

# The search for political community

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American activists reinventing commitment

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# Personalism and political commitment

## A COMMON COMPLAINT

Critics often say that too few Americans get politically involved. Active political commitment is declining, goes one familiar complaint, because people have become too concerned with their own personal fulfillment. Critics fear that the widespread emphasis on self-fulfillment is destroying traditional community ties that are necessary for active citizenship and the sacrifices that may accompany it. Calls to reestablish “a sense of community” continue to resound in academic criticism, political leaders’ rhetoric, and everyday talk about what is wrong with contemporary US culture.<sup>1</sup>

This book addresses the complaint about self-fulfillment and political commitment by exploring how different environmental activists practice their commitments to activism. Critics of the self-fulfillment ethos would not question that people can and do enter the political arena to win attention for their personal needs. The question is whether the self-fulfillment ethos necessarily detracts from a public-spirited politics, a politics that aims to secure a common, public good such as a safer environment for a wide community of citizens. Critics of modern US culture have often assumed that it takes certain kinds of communal bonds between people to nurture public-spirited commitments: they have advocated the kinds of ties that Americans in the past developed in local or perhaps national communities with shared civic or religious traditions that obligated community members to one another. People who grow up within such ties would find it easier, more natural to commit themselves to the public good than those who don’t. These critics argue that the self-fulfillment ethos has weakened these communal ties. Modern society needs to reestablish the kind of community that will produce citizens

with a sense of public obligation who stand up for standards and work for the common good.

Committed citizens have not completely disappeared, and some do belong to communities whose members share traditions and a sense of communal belonging. A good example is Mrs. Davis of Hillviewers Against Toxics.<sup>2</sup> Toxic hazards from industrial plants ringing Hillview menaced largely low-income neighborhoods like Mrs. Davis' with the threat – occasionally realized – of a toxic fire or a slow, poisonous leak. Mrs. Davis did not, however, join her toxics group out of simple self-interest: she did not express concern about her neighborhood property values, and had so far escaped the chronic health problems that plagued some Hillview residents. Davis was new to grassroots activism, and looking for an organization to join when she attended her first Hillviewers Against Toxics (HAT) meeting. Conversations with her neighbors and the HAT staffperson made the anti-toxics struggle compelling to her.

An African-American woman in her forties, Mrs. Davis drew on communal traditions, a sense of belonging to the black Hillview community and to a broader community of African-American Christians, when she “went public” as an activist. When she ran for city council three years after joining HAT, several of her endorsement speakers, including her pastor and a member of a religious broadcasters association, spoke at length about her virtues as a Christian woman. Mrs. Davis did not often articulate a religious basis for her activism, and she did not always define her work as service to a specifically black community; she did not need to. She could take for granted a local moral universe of Christian charity and African-American communal service in which public-spirited good deeds made sense, were worthwhile. Of course, her community did not always live up to the standards its spokespersons set for it. HAT's staffperson asserted several times that his organization did what local churches should have been doing, had they not been worried about endangering the occasional economic or political support they received from Petrox, Hillview's largest taxpayer and a major target of HAT's anti-toxics efforts. Neither did Mrs. Davis' community-minded dedication keep her from eventually voicing dissatisfactions with the level of individual involvement that the HAT leadership allowed for members. The point is that Mrs. Davis lived within the kind of community ties that many critics of American individualism see as essential for public-spirited commitment, and threatened by the widespread quest for personal fulfillment.

Compare Carl of the Ridge Greens, an activist organization based about a half hour's drive from Hillview. Carl, like Mrs. Davis, had little experience with activism before getting involved with his organization. He had thought seriously about environmental and political issues, though, to the point of quitting his well-paying job in genetic engineering because of qualms about its moral and political implications. Carl followed political issues in the news with a passion and did not like most of what he learned. He figured, in fact, that conventional electoral politics would probably never raise the fundamental questions about corporate interests and environmental priorities that he found at the root of so much policy-making. The movement organizations he was familiar with went about "putting out fires" with single-issue political campaigns. He envisioned a popular movement that would publicize the fundamental questions about environmental priorities and social justice that smoldered behind any single issue. He wanted to be part of a movement that would let ordinary citizens voice alternatives to the usual answers given by big interests and single-issue agitators. He became more and more involved in community educating and occasional protests with the small US Green movement in hopes that it would provide one of those alternative voices, and was one of the key organizers in the successful effort to get the fledgling California Green Party on to the ballot in 1991.

Carl did not tap into the kinds of communal tradition that sustained Mrs. Davis. A white man in his thirties, son of liberal-minded and non-churchgoing college instructors, he did not nurture his political commitments with the sense of obligation to a particular people, community, or faith that Mrs. Davis had. No ready answer came to mind when I asked Carl what made him committed to activism; he supposed, after mulling it over, that his parents' fight against a color bar at their college may have inspired him. Carl's practice of political commitment grew out of a very personalized sense of political responsibility. A man who quit his job over its larger political implications – and screened future opportunities with a critical, political imagination – was one who assumed that individuals could and should exercise a great deal of political commitment in their own lives. Grassroots politics for Carl meant a highly participatory politics in which individuals could realize themselves, actualize themselves, as personal agents of social change both in activist organizations and in everyday life. Carl would have agreed with a former member of the Ridge Greens who declared that he "couldn't just be a little bit involved." Activism had to be self-fulfilling. Carl did not ease himself into political involvement by talking to local neighbors or accepting the tutelage of an organization staffperson. He practiced a self-propelled sense of social responsibility.

The terms of complaint about self-fulfillment make it hard to understand someone like Carl. Cultural analysts and critics have often argued that a widespread emphasis on personal fulfillment is incompatible with public, political commitments. This study challenges that argument. Rather than always weakening commitment, the culture of self-fulfillment has made possible in some settings a form of public-spirited political commitment that Carl and many others like him have practiced in a personalized, self-expressive way. In other words, some people's individualism supports rather than sabotages their political commitments. A culture of self-fulfillment may well have encouraged some Americans to turn away from political engagement and toward apolitical self-exploration or consumerism. But a strain of this culture has also enabled some activists to practice political commitments that include a strong critique of selfishness and acquisitiveness. This study examines those activists' personalized form of commitment, and contrasts it with the more "community"-centered commitments that critics of individualism have upheld.

Critics are right that a culture of personal fulfillment has grown large, especially in the last thirty years. This culture is changing the very meaning and practice of "community" itself for many Americans. The trend represents a growing predicament for theories that find real political commitments only in traditional communities bound by a common faith or common sense of communal pride. This study shows why some Americans make personalized political commitments to begin with, why they cannot practice a more traditional kind of political responsibility that would emphasize community belonging and the communal will over individual expression. The personalized commitments we examine in this study both create and are sustained by a form of political community that emphasizes individual voice without sacrificing the common good for private needs.

My arguments arise out of a study of grassroots activism in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I draw on four case studies of citizen environmentalist organizations, along with other research material described at the end of this chapter. Since complaints about the emphasis on personal expressiveness and self-fulfillment counterpose this trend to commitments anchored in traditional communities, I chose my cases so that I could compare commitments practiced in different kinds of communities. I contrast the forms of "community" that a variety of white and mostly middle-class activists have invoked with the "community" underlying organizing drives in the largely African-American Hillview locale of Mrs. Davis. And I compare the results of my own field research

with studies of other recent social activists. There are limits on what kinds of public involvement and what kinds of political organizations the personalized kind of political commitment can sustain. Nevertheless, the study argues that a personalized form of political commitment underlies significant portions of numerous recent grassroots movements in the US.

Some academic observers would suggest that personalized politics is relatively new, a product of rapid social change and cultural ferment that ignited the movements of the 1960s and fueled movements thereafter. Other observers have been skeptical of claims to newness, pointing out the existence of seemingly similar movements from many decades ago. Vigorous debates about the putative “newness” of some recent movements have generated some useful – if limited – insights, a good deal of miscommunication, and relatively little attention to the question of commitment that is central in this study. We will examine and critique arguments about “newness” as they apply to grassroots environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter 6 will suggest that the culture of commitment examined in this study is no newcomer in the US political scene, but that its modern form developed and changed during the US civil rights movement and became routinized in the 1970s. The institutional context for grassroots activism has helped to shape a succession of movements whose cultures of commitment bear a strong family resemblance. But the empirical question of “newness” will be much less important than the theoretical question of whether we need some new conceptual tools for thinking about political commitment.

My goal at the outset is to bring theoretical questions about commitment in American culture to bear on observations from contemporary social movements. The resulting encounter will illuminate how, why, and with what consequences have some Americans turned a popular kind of individualism to public-spirited political action. The notion of activism for the broad public good may seem increasingly unrealistic or outdated for activists influenced by the self-fulfillment themes in the cultural mainstream, or the identity-based politics of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than dismiss the notion we should re-work it to reflect the role that self-fulfillment as a cultural trend can play in a public-spirited grassroots politics.

#### PERSONALISM AS A CULTURAL TREND

Individualism is not a single ethos in US society. Various individualisms have grown as the US itself has developed from a largely rural society to a highly industrialized one. Easiest to recognize, perhaps, is the instrumental or “utilitarian” individualism that drives individuals to save



money and build an affluent lifestyle through careful calculation. Anyone who shops carefully for bargains or strategizes for a successful career practices this kind of individualism in some situations. Through countless stories, teachings, and rules of thumb, popular culture tells Americans of the virtues, and sometimes the vices, of individual hard work and sacrifice in the service of “getting ahead.” But a somewhat different individualism concerns this study. It is the individualism women and men practice when they seek self-fulfillment and individualized expression, “growth” in personal development rather than growth in purely material well-being. This is the individualism that some critics have interpreted as excessive self-centeredness or “narcissism,” fearing its corrosive effects on commitment to the common good. I will call this kind of individualism “personalism.”

In this study, “personalism” refers to ways of speaking or acting which highlight a unique, personal self. Personalism supposes that one’s own individuality has inherent value, apart from one’s material or social achievements, no matter what connections to specific communities or institutions the individual maintains.<sup>3</sup> Personalism upholds a personal self that lives with ambivalence towards, and often in tension with, the institutional or communal standards that surround it (Taylor 1991, 1989; Bellah *et al.* 1985; MacIntyre 1981; Rieff 1966). But we should not reduce personalism to its most selfish or privatizing manifestations: personalism does not necessarily deny the existence of communities surrounding and shaping the self, but it accentuates an individualized relationship to any such communities. In contrast with a political identity that is defined by membership in a local, national, or global polity, a traditional religious identity that gets realized in a fellowship of believers,<sup>4</sup> or a communal identity that develops in relation to a specific community, the personal self gets developed by reflecting on individual biography, by establishing one’s own individuality amidst an array of cultural, religious, or political authorities.

It is easy to assume that personalism is simply human nature. Isn’t it just natural to want to develop one’s individuality? Hasn’t the main achievement of modern culture been a freeing of this natural, universal inclination from the constraints of tradition? It is easy for many Americans to counterpose “natural” or “real” selves to social “constraints” outside the self because of a popular version of personalism that is widespread in the US cultural mainstream. Cross-cultural study makes clear that not all cultures place the emphasis on personal development and personalized initiative that many Americans now take for granted.<sup>5</sup> Personalism is not a simple reflection of nature, but a way of defining

and presenting the self. Developing individuality depends on interaction. There are norms for “expressing oneself,” for being an individualist who can converse with others about personal feelings and experiences. Individuality does not pre-exist culture; it is a cultural accomplishment. Personalism develops in a kind of community in fact, one in which people create and practice norms of highly individualized expression.

Personalism echoes in many popular understandings of self and society. If we say that no individual, organization, or tradition can “tell us how to think” because each person has to “let his own intuitions guide him” or “find her own meaning in life” then we are speaking from the broad personalist tradition. When self-help books counsel readers to “look within” to find the resources to make decisions about changing relationships or changing jobs, they are counselling a personalist morality. If a political organization insists on making decisions through a unanimous consensus because it assumes that each member has a unique, inviolable contribution to make, then that organization is practicing a personalized politics. In all of these instances, the assumption is that each individual carries a unique moral will that is “authentic” (Taylor 1991) or real for that individual and needs to be respected. Personal authenticity – being true to an individual vision – becomes the standard by which to decide and prioritize.

Varied currents of personalism have long run through the US cultural mainstream. One of the most powerful is the quest for self-discovery through psychological therapy. One hundred years ago some Americans were trying to “get in touch with their feelings” by reading popular self-help books with messages strikingly similar to, if less technically articulated than, their contemporary counterparts. From the “mind cure” tracts of the late nineteenth century (Lears 1981) to the contemporary profusion of best-selling psychotherapies with specialized vocabularies (Lichterman 1992), Americans have continued reading about, talking about, and occasionally reacting against the search for self-realization.<sup>6</sup> We cannot equate personalism as a culture with the history of psychotherapy, nor with the popular psychologies that have so influenced everyday thinking in the US. But recent trends in therapeutic experiences represent one relatively well-documented indicator of a growing personalism in the US cultural mainstream during the last thirty years.

Figures on psychological help-seeking are a good source of evidence of personalism in the cultural mainstream because they suggest an increasing openness to focusing on the individual self, bracketing off communal ties. Psychologists and other mental health professionals often invite their clients to talk about personal experience and feelings in a

context removed from communal or institutional authorities. So becoming a psychologist's client often means, among other things, becoming an apprentice in the culture of personalism. According to one national survey (Kulka, Veroff, and Douvan 1979) between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s the proportion of all professional guidance-seeking individuals that sought out psychological guidance nearly doubled. The total number of Americans seeking psychologically oriented help – as distinguished from purely medical or religious guidance – tripled. These figures do not necessarily mean that Americans were any less mentally healthy by the mid-1970s than they were in the 1950s; the figures do imply that Americans became more willing to talk about private feelings and accept psychotherapeutic guidance.

Americans not only became more open to therapeutic guidance, but more oriented to self-fulfillment in their everyday lives. Between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, Americans had become increasingly likely to define well-being in terms of personal expression rather than in terms of success at complying with institutionalized roles (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka 1981). A review of national surveys (Yankelovich 1981: 4–5) claimed that a “preoccupation with self” and “search for self-fulfillment” – confined largely to campus youth in the 1960s – diffused through broader socio-economic strata. The increasing orientation to self-fulfillment reflects not only in survey responses but in talk about what matters in life. In his national study, Daniel Yankelovich (1981) heard a lot of interviewees phrase their life priorities in terms of self-realization. Robert Bellah and his research team (1985) heard a lot of this same kind of talk during the lengthy interviews and field research that went into their own study of moral reasoning several years later. Richard Flacks (1988) argued similarly that Americans after the 1960s became increasingly attuned to self-exploration and experimentation even as, and perhaps in part because, economic opportunity contracted.

Personalism has become a big enough part of the US mainstream that millions of Americans now participate in personal support groups (Wuthnow 1994). Roughly 75 million Americans belong to some kind of “small group” that “provides caring and support for its members” (Wuthnow 1994: 4). Nearly half of the group members in this small groups study described their groups as Bible study or prayer fellowships, while roughly one-eighth of group members belonged to therapeutic self-help groups such as 12-step groups focused on addictions. What is striking, though, is how personalism has suffused church-based as well as more specifically self-help small groups. The great majority of specifically religious group members characterized their groups as places for getting

“emotional support” and discussing personal problems (Wuthnow 1994: 66–69). They wanted not so much to fulfill religious *duty* as to make religious teachings *personally fulfilling*, to use them therapeutically.

This study of small groups highlights not only the continuing, widespread dedication to personal development in the 1990s but the fact that personal fulfillment is a *cultural* accomplishment, that it happens in group settings. Members of supportive groups must know how to talk about themselves, about their deeply personal feelings and experiences. As the small groups study relates, these groups have norms for talking and listening, and their members have expectations about what a good group will be like. Members of small supportive groups do not participate in raw individual spontaneity but in a culture, a learned, shared way of speaking and acting: the culture of personalism. Personalist ways of creating community have suffused not only religious and self-help but some grassroots political groups, too. Thirty years before Wuthnow’s small groups study, a critic warned that the US was undergoing a cultural revolution – a widespread turn to psychological thinking and corresponding abandonment of morality and public virtue rightly understood (Rieff 1966). We might well consider the ascendance of personalism in the US cultural mainstream as a quiet “revolution” in morality. We need to look more closely now at the complaints about this cultural revolution.

This study concerns itself mainly with two very broad positions on the question of personalism and public, political commitment, one of which I will call “communitarian,” and the other, “radical democratic.” Elements of each position overlap in specific works; some specific authors have spanned both positions in their writings.<sup>7</sup> I am highlighting the differences between the positions in order to chart the limits of the debate. The two positions suggest quite different ways of interpreting the evidence on the growth of personalist culture. The following review does not treat either set of views exhaustively, nor does it exhaust the positions in the debate. It focuses on a few particularly important arguments by sociologically oriented thinkers about relations between personalism and commitments to the public good.

## COMMUNITARIAN VIEWS

### The seesaw model

The complaint about self-fulfillment has often been inspired by an image of community that is quite different from the kind of community many

support group members seek. For scholarly critics of self-fulfillment, whom we can call communitarians, a “sense of community” does not mean the good personal feelings someone may get from joining an organization or moving to a friendly neighborhood. Rather, a sense of community is a sense of obligation. Communitarians focus less on what communities can do for individuals and more on what members do to maintain a community. Communities only cohere, according to this view, when their members practice traditional obligations – contained in religious teachings or notions of good citizenship for instance – that are larger than any individual. Members of such a community share a sense of producing their lives together, depending on one another as bearers of ongoing traditions that pre-exist and will outlast any individual member.

Certainly members of a community may be “personally” invested in it: their feelings are an important part of their sense of communal belonging. But to communitarians, the crucial feature of commitment is the interdependence, the sense of obligation to and contribution to a collective body, not the sense of personal empowerment or self-realization upon which one might act, “making a difference” as an individual. Communitarians fear that the kinds of community that make public-spirited, political commitment possible have increasingly been supplanted by communities based on lifestyle tastes more than a sense of obligation. These communities strike communitarians as weak bases for nurturing political commitments that have a broad public good at heart. If people join a community in order to discover or express their individuality, then how can they develop broad horizons, dedication to shared goods and shared struggles?

Communitarian scholars and critics have often argued that communities formed out of a convergence of personal preferences will amount only to a collection of individuals pursuing private ends, not a broad public good. Their members will only practice personal gratification, not political virtue. The basic communitarian argument imagines public, political commitment and individuality in terms of a seesaw: as self-expression and private life become more important they pull down morality, political dedication, and public virtue. This seesaw model was perhaps articulated most simply and starkly by culture scholar Philip Rieff, who feared that with the rising personalism in the culture, moral obligation would become simply another “personal experience” that one could take or leave, experimenting with it as with any other personal experience. Personalism would corrode any sense of obligation that emanates from outside the self. Rieff sadly envisioned Americans living lives consisting of one personal experience after another, “freed from communal purpose” (Rieff 1966: 22).

The image of a seesaw serves to highlight two basic features of communitarian thinking about commitment to the common good. One is that communitarians have assumed dichotomous distinctions between the communal and the individual when they conceive how good commitments work. Serious commitments infringe on individual freedom in the interests of some broader good. The image is that people are torn between personal gratification and service to communities, and must balance the two in some way. We choose between private interests or the broad public good, individuality or shared bonds. Communitarians do not all simply rail against private interests and personal needs as if these would or should disappear. As a recent manifesto of communitarianism puts it, Americans need to institute more mutual obligation into the structure of everyday life to counterbalance the dedication to self-interest and self-expression – the “me-istic forces” – already strong in the culture (Etzioni 1993: 26). The image is of a need for better balance, an adjustment of the seesaw.

The other important aspect of the metaphorical seesaw is its tilt: in most communitarian accounts the seesaw of commitment in the US has tilted historically toward the “personal” and away from the public, political, or communal. Communitarian writer Christopher Lasch, for instance, flatly contended in 1979 that “after the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations” (Lasch 1979: 29). Even broader historical claims framed Lasch’s account of the rise of personalism in US culture: as large bureaucracies and an intrusive welfare state grew during the twentieth century, experts and state bureaucrats took over many of the functions the traditional family once performed, but they neglected to carry on the family’s role in teaching morality. Bureaucratic human service agencies ended up encouraging a self-indulgent, dependent population, a malleable clientele of big children who, having had selfish needs met, would not challenge the bureaucratic powers that be. An older morality of self-sacrifice, hard work, and communal effort declined, public standards decayed, and personalism took their place – a culture that Lasch judged harshly as self-centered, or “narcissistic.” A seesaw of moral decline and individual efflorescence characterizes other communitarian accounts too. Theorist and critic Daniel Bell (1976), for instance, criticized an individualistic “fun morality,” encouraged by the rise of mass consumption in the 1920s. “By the 1950s, American culture had become primarily hedonistic, concerned with play, fun, display, pleasure” – or in other words, with personal exploration and expression (Bell 1976: 70). During a decades-long tilt of the seesaw, “traditional morality was replaced by psychology” (Bell 1976: 72).

Seesaw thinking colors the kinds of solutions communitarians offer for the perceived weak state of commitment. Communitarian arguments tend to invoke a time when the seesaw “riders” sat in different positions relative to one another, when communities of faith, ethnicity, or political membership were more numerous, and more people participated in the kinds of ties that supported anti-toxics activist Mrs. Davis. While communitarian arguments are not all simply stuck in “golden age” reverie, their rhetoric often compares the present unfavorably with some imagined past. Rieff saw a communal past as nearly irretrievable and resigned himself to sometimes bitter criticism of a world blinded by an inward-focused psychological imagination. Lasch advocated “communities of competence” to take back some of the power and authority of professional experts, and invoked “localism” as a basis for resisting the suffocating grip of a therapeutic, bureaucratic sort of Big Brother. Bell called for a “great instauration,” a kind of moral reawakening that would inspire Americans to limit their profane self-indulgence and personal exploration and reestablish commitments to the public good.

The terms of debate limit the insights these accounts can offer. An argument that imagines public-spirited political commitment on a seesaw with personalism will have to see personalism as a counterweight at best, or as is more often the case, a looming threat at worst. From the start, accounts such as those of Rieff, Lasch, and Bell disallow the possibility that personalism plays some positive role in political commitment. Painting cultural trends with the broadest of strokes, these accounts suggest that a self-centered, hedonistic personalism has nearly taken over the culture. They make it easy to dismiss Carl of the Ridge Greens as morally adrift, and difficult to account for people such as Mrs. Davis of HAT at all. Even if we sympathize with concerns about community and political commitment, critiques such as Lasch’s make it too easy to conclude in a general way that “things are bad” from the communal standpoint, and getting worse at an increasingly rapid rate. By fiat, these critiques cut short the inquiry into personalism and its political consequences.

### **Developments within the communitarian imagination**

Some studies have gotten beyond broad, highly general critiques of moral deterioration while still strongly indebted to a communitarian imagination. They have asked how and to what degree communitarian sentiments and individualism might coexist. In their much-cited study of individualism and commitment in the US, Bellah *et al.* (1985) found both