Is America Coming Apart?
Addressing Economic, Social, and Ideological Stratification in the United States

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Somehow he won.

The intelligentsia said it was not politically possible; economists mocked his heterodox economic rationality; fact-checkers exposed his myriad inconsistencies. The remarkably narcissistic real estate mogul and reality television throwback invited microscopic media scrutiny, further validating his lack of competency as a serious political figure and providing infinite fodder for sarcastic bloggers and late-night comedians.¹

Despite these normally politically suicidal characteristics, Donald Trump is now president-elect for the most powerful nation in the world, and in a few days he will take office.

As expected, the postelection reactions have been as noisy and extreme as Trump himself. “Not Our President” marches (some rather unruly) cropped up in cities all across the country. Several college campuses broke out in protest or simply shut down in mourning. Social media outlets became battlegrounds for hostility and opposition.

Even the otherwise-affable Garrison Keillor was reduced to snarling at Trump supporters. In a Washington Post piece depicting Trump crusaders as illiterate and uneducated, Keillor suggests that “Trumpers” never really expected their guy to win: “They wanted only to whoop and yell, boo at the H-word, wear profane T-shirts, maybe grab a crotch or two, jump in the RV with a couple of six-packs and go out and shoot some spotted owls.”² The imagery is clear—any Trump vote in opposition to the “liberal elite” (his
term) could only come from a barbaric, redneck buffoon. That is, America’s electorate is populated with imbeciles, and they are about to get what they deserve.

In spite of the conspicuous (and ubiquitous) nature of such commentary, sensible and reflective voices can still be found. Instead of fretting over the various apocalyptic scenarios that may occur under a Trump presidency, or deriding the supporters who turned out to “Make America Great Again,” many are attempting to discern the state of the American experiment. As Arthur Brooks has suggested, there are “deeper trends” occurring across America—trends largely ignored in the political forecasting that all but promised we would awake November 9 to a Hillary Clinton presidency and GOP-controlled House (thus promising four more years of status-quo government, with ongoing executive/legislative strife between Democrats and Republicans).³

Eminent social scientists have described these trends in vivid details. In 2012, Charles Murray characterized the isolation of elites from everyone else, as the rising wealth of the top 20 percent of our socioeconomic spectrum concentrated themselves in exclusive suburbs or gentrified neighborhoods. Insights from Murray’s Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010 are prescient: “The new isolation involves spatial, economic, educational, cultural, and, to some degree, political isolation. This growing isolation has been accompanied by growing ignorance about the country over which our elites have so much power.”⁴

Further illuminating the social effects of life in the upper and lower classes was Robert Putnam’s 2015 book Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis, which examined the personal, familial, and employment lives of those in the top and bottom strata of our social order.⁵

Four years after the publication of Coming Apart, in the wake of an acrimonious election, Murray’s diagnosis of an electorate split between elite and nonelite classes continues to find confirmation in various postelection reflection pieces. “There are many reasons for our troubles,” writes Jill Lepore in a New Yorker article titled “Aftermath.” “But the deepest reason is inequality: the forms of
political, cultural, and economic polarization that have been wid-
kening, not narrowing, for decades.”

President Barack Obama spoke of a “crude sort of national-
ism” built around distinctions of “us and them.” Peggy Noonan
characterized the election as a revolt of the “unprotected” against
“protected and detached elites.” Brooks describes the division as a
“dignity deficit”—a bifurcated nation of winners and losers where
the latter are bluntly alerted to their obsolescence: “We don’t need
you anymore.”

To summarize, we are a fractured nation with a socially seg-
mented populace. Americans have sorted themselves into homoge-
nous enclaves across race, income, education, age, and partisanship.
In one sense, this is natural. Homogeneity often serves as the social
lubricant for belonging and affiliation among individuals. Robert
Putnam writes: “For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to
our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends.”
That is, meaningful and authentic relationships are likely to occur
more naturally among individuals who share similar characteristics
(i.e., homophily—“love of the same”).

However understandable such sorting processes may be, we
believe our various socially segmented arrangements threaten
our future in both moral and practical terms. Though we cannot
be exhaustive here, our aim in this short essay is to consider this
threat and suggest some directions for reimagining an approach
to our national project—“a civic culture . . . widely shared among
Americans”—that seems currently unavailable to our ideologi-
cally oriented political parties.

The Effects of Segmentation

In using the term “segmentation,” we are simply acknowledging
the spatial and ideological distance among our citizens across a
host of social, political, and economic attributes. Murray tren-
chantly captures this distance in his sketch of life in upper-class
Belmont versus working-class Fishtown. Putnam’s book overflows
with similar vignettes of family lives across such vastly different
socioeconomic settings. But what, specifically, is objectionable about social segmentation in the long run?

In terms of the practical effects of segmentation, scholars have identified a broad range of social and economic ills associated with social isolation and separation. But the problem is hardly limited to physical proximity. Indeed, groups can occupy a similar space yet still be worlds apart in their conceptions of reality, worldviews, values, and pursuits.

Ideological segmentation (politically, culturally) has been said to lead to more extreme views and less empathy among members of society. In other words, our beliefs matter for the way we live. And our ability to self-select into neighborhoods, schools, work environments, recreational networks, media outlets, and so forth only reinforces this ideological gap and blunts our “democratic competencies.”

This last point, in particular, deserves attention. The “in-group” loyalty associated with a segmented enclave of like-minded participants is at greater risk of social condescension, misunderstanding, or fear against the “out-group” other. Robert Putnam warns of the potential for conflict among homogeneous groups when only “bonding capital” (affiliation with others like me) and not “bridging capital” (affiliation with others unlike me) is the norm: “a society that has only bonding social capital risks looking like Bosnia or Belfast.”

Indeed, such social bridges are “uniquely important in social life.” Xavier De Souza Briggs writes:

Bridging ties are particularly crucial where they help bind diverse societies, expanding social and civic identities, opening up insular communities of interest, containing ethnic and other intergroup conflicts, and reducing status inequalities, for example, by widening access to valuable information and endorsements.

The issue, says Putnam, is that if we ignore the necessity of having “bridging” relationships in our day-to-day lives, then “our efforts to reinvigorate community in America may simply lead to a more
divided society.” Much can be written regarding the perils of a divided society, but suffice to say that it is not hospitable to American ideals of progress, prosperity, and the common good. The success of our efforts to close the chasm evident in our physical and ideological proximity has significant implications for our future.

**Addressing Segmentation: Left and Right**

As we suggested above, segmentation, at least as we have defined it, is a natural outworking of a liberal democratic arrangement, in which individuals and families make sensible decisions for themselves about the neighborhoods, schools, churches, and clubs with which they wish to identify. Although a seemingly ubiquitous collection of icons, symbols, and language prompts us to celebrate diversity in the United States, our populace has increasingly sorted itself into relatively homogeneous enclaves.

This is perhaps less of a contradiction than it seems. Indeed, the very notion of liberalism does not identify an overriding good around which members are morally impelled to organize. Rather, in celebrating a plurality of values and beliefs, “Liberals typically invoke higher-order principles (such as neutrality or impartiality) that are intended to transcend dis-agreement on specific policies.” This is a nod to freedom, but freedom of a particular sort, in which individuals are at liberty to pursue their own conceptions of good so long as they are not prohibitive of others in their pursuit of good. “Live and let live,” we say.

So we are on the horns of a dilemma. Several decades of socioeconomic-sorting decisions ordained by liberal philosophy have led to an increasingly segmented society. Yet the evidence is strong that such segmentation is harmful to us as a people and indicates further fraying of the body politic.

At present, our political elites have few constructive suggestions about how to reduce segmentation. Our liberal left, being naturally disposed toward principles of neutrality and impartiality, typically proposes integrating communities from above, so that less fortunate citizens may reasonably fulfill their pursuit of good alongside
their better-off peers. To the extent that spatial segmentation is associated with an allotment of social ills and disadvantages—and thus an affront to equality—many political liberals in the US advocate for redistributing otherwise-impoverished households into nonpoverty areas and neighborhoods. This has been referred to as spatial integration or “mixing.”

Such solutions have been met with an abundance of criticism related to their modest effectiveness in reducing poverty (particularly given the cost to physically move individuals and families) and inspiring a sense of belonging. Our efforts toward engineered mixing over the past 40 years have proved ineffective to create the enhanced standard of living, diversity, and solidarity these programs have sought. To summarize, liberal ideology and its associated policy prescriptions appear impoverished when it comes to closing the gap in a coming-apart era.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether dimensions of conservative ideology, in its present form, rise above this impoverishment. Conservatives also invoke higher-order principles such as neutrality or impartiality—particularly in instances when state paternalism is deemed to wrongly infringe on individual freedom.

To be clear, the notion of freedom is invoked by both conservatives and liberals, as “an empty stomach [is] not conducive to freedom.” Yet to the extent that the conservative vision of unencumbered human activity is solely defined by the absence of government action or other authoritative constraints (i.e., social norms, religious injunctions, etc.), a comparably limited conception of freedom is implied, where liberty is merely the occasion to do as one please. Here, freedom becomes nothing more than a euphemism for autonomy.

This conception of freedom (unfettered autonomy) is often present in the conservative defense of free markets. Conservatives rightly recognize that market structures provide incentive schemes that efficiently coordinate productive behaviors, provide gains through trade, stimulate innovation, and yield economic growth. Furthermore, conservatives recognize that markets are unparalleled in mobilizing productive forces and distributing scarce resources.
Beyond this, however, market apologists on the right tend to point to the freedom that markets afford as ipso facto substantiation for their existence. As Debra Satz writes, markets can be instruments for promoting freedom as they develop our capacities to choose: “markets allow people to make their own judgments about what they want to buy or sell, how hard they want to work, how much they want to save, what they value and how they value it, and what they wish to consume.”

At face value, this seems entirely appropriate. However, this conception smuggles in a notion of freedom that makes value a subjective concept, a preference. As one ancient expression puts it: *suum cuique pulchrum est*—“to each his own is beautiful.” Put differently, under this paradigm, welfare (literally, the “condition of being or doing well”) is directly related to giving me what I want.

To summarize, although conservatism as a philosophy often conceptualizes citizens in thickly constituted terms, they are not immune from potentially perpetuating what Robert and Edward Skidelsky call the liberty of indifference—“[where] all things are possible and nothing matters.” Allowing agents to choose their values, they write, is one symptom of this confusion. Choice does not create value; rather, “choice responds to value.”

Although liberals and conservatives, by category, exist on opposite sides of the political spectrum, they share a conception of freedom that has more commonalities than differences. “Both sides,” writes Harvard’s Michael Sandel, “assume that freedom consists in the capacity of people to choose their own ends.”

Why does this matter? This assumption is prohibitive of mobilizing our otherwise-segmented social landscape toward a coherent suite of virtues worthy of our pursuit and necessarily antecedent to the American civic vision of self-governance (where early framers saw liberty and self-governance as intricately linked to the preservation and exercise of public virtue).

The aforementioned expressions of freedom, and their thinly constituted nature, fail to conceptualize citizens as relationally constituted members who realize their fulfillment in others. Our freedom, in a more traditional sense, functions out of commonality,
not in spite of it. Indeed, the notion of a “common good” is both relational and moral in its makeup. Sandel writes:

But to deliberate well about the common good requires more than the capacity to choose one’s ends and to respect others’ right to do the same. It requires a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake.33

Our current political atmosphere does not effectively inspire or encourage this knowledge and sense of belonging. Indeed, it is arguably impotent to do so.

Not only do our political ideologies have insufficient resources to combat social segmentation, but our political parties reflect the same weakness. As Yuval Levin writes in *Fractured Republic*, both Democrats and Republicans look backward to solutions and ideologies of previous eras—the Democrats to the strong union era of the ’50s and ’60s and the Republicans to the tax-cutting Reagan years of the 1980s—although the cultural and economic conditions in the country are radically different today and thus demand alternative solutions to contemporary and future problems, including segmentation.34

**Coming Together and Moving Forward**

We believe a new approach toward segmentation is necessary—one that emphasizes certain civic attributes that are required to navigate the complexities of our social, political, and economic landscape in the coming years and cultivate the sense of belonging needed to come together and “deliberate well about the common good.”35 Furthermore, the task of cultivating civic attributes meant to address a coming-apart age invites—indeed requires—a suite of moral and pragmatic solutions.

Morally speaking, one such attribute relates to our *posture*, or our attitude toward others. If we are not careful, our beliefs and values can quickly ossify into dogmatism, in which we become deaf to the stories of those around us. Moreover, dogmatic expressions
that fuel “us and them” arrangements are not simply a function of intellect or action—but tend to originate from our attitude.

The right posture toward others, however different they may be from us, is a necessary antecedent to right practice. Put differently, Arthur Brooks, borrowing from the Dalai Lama, describes it as “warm-heartedness.” Such a conception begins with the belief that others are a source of meaning and fulfillment, not a threat or impediment. Moreover, this perspective rightly recognizes that a significant dimension of our participation in a free democracy is bound up in, not independent of, other Americans and their pursuit of a satisfying life (what Murray calls “the heart of the American community”).

Another moral attribute necessary for cultivating a sense of belonging in a coming-apart age is our parlance, or the common well of principled language that all can draw from. “I doubt people behave worse than before,” writes David Brooks, “but we are less articulate about the inner life.” Brooks is critical of a public square deprived of moral conversation, which leads to a world where people who hunger for meaning “don’t know the right questions to ask, the right vocabulary to use, the right place to look or even if there are ultimate answers at all.”

Murray writes: “If we ask what are the domains through which human beings achieve deep satisfactions in life—achieve happiness—the answer is that there are just four: family, vocation, community, and faith.” Such virtues are values, and values compete in the marketplace of ideas. That is, they must be substantiated, articulated.

Thus, a significant dimension of decreasing ideological segmentation is the language we use to mobilize human activity and pursuits. Some of our greatest strides as a nation have followed from a well-articulated and compelling moral vision.

Finally, in more pragmatic terms, a sense of belonging requires our physical presence, or proximity, in the lives of others. In other words, it is important to think carefully about the public or shared spaces that best lubricate the pathway to social engagement.
Robert Putnam, Lewis Feldstein, and Donald Cohen write: “Again and again, we find that one key to creating social capital is to build in redundancy of contact.” They continue: “Common spaces for commonplace encounters are prerequisites for common conversations and common debate. Furthermore, networks that intersect and circles that overlap reinforce a sense of reciprocal obligation and extend the boundaries of empathy.”41 This speaks to the construction of local amenities and shared spaces where common interaction and interests can occur. Parks, community centers, local newspapers, sports, and other shared venues provide “redundant multi-stranded” encounters.42 Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen suggest that “webs of encounter” often need to be reweaved, and this can take place through “innovative uses of technology, creative urban and regional planning, and political will.”43

It is important to point out, as well, that the aforementioned virtues of posture and parlance (our attitude toward others and the common moral vocabulary we draw from) can be animated and indeed facilitated by our engagement of one another within these common spaces. This is consistent with the idea of “contact theory,” which asserts that healthy interaction with people from other groups can reduce prejudice and fears toward those different than us.44 Contact theory or the “contact hypothesis” posits that “diversity fosters interethnic tolerance and social solidarity.”45

Our relationships moderate our ideas, beliefs, and values, and in a mutually causal manner, our ideas, beliefs, and values can also moderate and reinforce our relationships. As Emmanuel Levinas argues in Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, our moral sensibilities become most acute in the presence of others.46

These attributes differ in many ways, but all draw on a thick conception of freedom (not simply freedom to do what I please, but freedom to do what I ought). This conception also recognizes the moral bonds and common fate we share with others (even those different than us), and it inspires and promotes arrangements where all can flourish. Murray writes: “Age-old human wisdom has understood that a life well lived requires engagement with those around us.”47
In sum, our appeal is to a new governing philosophy that encourages—indeed incentivizes—the creation of neighborhoods and communities that promote posture, parlance, and proximity. Moreover, we humbly suggest that such conditions offer an appropriate starting point for rebuilding our economy and social order, especially in the rural and urban areas that have been emptied out by economic changes over the past four to five decades.

As noted, our current elites appear less than capable of casting a vision for a coming-together future in a coming-apart age. Pro-government liberals and avid redistributionists tend to advocate for vast, federal, one-size-fits-all education and unemployment/reemployment programs that typically will not address concerns of distressed American communities. Similarly, antigovernment conservatives who appeal solely to market outcomes without considering the conditions, values, and virtues that presuppose market activity will also fall short in addressing these concerns.

We would like to see a vision emerge that draws on the efficacy of free market capitalism accompanied by the intentional pursuit of an integrated society, which—in Tocquevillian fashion—can be realized through churches, civic groups, and other mediating institutions being nudged, coordinated, and encouraged through governmental and nongovernmental entities.

Conclusion

In the spirit of the Values & Capitalism project, we seek to counteract segmentation by first appealing to what we believe are necessary civic attributes for a coming-apart age. Our most recent election cycle is merely a symptom (or a signal) of deeper trends, not their cause, and our tendency to entrench into an “us and them” mentality would be a mistake. Our present circumstances call for us to close our proximate and ideological gap, articulate a thickly constituted expression of freedom, and cultivate the civic attributes that would animate networks of social intercourse.

Of course, such bridging can be complicated and complex. Textured. Yet in Murray’s judgment, this is our most rewarding
arrangement. “It can be pleasant to lead a glossy life, but it is ultimately more rewarding—and more fun—to lead a textured life, and to be in the midst of others who are leading textured lives.”

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**Notes**


11. Ibid., 274.

12. Murray, Coming Apart, 12.

13. We deliberately chose to use the word “segmentation” over “segregation” since the latter expression is freighted with a variety of images, ideas, and experiences that extend beyond the boundaries of our subject area.

14. For example, in terms of race and income, residential segmentation has been criticized for perpetuating an “underclass” in which low- to moderate-income households or racial minorities are more likely to live in dilapidated living structures, experience lower housing returns, receive inferior education, and suffer isolation from resource networks that would otherwise influence job opportunities (“spatial mismatch”). Related, scholars have speculated about the presence of “neighborhood effects”—or the causal effect of a neighborhood on the social, economic, and health outcomes of its inhabitants.


On a more ominous note, Trevor Noah, who grew up in apartheid South Africa, warns that there are costs beyond “the death of progress” for divided societies: “Divided people are easier to rule. That was, after all, the whole point of apartheid.” See Trevor Noah, “Trevor Noah: Let’s Not Be Divided. Divided People Are Easier to Rule.,” New York Times, December 5, 2016, http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/opinion/trevor-noah-lets-not-be-divided-divided-people-are-easier-to-rule.html.


Of course, such an expression has its own unique application in contemporary political liberalism. That said, it still shares a significant philosophical lineage to classical liberalism.

For example, the famous 20th-century liberal philosopher John Rawls advocated for the necessity of primary social goods such as rights, liberties, opportunities, and wealth—goods that everyone wants regardless of whatever else they want (what has been called a “thin” conception of the good).


Over the past 40 years, there have been four major overtures toward residential mixing (both in terms of race and income): the Gatreaux dispersal program, the Moving to Opportunity dispersal project (MTO), the HOPE VI Initiative, and the Mount Laurel land usage legislation.

David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 189.


A particularly strident expression of unfettered freedom in a marketplace context comes from Jason Brennan and Peter Jaworski in their
2015 book *Markets Without Limits*. From private acts such as sex to political acts of voting—if something can be done for free, they write, then it can be done for money. (Note, though, that Brennan and Jaworski would likely not self-identify as “conservative.”) As mentioned, this risks snuffing out the moral significance of our preferences, making choice its own value (as opposed to judging the value of a choice based on the nature of what is chosen). Consistent with this suggestion is a comment from economist Jodi Beggs. Responding to the suggestion that it is important to value goods in an appropriate way, she writes, “Who in the hell are you to tell people what they ‘should’ be valuing? Some economists may try to account for tastes, but none of us are presumptuous enough to tell anyone what their tastes should be.” See Jason Brennan and Peter M. Jaworski, *Markets Without Limits: Moral Virtues and Commercial Interests* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); and J. Beggs, “My Imagined Yet Realistic Debate Between Michael Sandel and the Economics World,” Economists Do It with Models, November 24, 2012, http://www.economistsdoitwithmodels.com/2012/11/24/my-imagined-yet-realistic-debate-between-michael-sandel-and-the-economics-world/.


31. Ibid.


33. Ibid.


35. While far from exhaustive, and recognizing that a variety of other attributes could be incorporated, these are the attributes we wanted to emphasize.


39. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 292.
43. Ibid., 294.
47. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 310.
48. Ibid.