VOLUME 11 ISSUE 4

The International Journal of

Civic, Political, and Community Studies

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An Historical Approach to Understanding a Troublesome Dichotomy

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COMMON GROUND

THEHUMANITIES.COM

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CIVIC, POLITICAL, AND COMMUNITY STUDIES
www.thehumanities.com

First published in 2014 in Champaign, Illinois, USA
by Common Ground Publishing LLC
www.commongroundpublishing.com

ISSN 2327-0047

The International Journal of Civic, Political, and Community Studies is peer-reviewed, supported by rigorous processes of criterion-referenced article ranking and qualitative commentary, ensuring that only intellectual work of the greatest substance and highest significance is published.

Puritan Origins of the American Left and Right: An Historical Approach to Understanding a Troublesome Dichotomy

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Abstract: Economists and American Studies scholars have suggested that in the early Puritan community, the seemingly opposing mind sets of self-interest and the common good were not at all oppositional, but rather co-existed comfortably. We show how this perspective emerged from the dominant religious belief that social commitment was necessary for individual salvation—fostering a Puritan self-interest and social obligation merger that advanced both individual and community successes. By the early eighteenth century, the religious strands of the self-interest/common good dialectical knot had unraveled in what had become a more secularized, more political American heart. Today, a clear division of these two poles is reflected in "two radically different visions for America"—one focused on the liberties of individual self-interest and the other on social responsibility. A once polarized yet cohesive collective consciousness appears today as a collective consciousness bipolarized to the point of dysfunction. Oddly enough, those who most insistently emphasize the sovereignty of individualism often tap religious (sometimes even Puritan) references, missing the point that it was religion that insisted upon and ensured the integration of both individual interest and communal commitment.

Keywords: Government, Community, Identities

Probably, the most persistent *perceived* difference between capitalism and socialism is that capitalism privileges individual development while socialism privileges the development of society as a whole. This perception has been (and continues to be) interpreted, articulated, and politicized in surprisingly various ways, and the clashes between capitalist and socialist ideologies have backed us into some very tight corners. Although we are now managing to get along a little better on a global scale, in many countries (including and exemplified by the United States), factions who favor one or the other of these ideologies refuse to concede that "the other" has any merit whatsoever. The individualist/"socialist" contrast conceived in early American culture--repurposed and relabeled--is now being realized in United States politics in some very unfortunate ways.

The evolution of early Puritan and Separatist views on individualism and the common good serve as a logical starting place from which to examine our social and political structures and policies. Doing so may shed light on the escalating controversies within a congress and a populace split by their convictions that one of these contrasting paradigms is superior to the other.

Well before the labels of capitalism and socialism identified differences between individualism and the common good, both principles were deeply engrained and highly significant in seventeenth-century Puritan thought. In his book *Errand into the Wilderness*, Perry Miller describes how in the Puritans' understanding, self-interest *and* commitment to the common good were not at odds, but rather two important precepts linked tightly together under their dominant religious ideology: there was a "strong element of individualism in the Puritan creed; [in that] every man had to work out his own salvation, each soul had to face his maker alone. [. . .] At the same time," Miller adds, "the Puritan philosophy demanded that in society all men, at least all regenerate men, be marshaled into one united array."[1] [2]

[1] This inner dialectic seems analogous to the kind of capitalist "balance" Max Weber describes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (18): what, according to Weber, for the capitalist amounts to balances between projection and actual profit, for the Puritan amounted to a balance between the spiritual, social, and financial investment in a new England theocracy, along with the projected success of the community that will ultimately sustain it.
[2] Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 143.

Economist Donald Frey writes that a commonly held contemporary view of the Puritan self-interest/common good dichotomy is that the Puritans *privileged* individualism. But, he says, that idea is wrong; it was rather the case that the Puritan moralists were habitually suspicious of the individualist--mainly because they feared "the tendency of self-interest to undercut the common good."[3] Frey says that the Puritans "encourage[d] a degree of self-interest," but only the degree that would be "inimical to the good of organizations and society"; the Puritan focus on establishing the "moral limits" of self-interest indicates that their ethic "was far more nuanced and balanced than [is] conventionally portrayed."[4]

Frey is not alone in claiming that the individual Puritan citizen was not representative of *one or the other side* of a self-interest/common good dichotomy, but was instead a person who balanced these two poles comfortably within the context of a singular religious perspective. The emphasis on unity, found in scriptures describing the church as One in the body of Christ, emerges in John Winthrop's analogy that likens a ligament to a unified society: "all in eache other knit together by this bond of love [. . .] knit together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, we must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities."[5] The phrase "abridge our selves" is telling, as it signifies the weight of a citizen's responsibility to diminish superfluities, both in amount and duration. Winthrop is assuring his fellow Congregationalists that limiting the number of their possessions for the sake of others in no way lessens their societal standing--and certainly not their spiritual standing. In fact, such a practice would be likely to *improve* their spiritual standing.[6]

The revered balance of self and community within its religious context is clearly meant to be seen as a model and an example. In one of his most famous sermons, Winthrop's reference to the city on the hill suggests that the community "Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us"[7]. For Winthrop, the vocation, the calling, and the success of the New England experiment depended entirely on the interconnected dependency of its individual members; a citizen's public image should be a model of Christian charity (the sermon's title), and was also a matter of celestial consequence. In this same sermon, Winthrop crystallizes the bond between self-interest and commitment to the common good into the nutshell of the Golden Rule: "every man [should] afford his help to another in every want or distresse" such that "hee performe this out of the same affeccion, which makes him carefull of his own goode."[8] Here again is the overarching ideological principle that Puritan self-determination, individual prosperity, and salvation are spiritually, and thus necessarily, tied to taking care of the needs of others.

To a Puritan mind, the allusion to the Golden Rule would also be an allusion to the New Testament words of Christ, "in as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it to me."[9] The ultimatum embedded throughout this section of Matthew would not have been lost either on Puritan Congregationalists or on participating non-members: life or damnation, according to the Puritan Bible, rested upon the individual's response to the needs of others: "in as much as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go into everlasting pain, and the righteous into life eternal."[10] As political scientist

[3] Donald Frey, "Individualistic Economic Values and Self-Interest: The Problem in the Puritan Ethic," *Journal of Business Ethics* 17.14 (1998), 1573.
[4] Ibid, 1573.
[5] John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" in Heath Anthology of American Literature, Vol. A, eds. Paul Lauter et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 315 - 316.
[6] This according to James Calvin Davis's analysis of the influential British Puritan Richard Baxter's theology. James Calvin Davis, "Pardoning Puritanism: Community, Character, and Forgiveness in the Work of Richard Baxter," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 29. 2 (2001), 283-306.
[7] Winthrop, 317.
[8] Ibid, 310.
[9] Matt. 25:40 (Geneva Bible).
[10] Matt. 25: 45-46 (Geneva Bible).

Joshua Miller has put it, "The Puritan concern with the criteria for admission to community membership emerged largely from their conception of the public realm as a cause whose success required the active engagement of the citizens."[11] In other words, the religious and social imperative prescribed in the book of Matthew was the foundation of the Puritan political agenda.

The view that self-interested individualism was a threat to the Puritan community did not include the belief that all citizens were or should be across-the-board "equal." Equal division of food and clothing, an experiment implemented despite Winthrop's emphasis on the benefits of a stratified society, had, within a few short years, proved unworkable. Winthrop opens "A Model of Christian Charity" by recognizing differences among the settling Puritans: "in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjeccion." He noted, however, that God shows those differences "for the preservacion and good of the whole."[12] Secondly, Winthrop says, the social arrangement of wealth and power provides a balance in the community directed at restraining the wicked so that while the "poore and dispised" shall not "rise upp against the riche and mighty," neither shall the "riche and mighty [. . .] eate up the poore."[13] Winthrop then offers a third rationale for a stratified community: "That every man might have need of the other, and from hence they might be knit more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affeccion [. . .]"[14] [15]

William Bradford's history *Of Plymouth Plantation* notes that the name the New England Puritans and Separatists gave to this interconnected dependency was "covenant." Seeing itself as the typological fulfillment of the Old Testament Hebrew exile into the wilderness, New England Puritanism functioned under a trinity of covenants, each distinct yet all bound together by their single religious cause: the invisible covenant of *Grace*, by which all the saints, present and past, are joined as a single church; the *church covenant* (the visible church which included the *social and political life* centered about the various settlements organized into congregations);[16] and the *civil covenant*, which included the physical enforcement and public advancement of whatever the churches desired. While the non-church citizens might have reason to resent the civil covenant, it was still the civil covenant that functioned to bind moral conscience to social responsibility. And, according to James Calvin Davis, the relationships that formed the Puritan understanding of a covenanted community began with the acknowledgement of human dependency, not only on divine mercy but also on our indebtedness both to and for the mercy of others.[17]

In sum then: the integrated self-interest/common good dialectic that inspired and drove the Puritans and Separatists rested, on one hand, on their desire for individual salvation and, on the other, on an ideal characterized by social conformity and selfless participation in the good of the community. These principles were welded together under an overarching Christian ideology.

There were certainly strong, even radical individualists in the early groups. And, Roger Williams's banishment to Rhode Island in 1635 (he was thirty-one at the time), helps us understand that Puritan individualism had more to do with obsessing about the state of one's soul

[11] Joshua Miller, "Direct Democracy and the Puritan Theory of Membership," *The Journal of Politics* 53.1 (1991): 71.
[12] Winthrop, 309.
[13] Ibid, 309.
[14] Ibid, 309.
[15] Earlier in the sermon Winthrop had clarified the urgency for the social bond: "There is noe body but consistes of partes and that which knits these partes together gives the body its perfeccion because it makes eache parte soe contiguous to other as thereby they doe mutually participate with eache other, both in strengthe and infirmity in pleasure and paine, to instance in the most perfect of all bodies [. . .]" (Winthrop, 311). Ten years earlier, first generation historian of the pilgrim separatist migration, William Bradford, borrowed a similar scriptural metaphor: "We are knit together as a body in a most strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord of the violation whereof we make great conscience, and by virtue whereof we do hold ourselves straitly tied to all care of each other's good and of the whole, by every one and so mutually." William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620 – 1647* (New York: Modern Library, 1981): 34-35.
[16] Hence the term *congregationalism.*
[17] Davis, 287-288.

than with individual rights.[18] As Perry Miller writes, when we think of the Puritan society as a whole, we tend not to "focus on individual pursuits, [we] do not include the business man, the speculator, or the solitary hunter [. . .]."[19] Still, we have noteworthy examples of both religious and secular individualists. Religious individualists like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson asserted their rights to individual thought and conscience, while the merchant Thomas Morton asserted his right to do business as he saw fit—and he saw fit to make himself substantially wealthy.

Those who disturbed the self-interest/common good balance by emphasizing self-interest were suspect. A group or groups that strayed for what they perceived to be the benefit of the whole social body (for example the Gortonists) could be seen as threatening to the Puritan sense of order and control.[20] But even more threatening were those who, like Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, asserted their senses of individual thought and conscience. Williams's individual conscience could not tolerate the Massachusetts Puritans' intolerance. His banishment to Rhode Island was due in large part to what the Puritan authorities saw in Williams's teaching and practice as a dangerous separation between the functions of the church and civil covenants. His famous claim that "forced worship stinks in God's nostrils" was interpreted not so much as a before-its-time claim for inalienable rights, which 21st century hindsight likes to project upon it, but rather as a direct threat to the partnership between faith and community. Williams ended up being too much of a separatist even for the Separatists.

Anne Hutchinson's threat to the New England Puritan sense of community was likewise based on her challenge to the Puritan notion of the interconnection between individual faith and community obligation. Hutchinson was banished to Rhode Island for converting her followers to the belief that God's will was so arbitrary and election into the covenant of Grace so entirely unconditional on the part of God, that one's behavior within the community and toward others had not a single connection to the state of one's soul. This was the crux of how the Puritans interpreted Hutchinson's teachings: *individuals had no social responsibilities because these bore no relation to the state of their souls.* In theological terms, Hutchinson was challenging the Puritan assumption regarding the partnership between justification and sanctification, the partnership between one's individual salvation and the life one lived within a community based upon that salvation. The dialectic between salvation (justification) and publicly evidencing that salvation (sanctification) constituted the very dialectic that, for the New England Puritans, insisted there be a knitted bond between themselves as individual souls and themselves as their "other's" keepers. According to James Davis, "The ability to live an admirably moral life [with others] was not a prerequisite for, but a consequence of, redeeming grace" thus making social virtue a sign of salvation.[21] While Williams had elevated individual conscience above community commitment and congregational order, Hutchinson had elevated individual piety above Winthrop's charge to "be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities."

In contrast to religious individualism, secular individualism could include the sinful slide into self-merit and self-promotion--exemplified for Bradford and the Plymouth Separatists by Thomas Morton, an Anglican merchant who had earlier established himself within miles of Plymouth at a location that would come to be known as Meriemounte (Bradford's spelling). Morton had no religious agenda other than to have his secularized Anglicanism go unbothered. He was a successful entrepreneur: trapping, hunting, trading with the natives, selling arms to the natives. Morton had such a good business sense that he could, without worry, squander today's

[18] Sacvan Bercovitch calls this obsession a "schizophrenic single-mindedness," in that the paradoxical "I," present in the very act of rigorous self-abnegation, finds itself, knowingly or not, "freighted with the burden of self-identity." Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975): 23.
[19] Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 43.
[20] Followers of Samuel Gorton, who advocated, among other progressive ideas, the separation of church and state.
[21] Davis, 295.

equivalent of twenty-five hundred dollars in a single morning's festivities. Bradford must have been outraged at the success of Morton's plantation.

Bradford's issue was that in the person of Thomas Morton he saw the transformation of a single-minded concern for the soul, *the Puritan touchstone for individualism*, into a single-minded concern for getting on. "And this I fear," he concludes on the point, "will be the ruin of New England, at least of the churches of God there, and will provoke the Lord's displeasure against them."[22] For Bradford, Morton's social crime and religious sin was akin to Richard Baxter's sin of self-interest: "A proud, self-esteeming man is easily provoked, and hardly reconciled without great submission; because he thinketh so highly of himself, that he thinketh heinously of all that is said or done against him; and he is so over-dear to himself, that he is impatient with his adversary."[23]

Thomas Morton and his mercantilism assaulted both the Puritan and the Separatist notions of covenant by redefining individualism on an entirely secular and self-interested basis. The theological convictions of both Williams and Hutchinson were seen as severing—at least ignoring—the interdependency of faith and community. Additionally, Bradford's Separatists in Plymouth had found themselves challenged on yet another front when, early on, not everyone agreed about how community should function within the framework of a Christian ideology that emphasized salvation.

According to Bradford, their first seasons included the severest of winters, starvation, and frostbite. The Plymouth separatists had no news of supplies coming, so they decided to parcel off land to individual families based on family size, a commune system, not unlike Plato's in *The Republic*, that ended in disaster. The community, Bradford remarks, "was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For the young men, that were most able and fit for labor and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense."[24] The communal experiment had failed, not because self-interest and/or individualism had run amok, but simply because in their pursuit of abridging themselves of their superfluities for the supply of others' necessities, Bradford's Pilgrims realized first-hand the second half of John Winthrop's modified Golden Rule: that which makes one careful of one's own good.

By the early eighteenth century, the "religious strands" of the self-interest/common good dialectical knot were clearly unraveling in what had become a more secularized, more political American heart. But the unraveling had been evident as early as the 1670s and even before, when as Perry Miller writes, "[T]he early zeal began to die down, and . . . the purely naturalistic, rational, practical aspect of the political theory became detached from the theological, and began to stand alone."[25] One of the most crucial signifiers that the Puritan dialectic of individualism and community was unraveling itself into distinctly separate and opposing principles was the notorious halfway covenant of the 1660s. In effect, the halfway covenant provided would-be members of Puritan congregations the benefits of church membership without the rigorous requirement of public testimony. It was a sincere effort to be sure, but, as Alan Simpson points out, the covenant "only heighten[ed] the irony of a situation in which a [community of] chosen people [. . .] [could not] [. . .] find enough chosen people to prolong its existence."[26] Because of the new covenant, congregational clergy no longer had the kind of hold on their congregation's membership that their predecessors had had as recently as two generations past.

The merits of individual labor in New England were paying off, New Englanders were prospering, and church attendees had more going for them than either church membership in

[22] Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1955): 33.
[23] Davis, 292.
[24] Bradford, 133.
[25] Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 151.
[26] Simpson, 35.

particular, or, in some cases, salvation in general. The halfway covenant was a means for clergy to maintain church membership while relaxing (in some cases eliminating all together) the strict requirements necessary to "prove" one's justification and subsequent sanctification. Some scholars even argue that the turmoil of the Salem witch-hunts of the 1690s were initiated more by local politics and personal vendetta than by religious zeal, however misguided that zeal might have been.[27]

By the third generation, New England Puritan thinking had evolved into something that readers today would recognize as anticipating the social theory of the Enlightenment—the emergence of the supremacy of individual rights and individual sovereignty. In his famous piece "Vindication," Reverend John Wise, the son of an indentured servant, demonstrates that the commitment to social necessities is still evident, although the sense of commitment now takes on a more individually sovereign and self-authoritative tone: "So every man must be conceived to be perfectly in his own Power and disposal, and not to be controuled by the Authority of any other. And thus every man, must be acknowledged equal to every Man."[28] It would have been unlikely for first generation Puritan John Winthrop to acknowledge every person "to be perfectly in his own Power," much less that every individual "must be acknowledged equal to every [other]." The distinction here between Wise's third-generation sensibility and Winthrop's first generation convictions lies not in the human commitment to what Wise calls "sociableness with others," but rather in the emphasis on self-determining autonomy.

Puritan scholar Alan Simpson reminds us that William Bradford, not long before his death in 1657, copied into his journal these lines from the original application for settlement: "We are knit together as a body in a most strict and sacred ***bond*** and covenant of the Lord […] ***tied*** to all care of each other's good, and of the whole by every one, and so mutually."[29] Nearing death, Bradford wrote the following:

> O sacred ***bond*** […] How sweet and precious were the fruits that flowed from the same, but when this fidelity ***decayed***, then their ruin approached […] (alas) that subtle serpent hath slyly wound in himself under fair pretenses of necessity and the like to ***untwist*** these sacred ***bonds and ties*** […] to dissolve […] or weaken the same."[30]

As New England was becoming more secularized by virtue of its economic prosperity, its religious commitment to the "bonds" and "ties" of social texture had, in Bradford's mind, become untwisted.

We have seen how the Puritans' self-interest *and* their contributions to their society worked in tandem to promote individual and community successes. *Under the influence of an all-encompassing Christian ideology, the integrated Puritan mind rejected an inordinate investment in self-interest as staunchly as it supported communal commitment*. It maintained a balanced view of, a personal focus on, and an allegiance to the principles of *both* self-interest and the common good, a view that rendered the Puritans *incapable* of separating strong individualism from social responsibility,

Alex de Toqueville stated that "Puritanism was not merely a religious doctrine, but [that] it corresponded in many points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories."[31] Be that as it may, having separated the self-interest/common good dichotomy (now often described as conservativist/liberalist or capitalist/socialist) once fused within a Christian ideology, how do we balance, harmonize, and rejoin these principles within a political system characterized by separation of church and state? In his review of E.J. Dionne Jr.'s *Our Divided Political Heart*,

[27] Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).
[28] Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds. *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings*. Vol. 1. Reprint. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963): 261.
[29] Simpson, 33.
[30] Simpson, 33-34.
[31] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Vol.1 Translated by Henry Reeve (New York: Schocken. 1961): 19.

Geoffrey Kabaservice demonstrates his insight into this challenge when he underscores two things: 1) Dionne's lament that "today's Tea Party-influenced conservatives have broken with their communitarian traditions and become zealots for radical individualism" and 2) a plea "for a return to the balance between individual and community values."[32]

The emerging division and definitions of the two poles of the dialectic have been shaped in part by the sharpening capitalist/socialist arguments of the last 200 plus years, and these conflicts are now being reflected in "two radically different visions for America"—one perceived as being obsessed with the liberties of individual self-interest and the other with social responsibility. Oddly enough, as Kabaservice seems to suggest, those who most insistently emphasize the sovereignty of individualism often tap religious (sometimes even Puritan) references to support their positions, missing the point that *it was religion that insisted upon and ensured the* ***integration*** of both individual interest and communal commitment.

If American political thought began with the two poles of self-interest and the common good being inextricably bound together under a shared Christian ideology, it is characterized in our time by their appearing to be inextricably separated and oppositional—so that a once coherent and informed American political identity has gone from being dialectically polar to being diametrically "bi-polar."

Many now accuse the country's respective political parties of operating on deeply embedded ideological principles that often seem dishonestly foregrounded and quite hopelessly irreconcilable. The 2012 election advertised itself as being a choice between "two radically different visions for America's future": one emphasizing the benefits of individual success, the other emphasizing the necessity for shared responsibility. In reexamining the contrasts between these two visions, we hope to have provided an historical space in which to discuss the possibilities, not only of rebalancing—albeit not necessarily through Calvinist Puritan theology--the self-interest/common-good poles of American thought, but also of sorting out the differences between and implications of both ideologically-based and rationally-directed policies and procedures.

[32] Geoffrey Kabaservice, "State of Disunion," *New York Times*, September 28, 2012.

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The International Journal of Civic, Political, and Community Studies is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal.

ISSN 2327-0047

ISBN 000-0-00000-000-0