

E. J. Dionne Jr.

Why the public interest matters now

There are cycles in American politics beyond those involving Republicans and Democrats, left and right, progressive and conservative. There are also poles in our history defined by liberty and community, the individual and the collective, the public and the private.

The interplay among these is not always clear. The New Left in the 1960s was both powerfully communitarian and strongly individualistic. One revealing New Left manifesto carried the quintessentially communitarian title, *The Right to Say We*, even as it is hard to find a more radically individualistic movement than the Yippies, who – to the extent that they had a philosophy

at all – found it captured in Abbie Hoffman’s *Steal This Book*.

The Port Huron Statement, the New Left’s classic statement of principles issued in 1962, almost perfectly captured the era’s tension between individualism and community. At one point, it declared: “As a *social* system we seek the establishment of a democracy of *individual* participation, governed by two central aims: that the *individual* share in those *social* decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage *independence* in men and provide the media for their *common* participation.” I have added the emphasis on “individual” and “independence” on the one hand, and “social” and “common” on the other, to suggest how deep the ambivalence ran in those years, even among the authors of a document committed to drawing Americans “out of isolation and into community.”

The New Right was equally ambiguous (or, perhaps, equally confused), encompassing both radical libertarianism and a communitarianism rooted in religion and tradition. The great contribution of William F. Buckley Jr.’s *National Review* to the conservative cause was the invention of ‘fusionism,’ a philosophy that sought to square the circle between a

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love for individual freedom and a Burkean reverence for community norms and traditional restraints. The New Left and the New Right were struggling in their distinctive ways with some of the same contradictions.

But there have been some historical transitions involving rather clear boundaries between one era and the next. The highly individualistic 1920s celebrated private accumulation in economics, private achievement in culture, and private pleasure in individual lives. The capitalist, the jazz musician, and the flapper were all representative of the era. The 1930s and 1940s were decidedly public decades involving collective struggle against the Depression and the rise of Fascism. The era produced labor organizers, the art and writing of the WPA, and the old-fashioned heroes of Frank Capra movies. The transition from the 1920s to the 1930s and 1940s can be seen in another way: Coolidge was as different from FDR as Fitzgerald was from Steinbeck.

Our current moment is more ambiguous. The strong feeling of community and patriotism inspired by the national reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001, has not fully dissipated. There has been a powerful assertion of state power in pursuit of collective domestic security, while on the right there has been a resurgence of religious communalism. But if the Bush administration has been taken to task for its extravagant confidence in our government's collective capacities in Iraq, it has also faced steady criticism for failing to ask much of citizens on behalf of our common life at a time of national challenge.

As a result of these conflicting trends, the final months of the Bush administration have already led to demands for a new, and more robust, public philosophy. It is possible that the end of the

Bush era could call forth a new libertarian period, as Brink Lindsey argues in his recent book, *The Age of Abundance*, especially in light of the declining confidence in our government's capacities, provoked by its difficulties in waging the war in Iraq and the weakness of its response to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. But there is even more ample evidence of a thirst for a new politics organized around the public interest and the common good.

The intuition that something new is afoot is the inspiration behind the essays commissioned for this collection.

One plausible reading of the last half century (again, Lindsey is helpful on this) would see the nation as having gone through two individualist revolutions. The first, rooted in the 1960s, entailed individualism in the personal sphere: greater freedom on matters related to sexuality, family life, abortion, dress codes, and culture. The second hit with full force in the 1980s and emphasized economic freedom: low taxes, deregulation, heightened competition, and greater inequality. David Brooks's bourgeois bohemians – the Bobos – are the offspring of these twin revolutions.

The Bobos are not going away, and neither are the personal freedoms they honor. But at the end of a long celebration of private pleasure and private striving, there is much evidence of a return to the public realm and a growing concern for public things. For nearly two decades, we have gone through a bumpy and somewhat erratic journey involving a search for the commons and a reengagement with the public interest.

The rise of communitarian thought in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a counter to libertarianism was a sign of what was coming. The work of Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Amitai Etzioni,

Philip Selznik, and William Galston all pointed toward something novel (or, perhaps, toward the rediscovery of something old). Sandel's formulation, that "when politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone," stands as a classic rebuke to a radically individualistic approach to public life.

In *The Resurgent Liberal*, published in 1989, Robert Reich – later Bill Clinton's Labor Secretary – argued that liberalism had grown weaker because in the post-New Deal period, it based itself on the values of "altruism and conciliation," not on "the stronger precept of social solidarity" that undergirded Roosevelt's experiment. "The liberalism of the New Deal and World War II partook of an inclusive spirit of generosity toward ourselves," Reich wrote. "Society was not seen as composed of *us* and *them*; it was the realm of *we*." A few years earlier, writing in *The Public Interest*, Mark Lilla similarly claimed that the New Deal had been accepted "in no small part because Roosevelt spoke *to* citizens, *about* citizens." It "succeeded in capturing the American imagination because it promised to be a great act of civic inclusion." Lilla entitled his piece, "What is the Civic Interest?"

Such were some of the influences on Clinton. In all the talk about his love for 'triangulation' and his sensitivity to conservative themes, it is sometimes forgotten that Clinton's New Democratic philosophy was in large part a critique of individualism. His trinity of values – "opportunity, responsibility, community" – is only one part libertarian; the latter two words are communitarian in inspiration. Talk about balancing 'rights' and 'responsibilities' trips off politicians' tongues (it certainly did off Clinton's). But the emphasis on responsibility marked a significant correction to the

old individualism that emphasized rights, and only rights.

At the same time, historians and legal theorists like Cass Sunstein and Paul Brest were embracing 'civic republicanism' as an alternative – or supplement – to liberalism. There was the search for 'universalist' values as a counter to 'particularism' and 'multiculturalism' (one thinks of Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams*). Political science rebelled against 'public choice,' with its emphasis on the individualistic and economic roots of public policy. There was a resurgence in the idea of 'the commonwealth,' advanced in these pages by Gary Hart, and elsewhere by Harry Boyte, who, along with Nancy Kari, also spoke of the value of 'public work,' surely a sister concept to 'the public interest.' Benjamin Barber's concept of 'strong democracy' and his critique of consumerism were part of this trend. So, too, was the renewed interest among Catholic progressives in 'the common good' and 'social reconstruction.'

These developments occurred largely on the left side of politics, but there was a hankering toward mutuality – toward the *public* – on the right as well. As Sandel has pointed out, Ronald Reagan's policies were largely individualistic, particularly in the economic sphere, but "the most resonant part of his political appeal" derived "from his skillful evocation of communal values such as family and neighborhood, religion and patriotism." What set Reagan apart, Sandel has argued, was "his ability to identify with Americans' yearnings for a common life of larger meanings on a smaller, less impersonal scale than that the procedural republic provides."

John McCain's 2000 primary campaign took off in large part because so many citizens were inspired by his repeated assertion that he had "stood up

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against the special interests and for the public interest” and his call on citizens “to sacrifice with others for a cause that is greater than self-interest . . . a cause greater than themselves.” One can view ‘compassionate conservatism’ as either a political gimmick or a sincere effort by conservatives to construct a new approach to social policy – or some combination of the two. But it did reflect an awareness on the right (not unlike Buckley’s reach for fusionism) that entrepreneurialism and unbridled individualism were not enough. “The invisible hand works many miracles,” a candidate named George W. Bush said in 1999, “but it cannot touch the human heart.” That same candidate asserted: “We are a nation of rugged individuals. But we are also the country of the second chance, tied together by bonds of friendship and community and solidarity.”

And so our current rendezvous with the public interest and a renewal of the commons has been a long time in the making.

Bush recognized its power before he became president – and then accelerated the demand for it by his own failures. The patriotic spirit bred by 9/11 (it still exists, despite the partisan rancor that has grown around the war in Iraq and the ‘war on terror’) combines with a thirst for public solutions to public problems (health care and pensions, rising inequality and economic insecurity) to endow the idea of ‘the public interest’ with a new energy. Political corruption and government incompetence provide what some might see as an anodyne concept with a populist edge. The public interest looks very attractive indeed when it is contrasted with ‘special interests,’ unjust privilege, and inside dealing.

None of this has rendered the idea uncontroversial, as many of the essays

here – particularly those by Galston and Adam Wolfson – suggest. The libertarian right will always be suspicious that the public interest is simply a high-minded rationalization for the expansion of state power. Many on the left will inevitably see it as a rationalization for acquiescence to the desires of the powerful who disguise their private advantage behind lofty ideals, and demand ‘sacrifice’ from others but not from themselves. Many skeptics of various orientations will continue to see the public interest as an empty phrase invoked cynically to justify any program that any given politician favors in a given week, month, or year. And even those who warm to the concept will acknowledge that believing in it does not necessarily settle any public question.

The issue, always, is: what is the public interest *rightly understood*? Reaching such an understanding requires debate not just about values, but also about facts. It entails arguments about who ‘the public’ is and what its interests really are. It decidedly requires debate over how responsibilities for achieving the public interest are divided between individuals and the community, between the government and private actors.

“In the long run,” James Q. Wilson once declared, “the public interest depends on private virtue.” That is certainly true. But to what extent does the promotion of private virtue depend on public action? Which economic systems, which government policies, which ways of organizing the relationship between work and family life, which approaches to taxation and regulation, which rules and norms create the circumstances in which private virtue, and thus the public interest, can be advanced?

The prospect that our nation might embark on such a debate is bracing. It

is so much more promising than arguments about who will expand or shrink the federal government, about who is tough or soft in foreign affairs, about who is repressive or permissive in their moral attitudes. Paradoxically, the very cynicism that our political system has encouraged is creating a demand for a more exacting standard in public life. There is substantial evidence that the rising generation, while certainly libertarian in many of its social attitudes, places a higher premium than many of their forebears on community service and public engagement. Theirs may be the generation of the public interest.

“The great object of the institution of civil government,” President John Quincy Adams wrote in his First Annual Message in 1825, “is the improvement of the condition of those who are parties to the social compact, and no government can accomplish . . . the lawful ends of its institution but in proportion as it improves the conditions of those over whom it is established.” Adams’s vision was expansive. He urged “laws promoting the improvement of agriculture, commerce and manufactures, the cultivation and encouragement of the mechanic and of the elegant arts, the advancement of literature, and the progress of the sciences, ornamental and profound.” And Adams insisted that to refrain from exercising government’s powers “for the benefit of the people themselves would be to hide in the earth the talent committed to our charge – would be treachery to the most sacred of trusts.”

Adams’s view was controversial at the time – he failed to win reelection – and it is controversial still. Yet he provided the country then, and provides us still, with the right starting point for considering what the public interest is, and how we should pursue it.