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Thinking Culturally about Politics: *Habits* 20 Years Later and 20 Years Hence¹

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For a twentieth anniversary special edition of *Sociology of Religion* edited by David Yamane

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Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life clearly mattered when it was published in 1985: One of only a handful of truly sociological books on the New York Times' list of bestsellers in recent decades, it was widely discussed in congregations, book groups, and classrooms throughout the country. But how might it matter today? Does it carry lasting significance twenty-plus years after publication, or stand as an important but dated commentary on the excesses of 1980s individualism?

In reflecting on these questions, I step outside the usual conventions of a book symposium in several ways. First, I take this opportunity to consider *Habits* not only analytically but also autobiographically and politically. Second, I consider not just *Habits*, but also its sister volume, *The Good Society*. I think the two books are best understood in relation to each other. Finally, I not only look back at the last twenty years, but also reflect on our current moment and twenty years hence.

Three dimensions of the *Habits/Good Society* legacy appear both most interesting and most important. To be very bodily about it all, I will call them the heart, the head, and the appendix of these 1980s works (*Good Society*, though published in 1991, was mostly written in the late 1980s).

I take as the *heart* of the *Habits/Good Society* legacy their focus on the relationship of culture, institutions, and social structures in social life. In this regard, both books simultaneously reflected and advanced the cultural and institutional turns that have occurred in social science over the last two or three decades. At a deep level, both books are about *both* culture and institutions, and both try to change the structural conditions of society by thinking culturally and institutionally (though this remains largely in the background). But *Habits* focuses primarily on the "soft tissue" of the social body: on culture and meaning and how they shape society. *The Good Society* focuses on the "skeletal tissue" of the social body, on institutions and their relationship to fundamental patterns of social life.

If this is so, let me suggest that *The Good Society* really *ought* to be the book closer to

¹ This article was first given as a paper at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, at a session on *Habits of the Heart: Twenty Years Later* organized and convened by Dr. David Yamane, now of Wake Forest University. My thanks to him and to the other panelists Kelly Besecke, Wendy Cadge, and Robert Zussman. Author may be contacted at rlwood@unm.edu or 505-277-3945.

most of our sociological hearts. And in some ways it is, at least for me: To the extent that we care that our intellectual work fosters positive social change, then *The Good Society's* focus on reforming institutions becomes urgent. I think it is true that *only* by focusing on institutions can we really hope to claim some long-term impact. *The Good Society* really is the better sociological book, in a narrowly pragmatic or instrumental sense. And yet: *Habits* draws our attention – perhaps claims many of our hearts – far beyond what *The Good Society* does. It drew a larger readership, gained enormous attention among institutional leaders from grassroots communities to elite settings, provoked conversations from parish halls to board rooms around the country, and continues to be talked about in ways that *The Good Society* never was, I suspect. Why might that be?

In part, this is no doubt a reflection of the condition that *Habits* analyzes: in a society driven by individualism, it is hard for an institutional analysis to gain traction. But I think the attraction of *Habits* is *also* a reflection of the deeper theoretical commitments that lie at the heart of the book: that meaning and sense-making are fundamentally constitutive of human life *and* at their best are communal activities. Indeed, meaning construction and sense-making are such fundamentally human processes that they sometimes override (even for sociologists!) more obviously relevant causal processes.

A digression into my own biography may illustrate the point: In the mid-1980s, I spent five years in poor urban neighborhoods and the countryside of Mexico and Central America, living with local folks and working to end Reaganite intervention in the civil wars then racking the region. In 1987, as I was preparing to return to the U.S. for graduate school, I was given a copy of *Habits* as a gift. By all rights, it should have been less than compelling for me: I was deeply vested in a political and structural reading of American hegemony in Central America – and whatever *Habits* offers, it's certainly not that. By all rights, a more obviously political and structural analysis of American life should have drawn my attention. But I also needed to understand my own journey “home,” to make sense of my own transition back to life within American culture. I needed not only to find the right structural analysis, but also – and more urgently – to undergo a journey of the heart back to my home culture. *Habits of the Heart* was the single most helpful source for that journey: it's combination of thorough-going critique of some of the deep currents of our culture, positive appreciation for other deep cultural currents, and sense-making of that 1980s moment in American history provided key intellectual undergirding for that transition in my life.

Thus, if forced to choose between these books, I would be tempted to say something like “as a sociologist I prefer *The Good Society* and want even more structural analysis, but as a human being I would choose *Habits* hands down.” But of course, that gets it all wrong: the “soft tissue” cultural analysis of *Habits* is fully as sociological as the harder institutional analysis of *The Good Society*, and both strove to contribute to rolling back the structural injustices of American life.

The terminology here becomes difficult, because I think that as sociologists we *still* have not developed adequate conceptual tools for adequately analyzing the complex interweaving of cultural, institutional, and structural causation within society (even after theoretical progress on

the relationship of culture-and-structure over the last decade). But the interpretations of cultural and institutional dynamics that lie at the heart of in *Habits* and *The Good Society* have helped us to see part of that terrain more clearly.

I turn next to the analytic argument underlying the *Habits/Good Society* project. Think of this as the project's left-side dominated "head". In its rawest terms, that underlying argument holds that culture ultimately forges history. Of course, that bald statement needs all sorts of further nuance and several caveats: it's only partially true, material conditions are crucial, power can trump culture in the short term, etc. Nonetheless, cultural dynamics take center stage here for a reason: they fundamentally forge our common life, our politics, our economic future, and the workings of power in society. Thus, whether you care passionately about structural injustice and think sociology should focus on addressing it, or think sociologists ought to limit themselves to better explaining societal outcomes, you have to engage with culture and its institutionalized expressions – that is, with "traditions" in the language of *Habits*.

Recalling that analytic argument is important, because *Habits*'s critique of American culture, its call to community and to re-engaging with democratic and religious traditions, was regularly misinterpreted as an exercise in nostalgia, a backward-looking yearning for an idealized communal past. Though I think this may have been a willful misinterpretation, I think it true that the language of *Habits* left the book vulnerable to this charge. Nonetheless, it represents a profound misreading. *Habits* was never a nostalgic work. In its analytic argument, the language of community was always much closer to the invocations of progressive utopias that have a long and worthy pedigree among progressive thinkers: a call to building a better societal future, albeit here spiked with a dose of realism. What *Habits* did was to root that call to engagement in the soil of democratic and religious traditions that can *sustain* progressive social action over the long term. Misreading this as conservative nostalgia was and is symptomatic of the continuing failure of the secular left and many academic liberals to understand real human communities – depressingly, a failure that debilitates us intellectually, politically, and professionally today.

This also suggests something crucial about our present political moment. Right now, neither major political party really understands religious commitment. The Republican Party "gets religion" in the sense of affirming conservative moral values, but largely in an instrumental sense, denying the broader moral values of the historic religions any effective claim on party ideology or policy. Meanwhile, within the Democratic Party, what passes for visionary thinking about religion is "framing" – the need to better frame issues so that religious Americans will understand them in light of underlying democratic values and narratives, rather than in light of competing narratives of hierarchy, patriarchy, and militarism. I do not doubt that better democratic framing might help the Democratic Party, at least marginally. But such framing assumes that people hold an underlying attachment to egalitarian values and narratives. What if, a la *Habits* and *Good Society*, the institutions that carry those democratic values and tell those egalitarian narratives are withering? What if those cultural traditions are being distorted or simply replaced (sometimes by paper-thin simulacra of the same name, say "Christian")? Then our political tasks – for whatever political party – are far more profound than framing analysis can imagine: we have to re-appropriate, reconstruct, re-invigorate, and sometimes re-invent the cultural streams and institutions that make democratic framing possible and effective. It's not just

a language game, but a social, political, and cultural struggle for the soul of the nation.

Having considered the heart and head of the *Habits/Good Society* oeuvre, I want to say a little about its “appendix.” *Habits* was published with a substantial closing appendix titled “Social Science as Public Philosophy.” A summary is beyond my purposes here, but bears re-reading well, these 20 years hence. Its call to a more publicly-engaged social science and a revival of the tradition of public intellectuals in American history even offers a certain hopeful note, in light of recent efforts in the American Anthropological Association, the American Sociological Association, and other professional bodies to reclaim a public intellectual role for our disciplines. I would by no means suggest *Habits* or its appendix has been anything like the primary driving force in this, but it mattered greatly to many of us who fashion ourselves in part as public intellectuals. And I think it not a coincidence that Bob Bellah was for decades among those at the moral and intellectual center of the Berkeley department called home not only by Ann Swidler but also by Michael Burawoy and, until fairly recently, Troy Duster, Todd Gitlin, and other architects of public sociology. Thus, even the lowly appendix of *Habits* matters, along with its cultural and institutional heart and head.

I close by looking another 20 years into the future, not in a spirit of positivist prediction, but in a spirit of analytically-grounded hope. “Analytically-grounded” in that nothing predetermines that a positive scenario will play out in American life or the world stage in the years ahead. If anything, the evisceration of democratic engagement and “public work” transcending elite interests bodes poorly for our democratic future; our national leadership’s cynical machinations in the Middle East may have undermined any semblance of America as a democratic beacon, and poisoned the language of democracy, in that crucial region for the next generation. Yet I hope that over the next twenty years, we can deepen democracy in this country and around the world. I hope that in about 2025, when I’ll be 65 and my kids will be grown adults, that we will be living in an America that at least *strives* mightily to live up to her promises to her own people, and works in partnership with democratic currents everywhere in the world. This risks sounding naive, in this inauspicious moment for such yearnings, but call it my own utopia. And to the cynics among us, I note that if we fail to imagine a different future, we will never build one.

If we witness something closer to this vision in our old age, where we are today is where the neocon barbarians currently controlling American policy will find themselves in 2025. Today, we look back ruefully over the last 40 years as the disciples of Leo Strauss, Milton Friedman, and others were laying the intellectual foundations of neoconservative hegemony. In 20 more years, I hope the neocons look back ruefully 40 years, and see that the intellectual foundations of *their* demise were being laid. Those foundations will be built partly as bookshelves, and those bookshelves will hold a rich and diverse library. Among the key volumes there will be *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*, with their culturalist and institutionalist analysis of the deep currents of American society at the end of the 20th century, and a vision for public intellectual life in the 21st.