturalist umbrella. In the words of one commentator, multiculturalism “promotes group loyalties at the expense of a larger national identity” (Steel 1998, 13).

That all groups do not have equal power makes the matter somewhat more complex, as the loyalties of dominant and subordinate groups to the larger society may differ. Indeed, some evidence suggests that high-status groups may more readily retain allegiance to both their ethnic groups and the larger society than do lower status groups. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one study has found that the patriotism and nationalism of Euro-Americans are

significantly higher than those of African Americans (Sidanius et al. 1997, 114).

Because the rights of individuals generally have primacy over the claims of the collectivity in American society, multiculturalism is widely criticized for promoting group rights. In part for this reason and in part because of fears of social fragmentation, this sample of writings includes no defenders of multiculturalism per se. While essays in *The Nation* and *The New Republic* defend some aspects of “multicultural education” or changes in the university canon, no one in the sample supports the general idea of multiculturalism.

Of the thirty-eight articles devoted to a discussion of multiculturalism, twenty-seven assail multiculturalists for failing to appreciate that there is an American culture. Whether American society is a melting pot or a WASP culture, it is composed of individuals and based on individual rights; it is multiracial and multiethnic but also monocultural. Whether there is a “centrist consensus” at its core (Henry 1993, 75) or “mutual respect” among heterogeneous groups (Hughes 1992a, 44) or a “time-honored American mixture of assimilation and traditional allegiance” (F. Siegel 1991, 35), American culture is to be protected against the fragmentation or Balkanization that multiculturalism would bring.

Of the remaining eleven articles dealing with multiculturalism, seven deal with the internecine battle among conservatives about the wisdom of limiting immigration from Third World countries: five favor restricting immigration, while two oppose such restrictions. Two of the remaining four articles consist of progressive criticisms that oppose multiculturalism because it fails to help the groups it is intended to help (Daryl Michael Scott 1998; Walzer 1996). One article celebrates the “post-multiculturalism” that now flourishes among those in the arts whose bonds are based on aesthetic tastes (Breslauer 1995, 22). And the remaining article discusses the tension between “celebrations of difference” and a commitment to universal human rights (Elshtain 1998, 11), suggesting that sensitivity to cultural differences must not be used to undermine commitment to universal human rights (12).

Multiculturalism goes against the grain of American culture primarily through its failure to honor the ideals of individualism. According to a writer in *Time*, “Put bluntly: Do Americans still have faith in the vision of their country as a cradle of individual rights and liberties, or must they re-

linquish the teaching of some of these freedoms to further the goals of the ethnic and social groups to which they belong?" (P. Gray 1991, 13). The current "celebration of cultural diversity" entails an "insistence on group rights over individual rights" (Krauthammer 1995; see also Auster 1994; J. Gray 1992); it "emphasizes the betterment of the group" (Henry 1993, 74). It advocates a nation of "inviolable ethnic and racial groups" rather than a nation "of individuals making their own choices" (Schlesinger 1991, 21). "Imagine places where it is considered racist," says a critic of multicultural curricula in universities, "to speak of the rights of the individual when they conflict with the community's prevailing opinion" (Henry 1991, 66). Multiculturalism entails a "revolutionary" change from America as "a nation of individuals, voluntary associations, and ethnic groups to a confederation of diverse 'peoples' with separate worldviews and different 'cultures.'" This phenomenon represents a shift from individual citizens entering the public arena to groups entering the public arena, a change from a "multiethnic America" to a "multicultural America." (Fonte 1996, 48). Multiculturalism might be called "the socialist theory of American nationality, in contrast to the liberal theory that sees Americans as rights-bearing individuals" (O'Sullivan 1994a, 38). The dreaded result is Balkanization (Krauthammer 1990, 1995; O'Sullivan 1994b).

Multiculturalism "turns upside down" the principle on which America is based: "the freedom to create a new personal identity" and "to become part of a nation of people who have done the same thing" (P. Gray 1991, 17). Indeed, "the American achievement is not the multicultural society, it is the multicultural individual" (Wieseltier 1994, 30). Diversity does not mean simply the presence of different racial, ethnic, or sexual groups. "True diversity lies in acknowledging that every human being is an individual, and not simply a member of racial, ethnic or sexual groups. The variety of these individual differences is what bonds us all to each other." We must recognize that "we are individuals first, Americans second and tribalists third" (Brustein 1997a, 34). One writer cites Woodrow Wilson to the effect that "you cannot become thorough Americans if you think of yourselves in groups. America does not consist of groups" (Hart 1996, 52).

Furthermore, individuals can and do transcend their groups and sub-cultures. "The great artists and thinkers of every culture have always looked for what is individual in humanity rather than what is general" and have celebrated the capacity of people "to transcend externally imposed roles to achieve a richer individuality" (Brustein 1991, 34). Students' minds should

not be made to conform to any of the “socially constructed group minds” but should instead be encouraged “to find their way to an individually achieved sense of culture” (Howe 1991, 47). The American experiment is about individuals pursuing their own private views of happiness (Crain 1993, 16).

By contrast, the “cult of multiculturalism” is seen as introducing a tension between individual uniqueness and group identity. “Blacks are forced either to deny their individuality by being made ‘representatives of their race’ . . . or to deny their race by insisting on their individual uniqueness” (F. Siegel 1991, 34). The tension between individual uniqueness and group identity is, of course, a classic sociological dilemma, well described by Georg Simmel at the beginning of the twentieth century. Simmel saw that for the group to maintain a unique identity, it must stifle individuals’ proclivity to deviate from group norms. Either the group itself is unique, or the group enlarges to allow for more individual diversity at the expense of its own individuality (Simmel 1908/1971, 257). Some observers have argued that African Americans today face the dilemma of reducing their opportunities for individual advancement by adhering to “the culture blacks have built in opposition to oppression” or abandoning this culture and its attendant solidarity to seek individual success (Merelman 1994, 6).

Tensions between individualist ideals and group-based commitments exist in popular consciousness as well as scholarly and critical discussion. Thus, in-depth interviews with respondents who are “well-informed and articulate about diversity” reveal that some see the ideal of diversity as a matter of treating all individuals the same regardless of their social differences, while others believe that diversity means that group differences are “consciously valued, celebrated, and sustained.” It is almost impossible to endorse both of these ideals at the same time because “they represent two fundamentally different conceptions of the proper role of the individual and the group in social life.” Many respondents applauded the idea of accepting diverse individuals into the group and seeing their diversity as enriching the group. At the same time, however, respondents viewed collective representations of diversity as problematic. They thus found it hard or undesirable to incorporate literature from diverse groups into school or college reading lists and complained of the difficulties of communication among different groups in community settings (J. M. Bell and Hartmann 2007, 898, 903).

One commentator notes that American society has long harbored “a

contradiction between . . . commands to be oneself while also being part of a common culture, a creative tension that has produced a literature populated by loners, rebels, and misfits." It has also produced much stress. "No one ever said it was easy to be an American, to learn the rules anew each day, every day" (P. Gray 1991, 17). Another observer suggests that the influx of Latin American immigrants might begin to subtly change this individualist culture: "The glamour of the United States is the Easter promise: you can be born again in your lifetime. You can separate yourself from your past. . . . Immigrants still come for that promise." But the more communal cultures of Latin America and Asia are now presenting alternatives that "beckon the American imagination." The Latin American culture offers "an undistressed leisure, a crowded kitchen table, even a full sorrow. . . . We will change America even as we will be changed" (Rodriguez 1988, 84).

According to one writer, Americans are currently so individualistic that U.S. society contains a new kind of "tribalism of conviction." People in the new tribes may live in the same towns or even in the same houses, "but their minds might as well be in separate countries." In their personal lives, Americans readily handle such differences, he suggests. But "Affirmative Action and ethnic politics, supposedly designed to bring people into the system, have the effect of turning people against each other." What is needed are "some myths of commonality, and some actual commonalities, to keep us from flying apart, . . . some notion of an American way of life" that goes beyond "diversity." The older American way of life, replete with republican virtue and *Poor Richard's Almanac*, can serve this purpose. "The tribes won't disappear. . . . But they will flourish a lot more harmoniously if the main lines of American civilization are a little more firmly drawn" (Brookhiser 1990, 65).

The sole article in *The Nation* that deals with the overall philosophy of multiculturalism is highly critical of it, not because of its threat to social unity but because contemporary multiculturalism—postmodern multiculturalism—insufficiently supports black identity groups. These multiculturalists "couple their celebration of group differences with a concerted effort to blur group borders. . . . They promote fluid notions of group identity, emphasizing cultural differences and fragmentation among African-Americans." They thus undermine the possibility of "a vibrant black community in which people have stable identities, grapple with internal differences," and are committed to a common culture (Daryl Michael Scott 1998, 26–27).

Progressives, the author argues, must recognize that “black politics should address economic inequities” and must therefore reject postmodern multiculturalism (27). For if it fails to maintain a vibrant group life, “the black community will continue to be vulnerable to AIDS and crack epidemics, and must await salvation from without or resort to rank individualism” (29). This piece demonstrates that social scientific discourses about culture have affected the thinking of some activists who are struggling to support a kind of multiculturalism that recognizes the looseness and fluidity of “culture.”

Another liberal commentator in *The New Republic* shows some sympathy for those who assert multiculturalism but similarly suggests that their tactics are misguided. Michael Walzer argues that the groups involved are not well served by multiculturalism because it is “a symbolic politics” that “challenges dominant beliefs . . . where the emotional pull of oneness—flag and country, God and family—is most deeply felt” (1996, 39). Instead of cultural symbolism, he argues, political and economic power are needed.

Concern for preserving group identity is not confined to the Left, however. All sides recognize the need for groups or communities to maintain their own cultures and identities. Being open to others’ ideas must not mean having no commitments to beliefs of our own. If we are “liberated from tradition and particularity,” we will not have much to say to each other, says a conservative writer (Neuhaus 1988b, 24). When the mainline Protestant churches “persuaded people to embrace tolerance and inclusiveness,” they “lost their internal sense of identity” (Ostling 1989, 95).

For all the ethos of the group and group rights that is embodied in multiculturalism, however, some commentators view multiculturalism as an outgrowth of individualism. It is seen as a form of “collective narcissism” (Brustein 1995, 30), a kind of “tribal solipsism” in which blacks, women, and the Moral Majority, for example, assume that true understanding is available only to their own membership (Morrow 1981, 73). If I love some work of art or music “because it is mine,” says another critic, “properly translated, this means: I do not love it, I love me” (Wieseltier 1994, 32). For those who define the United States as “a nation almost like any other,” reflecting a “sense of common nationhood in the European sense,” multiculturalists’ demands point up the fallacies of the liberal theory that Americans are united by their devotion to individual rights. This theory cannot resist the claims of multiculturalism because “if people believe they can

find self-expression only in ethnic and linguistic enclaves, the theory of individual rights allows them to do so" (O'Sullivan 1994a, 43).

Multiculturalism in Relationship to the Individual, the Group, and the Society

A number of well-known sociologists also perceive a link between multiculturalism and individualism in American culture. James Davison Hunter, for example, argues that because multiculturalism assumes an "autonomous individual whose cultural identity is a matter of relatively unconstrained choice," it does not challenge "radical individualism, it only reinforces it" (2002, 44–45). Only "creedal communities" can resist "the excesses of radical individualism" (47–48). What is ultimately wrong with multiculturalism is its failure to appreciate the power of culture. Multiculturalism equates culture with "the ethic of individual choice," seeing religion as something one "can choose to embrace or choose to reject" and race and ethnicity as something one can "choose to feel good about or be ashamed of" (J. D. Hunter 1994, 201–2). As a result, multiculturalism does not provide a way of understanding difference; "it only acknowledges differences among individuals in the choices they make" (J. D. Hunter 2002, 45). Thus, ironically, a philosophy that officially celebrates diversity reduces all to sameness (200). Because "individualism is paradigmatic in America," it is powerful enough to "suppress innovation when innovation is subversive to the basic commitments of the paradigm. This is what you have in multiculturalism. . . . Alternatives are offered but only in ways that are consistent with the assumptions, rules, and social practices of individualism" (J. D. Hunter 2002, 47).

Robert N. Bellah argues similarly that the ideology of multiculturalism operates as an agent of the dominant American culture; "multiculturalism, which has become so widely accepted in America, is part of the process of assimilation into the dominant culture, . . . and thus not in any real sense the expression of a genuine cultural pluralism." Its underlying message is that we must respect the fact that "we're all different; we're all unique" (2002, 27).

In Bellah's understanding, as in Hunter's, "deep cultural codes," often derived from religion, operate beneath the level of conscious awareness. In

American society, Protestant religious individualism operates in this fashion. It is reinforced by economic individualism, and both the state and the marketplace inculcate the common American culture of individualism. As Bellah sees it, "something is wrong not on the surface of American life but deep in the core of our common culture" (2002, 28). "What economic individualism destroys and what our kind of religious individualism cannot restore is solidarity, a sense of being members of the same body" (20). American society needs "to recover an idea of the common good toward which we can aspire in the face of the disintegrative tendencies not of cultural pluralism but of radical individualism" (28).

While sharing Bellah's view of what ails American society, Michael Walzer places multiculturalism in a different frame. Like Bellah, Walzer sees individual withdrawal rather than "multicultural cacophony" as the worrying aspect of American society. But unlike Bellah, Walzer sees multiculturalism as an antidote to excessive individualism. Leaders of movements for multiculturalism, he argues, lack power over their membership and consequently "demand governmental programs (targeted entitlements, quota systems) that will help them press their own members into line. From their perspective, the real alternative to multiculturalism is not a strong and substantive Americanism, but an empty or randomly filled individualism. . . . The critical conflict in American life today is not between multiculturalism and some kind of cultural hegemony . . . but between the manyness of groups and of individuals, between communities and private men and women" (1994, 188). In Walzer's understanding, then, multiculturalism represents the collectivity against the individual, a way of righting the imbalance between "culture and selfhood" (191). Because of the need for balance between the individual and the group, we must not consistently defend either multiculturalism or individualism, he argues, but rather should support "now one, now the other, as the balance requires" (191).

While Walzer thus frames multiculturalism rather differently from Hunter and Bellah, he lumps together ethnic and racial groups, groups based on gender or sexual preference, unions, interest groups, and political parties. All need assistance in the face of individual withdrawal, he argues. He thus appears to give ammunition to those detractors of multiculturalism who assert that no genuine cultural differences are at stake, merely self-interested politics in a new guise.

The allegation that various cultural claims are false and simply self-interested has been framed by one anthropologist as a manifestation of the larger clash between what he calls "liberal theory" and "culture theory." Liberal theory, which is dominant politically, sees individuals as forming society based on their own self-interested concerns; culture theory, in contrast, assumes that culture is important in shaping individuals. Liberal theory does not "allow for persistent cultural difference" or for "the legitimacy of claims based on it." Thus, if Native Americans claim that a given location is a "cultural site," local non-Indians respond by suggesting that "today's Indians had lost their original cultures" and therefore cannot "claim legitimate traditional connections to it" (Boggs 2002, 604).

Multiculturalism can also be viewed as a different way of incorporating people into the larger society. Jeffrey C. Alexander sees multiculturalism as offering a more welcoming mode of "incorporation" into society for groups outside the mainstream. Unlike both the assimilation and hyphenation models, multiculturalism does not maintain a separation between one's public and one's private identity. It thus erases the suggestion of inferiority that is attached to difference in these other models. It celebrates difference and encourages the maintenance of these diverse cultural communities. Its aim is not separation but a "more democratic mode of civil integration" (2001, 238). In multiculturalism, the qualities that make one an outsider are to be understood by all, rather than relegated to the private realm. "It is the qualities of being woman, of being nonwhite, of being homosexual or lesbian, of being handicapped that core group and out-group members struggle to understand and experience. . . . Insofar as such understandings are achieved, rigid distinctions between core and out-group members break down, and notions of particularity and universality become much more thoroughly intertwined" (246). As the proponents of multiculturalism have long noted, they seek "cultural pluralism without hierarchy" (Asante 1992, 309).

In somewhat similar fashion, Richard M. Merelman argues that African Americans have developed their own culture in response to the larger society's racism. Indeed, multiculturalism claims that "racial domination has contributed to blacks and whites becoming *culturally different groups*. Symbols of commonality, such as 'individualism,' 'Americanism,' and 'citizenship' not only hide this fact, but also protect 'meritocratic' practices which impede real political and economic parity between the races" (1994, 17). Be-

cause blacks have been isolated and subordinated, whites have controlled “the definition and flow of cultural capital in most universities, in the media, and in primary and secondary schools. . . . Blacks are asked to absorb some types of knowledge and certain specific values which many in their own group suspect and which—being unfamiliar—are difficult to acquire” (5–6). As blacks and whites increasingly interact, and cultural capital becomes increasingly important for economic and political power, “a heightened awareness of culture *as such* may well develop,” and conflict over culture emerges (6). Citing a study of student life at Rutgers University, Merelman notes that when confronted with racial realities on campus, “white students reluctantly are forced to acknowledge that race and culture do influence most [people’s] choice of friends. In order to defend individualism in the face of this challenge, white students at Rutgers distinguish between spheres—such as friendship—where they think individualism should continue to apply—and other spheres—such as politics—where they think the group has the right to come first. In effect, students protect individualism by ‘choosing’ multiculturalism as a public norm and by ‘choosing’ individualism as a private norm.” In this process, “multiculturalism transforms individualism itself,” since the earlier idea was that racial group choice was to be confined to private life and proscribed in the public sphere. If this newer view were to take root in the larger society, “a public norm of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity” would be erected “at the very time when the private, organic foundations of such diversity in ‘ethnically pure’ families, schools, neighborhoods, universities, and churches have substantially eroded” (16).

If advocates of multiculturalism celebrate it as a mode of incorporation into society, opponents see it as precisely the opposite. Spencer (1994), for example, characterizes it as a form of “minority nationalism” that competes with both American nationalism (white Christian supremacy) and cosmopolitan liberalism. The difference between American nationalism and African American nationalism, he argues, lies only in their power differentials; all nationalisms are essentially ethnocentric. Because it lacks power, African American nationalism must call for “diversity” and “inclusiveness,” just as religious groups that are politically weak and the victims of repression call for toleration and religious freedom while those that are politically strong repress other religions “in the name of the ‘one true faith’” (556). Other analysts, such as Ravitch, have talked of two different

kinds of multiculturalism: pluralistic and particularistic. Whereas "the pluralists seek a richer common culture, the particularists insist that no common culture is possible or desirable" (1992, 276–77). Defenders of multiculturalism, by contrast, see a choice rather between the reigning Eurocentric hegemony and those who seek genuine cultural pluralism (Asante 1992, 309).

Multiculturalism thus appears as a kind of Rorschach test. Does it promote individualism or the collectivity? Does it promote social integration or separation? Is it beneficial for the larger society? Is multiculturalism undesirable because it is essentialist or ascriptive and thus violates the voluntarism of American society? Or does its very openness and choice violate traditional patterns of community allegiance?

As Hollinger and others have suggested, a tension exists within multiculturalism, between "cosmopolitan and pluralist programs for the defense of cultural diversity." Whereas pluralism defends and preserves existing groups, cosmopolitanism favors voluntary individual affiliations and views individuals simultaneously as members of multiple communities. Cosmopolitanism "is willing to put the future of every culture at risk through the sympathetic but critical scrutiny of other cultures" (Hollinger 1995, 85). Individuals may well be "eager to escape" their traditional cultures "through new out-group affiliations" (107).

If the individual is the ultimate basis for association in society, then cosmopolitanism is plausible, and so is assimilation. If, conversely, groups form the basis of social association, then pluralism results. The assimilationist model rests on a classically liberal view of democracy, whereas the pluralist perspective is based on a more communitarian view (Wuthnow 2006, 168–69). Hartmann and Gerteis (2005) present a more thorough typology of the ways in which individuals and groups are incorporated into society, noting that theorists differ not only about whether the social association is based on individuals or requires the mediation of groups but also about whether cultural cohesion requires strong substantive moral bonds ("thick" culture) or whether procedural norms and common legal codes ("thin" culture) suffice. Using these two distinctions, Hartmann and Gerteis produce a fourfold typology, with individuals as the basis of association producing either "assimilationism" (under thick culture) or cosmopolitanism (under thin culture) and groups as the basis of association producing either "interactive pluralism" (under thick culture) or "frag-

mented pluralism" (under thin culture) (224). In the assimilation model, the individual adheres to a cohesive culture, whereas the cosmopolitan individual gives basic loyalty to the larger society while choosing which group memberships to retain and which to abandon. In the fragmented pluralism model, allegiance to the larger society is minimal, as there is maximal attachment to the group. The groups have clear and strong boundaries, they are not freely chosen, and membership within a group is essential and ascriptive. The national order comes from respect for group rights. While groups remain the basis of association under interactive pluralism, they are subordinate to the larger society. Groups recognize and respect each other, and the larger societal order emerges via group interaction. The specter of fragmented pluralism clearly leads critics of multiculturalism to condemn it for social disunity and moral relativism (230). The political commentators in our sample supported assimilation, cosmopolitanism, and interactive pluralism but not fragmented pluralism, which relegates the larger society to lesser concern than the social groups composing it.

Fears of fragmented pluralism account for much of the hostility toward multiculturalism. Hostility toward multiculturalists is based not just on their favoring group rights over individual rights but also on their perceived unwillingness to join in a common or unitary American culture. Proponents of this view assert that the majority of multiculturalists are hard-liners who "damn as racism any attempt to draw the myriad of American groups into a common American culture" (F. Siegel 1991, 35). As a result, the melting pot ideal "that was universally celebrated until about twenty years ago" is being abandoned, and the "common American identity" is in danger of becoming a "diluted legal one" (O'Sullivan 2000, 22). Multiculturalists take seriously every culture except for "the traditional American culture, now given such epithets as hegemonic Euro-Americanism" (O'Sullivan 1994a, 40).

Some critics acknowledge that competing strands of multiculturalism exist, with the beneficial strand showing an appreciation of "transcultural blending," while the harmful one celebrates a single culture and seeks "the empowerment of disadvantaged people through the agency of culture" (Brustein 1991, 32). The latter is akin to Ravitch's distinction between pluralistic and particularistic multiculturalism.

Everyone opposes what is called separatism, tribalism, or balkanization.

In addition, a number of conservative commentators point out that real multiculturalism would pose insuperable difficulties: "What would it mean? The promotion of clitoridectomy among African-Americans? American volunteers to implement the fatwa against Salman Rushdie?" (O'Sullivan 1994a, 40). An "incompatibility" clearly exists between "our own culture and that of the fundamentalist Muhammadan" (Buckley 1993b, 71). A critic of multicultural education derisively speaks of the "liberating 'otherness' of diverse civilizations (suitably purged, of course, of castes, cannibals, and clitoridectomies)" (Melzer 1991, 10-11).

How one evaluates multiculturalism hinges on one's implicit models of how society and culture operate. Can one "exit" a culture? Are individuals autonomous agents or "determined as members of particular groups?" (Eller 1997, 250). Considerable disagreement has arisen within the liberal or progressive camp on the issue of multiculturalism because of such issues. On the one hand, the Left sympathizes with movements that speak for subordinate groups and cultures. On the other hand, there is much support for individual autonomy.

Despite some liberal misgivings about multiculturalism because of concerns that individuals might be oppressed in cultural communities, Joseph Raz has argued that a liberal case can be made in support of multiculturalism: "Only through being socialized in a culture can one tap the options that give life a meaning." The moral claim of cultural groups to receive respect thus "rests entirely on their importance to the prosperity of individual human beings" (1994, 71-72). To be sure, "opportunities of exit should be encouraged . . . for members who cannot develop and find adequate avenues for self-expression within their native culture" (77).

Raz's essay prompted David Bromwich to critique the "culturalist argument" that sees "a universal human need to belong to a culture." Bromwich contends that in the strong sense, culturalism means that "'my culture' is a fact endowed with a dignity and deserving of a respect comparable to the dignity and respect I would claim for myself," and this "idea seems to me a lie" (1995, 89). The culturalist argument weakens the liberal commitment to individual artists and thinkers who choose "to cease to belong as reclaimable property to the culture that 'constitutes' them" (102).

In response to Bromwich's arguments, Michael Walzer has noted that the useful lives that individuals lead all differ and that "the differences are culturally determined." Furthermore, the "autonomous self-creating indi-

vidual" that Bromwich celebrates "is a cultural ideal" too—"ours" (1995, 105). Liberal societies, to their credit, allow "ordinary people to live freely within more than one cultural community." And liberalism "protects its own competition—by tolerating, say, religious faith and practice. . . . Some of the protected groups are, no doubt, illiberal" (106).

Charles Taylor responds to Bromwich by suggesting that an argument about giving priority to the group or the individual can occur only in "a dissociated world of self-enclosed theory." In the real world, individuals and groups are intertwined. Taylor "realize[s] that we are still struggling to know what we mean by 'culture.' I know it has something to do with what has defined the important, the holy, the worthwhile for many people over time" (1995, 103–4).

Just as our understanding of culture has changed over time, so too has our image of the individual-society relationship. The dominant understanding of individualism within American culture has long been a kind of conflict model in which individualism and conformity are antagonistic to each other and individualism and social cooperation are at opposite ends of the continuum. But evidence indicates that Americans no longer define authentic selfhood as requiring conflict with the surrounding society. When mid-twentieth-century social critics and theorists perceived "conformity" to be the scourge of middle-class America, an implicit conflict model often became explicit. William Whyte, whose study of *The Organization Man* (1956) was a best-selling indictment of "groupthink" at the office and in suburbia, put it quite clearly. However benevolent the organization may seem, he argued, the organization man must not "hold before him the dream that ideally there need be no conflict between him and society. There always is; there always must be" (448). Half a century later, an article in the *New York Times Magazine* made "The Case for Fitting In" (Berreby 2008). Included here was a reinterpretation of classic psychological experiments in individual capitulation to the group or obedience to an authority figure. The article suggests that such experiments might reveal not "the evils of conformity" but the virtues of trust and social cooperation (25).

For many Americans in the late twentieth century and beyond, identification with groups and subcultures has become an essential aspect of the self. It is no longer necessary to renounce such ties in the name of "authenticity" or the "true self." Quite unlike the earlier self-help literature, advice books as early as the 1980s counseled readers to reject cultural

images of a totally independent self. They also told readers to reject interpersonal manipulations of the kind taught by Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale. Survey data similarly reflect a heightened concern over time with the interpersonal dimensions of all roles and a more relational view of the self (Thomson 2000, 73–84). A self that is flexible, capable of change, and embedded within a variety of groups has become a more culturally approved model than one that is in conflict with the society.

This newer view of the individual self mirrors the change in paradigm that has taken place with regard to culture. Rather than seeing the self as an integrated, stable, and well-defined entity, newer understandings see the self as fluid rather than fixed, constantly in process of change and redefinition. This kind of self is nurtured as well as constrained by cultures and relationships (Gergen 1991; Leinberger and Tucker 1991; Thomson 2000). As one sociologist has described our current view of self, “whether we flee from it or embrace it—we know ourselves as a ‘construction’ of culture” (McCarthy 1996, 84).

Paradoxically, however, the decrease in conflict between the individual and the society may have generated greater levels of conflict—or at least the perception of conflict—among groups and between groups and the larger society. To the degree that Americans now embrace groups as vehicles for individual well-being, even reinventing themselves through groups of Fundamentalists or gays or Eastern mystics (FitzGerald 1986, 23), the groups come to be seen as selfish, perhaps particularly where the groups are defined in cultural rather than interest group terms, since interests can more readily be compromised than cultures.

Conclusions

In valuing individualism but not to excess, culture warriors replicate a long-standing American practice. Both major American political parties simultaneously endorse aspects of individualism and communitarianism. What is new here is the emergence of a multiculturalism that demands public recognition of subcultural differences. Culture war contentions notwithstanding, all seem opposed to this idea.

Multiculturalists are following in the tradition of feminists and others who recognized that “the personal is political.” Confusions about whether

multiculturalism represents a form of group supremacy or extreme individualism can be clarified by taking into account late-twentieth-century American conceptions of the self in society that allow for authentic individuality to emerge within group contexts.

In what is perhaps the dominant image of multiculturalism, multiculturalists worldwide appear to challenge the “cultural content” of their nations, reducing them to “civic communities committed to the same procedural rules” (Joppke 1996, 486). But the United States differs from other nations “because it alone has made the immigrant experience part of its national identity” (490). The question then becomes how it handles cultural pluralism.