

Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization

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Key Takeaways

- ▶ A robust centrist sociology illustrates how a strong “center of society” can enable the existence of happy, functional societies, embodying their core values while evolving to incorporate the various peripheries and thereby embrace new ideas.
- ▶ The “center” is where the most crucial values of modern societies are translated and made real in its central institutions. Institutions embody the central values of society imperfectly and conflict with each other regularly, but the center of society is strong to the extent that the central institutions work with one another to embody the central values even as they clash.
- ▶ Both centrism and moderation favor meliorism and incrementalism as a method of social change, but moderation does not set the course and lacks a positive program. Centrism creates and maintains elite consensus around the central values of society and holds elites to the larger task of incorporating the periphery.

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Introduction: A New Consensus Beyond Conflict

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” ...

And this will be the day — this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

Martin Luther King Jr.¹

After World War II, a confident social establishment imagined it could lead the nation into the American Century. This establishment had an intellectual counterpart within the dominant social sciences, which envisioned the nation's corporate, media, and political set allying with intellectuals to create a *consensus* on the central values of society. This value consensus would in turn be used by this interlocked elite to run the central institutions of society. This consensus did not mean that all of the problems had been solved, nor that all Americans were equally included. But the consensus created a basis for “the powers that be” to work together for the good of society as a whole.

Belief in this consensus was then shattered by a series of social movements that aimed to overcome gross injustices in American society. The long-simmering labor movement renewed its attack on class injustices. The growing civil rights movement attacked racial injustices. A new wave of the women's movement attacked gender injustices. Opposition to the Vietnam War would become part of a wider attack on the injustices of colonialism. The successes of these social movements would spur new movements to attack injustices against people with disabilities and against sexual minorities.

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington D.C., August 28, 1963. *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mlk01.asp>.

Just as the confident establishment of the American Century inspired a social science of consensus, the success of these oppositional social movements inspired a social science of conflict. Marxist theories, feminist theories, race theories, postcolonial theories, queer theories — all pointed toward a comprehensive ideology of critical theory. Every elite, every establishment, every grand narrative of history was presumed to be unjustly hoarding wealth, status, opportunity, power. Postmodernist theories went a step further, raising a presumption that any grand narrative of justice was itself a cloak for unequal power.

To the Baby Boomers who came of age with these successive waves of conflict theories, the consensus theory of their elders seemed naïve. As the Boomers came to power, displacing their elders, consensus theory seemed dead. Today, when the Boomers are the elders, the elite is more polarized than at any time in living memory. The ideology of endless conflict has become institutionalized. The various conflict ideologies force all social issues into a left-right straitjacket, whether they really fit or not. The center of a left-right spectrum is forced to be a compromise between two visions of order. In practice, the center of a left-right spectrum is reduced to offering a *process* of moderating change, more than it can provide an alternative, substantive vision of order.

There are internal problems with the left-right spectrum. First, the European original presumed a monarchist right, which has become irrelevant to European political thought and has never been relevant to American political thought. Second, the American left-right spectrum, framed by the Constitution, is driven by a much narrower question concerning two ways of achieving liberty. The big world of politics is larger than that, even if we think American liberal democracy is ultimately the best of all possible kinds of politics. Third, the current division of liberals and conservatives is of very recent origin—the 1950s, really, though it is typical of conservatism to claim older roots.

And yet...society needs a larger structure of order or its conflicts will tear society apart. The leaders of the various power structures in society need to find some way of working together in order for the central institutions to function. A society can only try to develop a concept of a just order if it shares some sense of the central values of that society. We yearn for a good society where we can achieve decent lives in peace.

The time is ripe to consider a new consensus theory, on the far side of the necessary social movements that criticized the old consensus. It is time for a vision of centrism with a heroic mission to include all and lead on to a flourishing future.

Center, Periphery, and the Task of Inclusion: The Positive Vision

The center of society is the place where the central *values* of a society get translated and made real in the central *institutions* of that society.

The center is the middle of a circle that extends out to various peripheries. The main task of those at the center of society is to make the values of the center equally real for the whole society, from center to periphery. Incorporating the periphery into the one shared society on terms of equal respect is the heroic task of centrists.

The existence of a center entails a periphery. The center best serves the whole of society when it creates a consensus around the central values. This was the central insight of the old consensus theory: that consensus-making was a process, moving from center to periphery. The more unified the center is in refining and applying this consensus, the greater its advantage over the various scattered places and peoples of the periphery. This central advantage means that power accumulates in the center—state power, market power, status power. This consensus of values becomes the basis of the central institutions of society. The people who run the central institutions of society are the elite of that society. Those in the periphery are not. The intellectuals who create the consensus and draw in the excluded are, too, part of society's elite.

The center is a vital social *structure*. We can describe its elements and its powers, hard and soft, at any given moment. The central institutions of modern societies are the state, the market, and the serving institutions of civil society. The actual institutions will embody the central values of society imperfectly, and with conflict. But the center of society is strong to the extent that the actual central institutions work with one another to embody those central values.

Making the center is also a vital social *process*. The primary process of the central elite is producing their consensus with one another. This is a difficult and endless process, because the central *institutions* have structural interests which tend to conflict with one another. The elite *individuals* who run the central institutions are also prone to all the forms of pride that lead to conflicts of personal interests with one another.

The secondary process of the central elite follows from the primary: to incorporate the peripheries into society. All the central institutions—political, economic, civil—are involved in this process of incorporation. Vital to the process of incorporation is drawing promising individuals from the periphery into the central elite. Incorporating new talent serves to both reinvigorate the elite and to bind periphery and center.

A center is the heart of a place. We make a *place* out of a *space* by imagining its contours and its meaning. We make a place emerge as real by loving it into being. The practice of achieving the end, the aim, the central values of our place is a heroic task. The task of the elite is to make a society a real place, from the center outward.

The ultimate aim of our lives, as Aristotle says, is happiness, flourishing, *eudaimonia*. Happiness is the end that is not a means to another end. We best achieve happiness by the long cultivation of the habits of virtue—and diminishing the inevitable habits of vice. We flourish in the center—the mean—between an excess and a deficiency of virtue. It is a hard, lifelong challenge to live by virtuous habits—hard but worthwhile. It is exponentially more difficult for an entire society to develop virtuous institutions and to diminish vicious institutions—hard but worthwhile. In a person, happiness is an ongoing action of the soul in accordance with virtue. In a society, happiness is an ongoing action of the center in accordance with virtue.

Centrist Tradition vs. Conflict Ideology: The Critique of Critique

The center-periphery model and the consensual view of society that it promotes was suppressed in the cultural struggles of the 1960s. The conflict school attacked the idea of consensus as false. The more sophisticated versions of postmodern conflict theory viewed the very idea of consensus as a cover for protecting the interests of the powerful. The elitism inherent in the claim of a center militates against modern society's most sacred values: individualism and equality. The idea that any values are sacred rubbed the secularists wrong. The claim of intellectuals to be essential to the working of society was scanted by both the peripheral masses and the self-satisfied managers. And the notion that society's sacred values were a tradition that must be nurtured, rather than a rational ideology that could simply be applied, offended the pride of ideologues of left and right.

Ironically, the center-periphery consensual view offers the best critique of the critical conflict theory. The conflict theorists hide their own interests in the conflict. They write as if from above the fray. They scant the corporate managers at the top of the market sector, or the state managers at the top of the government sector. They accuse each of these elite groups of rigging the game to defend the power they have through their sector. The intellectual elite who make conflict theory hide their own place in the social structure. They hide the status they gain from criticizing the other elites. Centrist theory candidly admits that intellectuals are at the center of the social dynamic, with an interest in staying there.

Centrist intellectuals have the vital task of integrating the periphery into the center. If they are successful, they will also, in the same process, be integrating the several institutions of the center with each other. The power of the intellectual “knowledge class” comes from their success in integrating society. The corporate managers can integrate society by commerce and money, and the state managers can integrate society by law and force. Only the intellectuals can offer the deeper, more enduring *legitimation* of the different forms that social integration takes. For this, the knowledge class is rewarded with status.

“Critique is a valuable service to any society...but consensus is, ultimately, a *more* valuable service to any society as it is vital to telling the story of how a society should work to be worth living in.”

Critical theorists are rewarded in status for criticism, for tearing down. Consensual theorists are rewarded in status for consensus, for building up. Critique is a valuable service to any society. Critique is part of telling the truth about how society works and a crucial motivation for change. But consensus is, ultimately, a *more* valuable service to any society, as it is vital to telling the story of how a society should work to be worth living in. Social change is good and necessary; however, social change is only possible within a social order. Social dynamics ultimately rest on social statics.

The weakness of critical conflict theory is that it is better at critique than nurture. It can show conflicts of interest in society. Critique can reveal the ways in which the social order is rigged to benefit the powerful groups, which undermines the legitimacy of that social order. Critical theory is much worse at offering a vision of building up a just social order on the far side of critique. Most critical theorists rely on a fuzzy vision of an egalitarian society that will also promote individual liberty. They obscure the inherent conflict between equality and liberty. The more sophisticated theorists, who do grasp the inevitable conflict between freedom and equality, give up altogether on the “modernist” quest for a free and equal social order and sink into irony.

The consensual centrist view, by contrast, accepts an unequal outcome while still offering people equal opportunities. Centrism sees that conflicts are real but does not attribute them merely to selfish conflicts of interest. William Galston, writing in 2002, argued that Isaiah Berlin shows there are tragic

conflicts of ends inherent in the world as we have it. According to Galston's interpretation of Berlin, the intellectuals of the elite have to *foster* consensus to draw in the excluded. Those in a position to define, understand, and develop that consensus have, of necessity, greater social power than those who do not. But the ability to share in consensus-building is more equally shared than is the ability to have money or state power. Consensus-building is a more equal process than social conflict, even if it does not produce a more equal result; but then again, an equal result is not its aim.

The Intellectual Lineage of the New Consensus Tradition

Two thinkers who were vital to the old consensus theory remain central to the new consensus theory: Edward Shils and E. Digby Baltzell. Shils, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, wrote a series of essays on the idea of center and periphery, and on charisma, starting in the 1930s. In the 1970s he added a deeper consideration of how organically developed "tradition" is distinct from overly rationalized "ideology."² Baltzell, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote several books about the importance of having an "establishment" of families to moderate a mere "elite" of individuals in the interests of the sustained leadership of society.³

Shils took from Max Weber the concept of the existence of multiple power hierarchies in society, which can lead to conflicts among contending elites who have class, status, or command authority. Each of these kinds of hierarchies operates on different values. The values, and the material interests associated with each kind of power, produce different kinds of institutions. Weber is usually read as a conflict theorist. Yet Weber, according to Shils, also says that when the elites who command each of these power pyramids work together, their ability to direct society as a whole is almost unsurpassable.

Shils read this potential consensus of the elite on society's central values as the crucial power of the center—the very motive and capacity to unite society around a center at all. These central values are embodied in the power structures—the central institutions—of society imperfectly, but truly. The several elite individuals at the top of the various power pyramids have a natural tendency to devolve into conflicts based on their opposing institutional interests. The primary task of the thought leaders of the elite—intellectuals,

² See Turner, Stephen. "The Significance of Shils." *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 2 (1999): 125–45.

³ See Weston, William. "The Power Elite and the Philadelphia Gentlemen." *Society* 47, no. 2 (March 1, 2010): 138–46 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-009-9289-3>>.

broadly understood—is to mold and hold this elite consensus. The secondary task is just as important: incorporate the leaders arising in the periphery into the center by drawing them, and their ideas, into an evolving consensus.

In “Types of Legitimate Domination” (1921), Weber said authority develops in society from extraordinary, charismatic individuals, who draw a following based on their ultimately ineffable personal qualities. If these charismatic leaders succeed in creating a social movement with durable institutions, their charismatic teachings will gradually be transformed into traditional authority. Premodern societies were overwhelmingly based on traditional authority. The distinctive movement of *modern* times is to attempt to reorganize society consistently into a third type of authority, rational-legal authority, which displaces and supersedes traditional authority.

Shils extended the concept of charismatic individuals to the idea of charismatic institutions. He argued that the central institutions of society—*because* they are central, because they are powerful, because they are the fixed point around which the turning social world can be organized—exert an *institutional* charisma. The central institutions have the power to include the periphery not solely because they are more powerful than the various peripheral institutions, but also because they attract acceptance due to their charisma. The center succeeds in incorporating the periphery not simply by imperialistic conquest; the center also exerts a legitimate attraction.

Weber contrasted traditional authority with rational-legal authority. He took rationalization—reorganizing everything to follow a rule—as the master principle of modernity. Traditional authority, on this account, is the dominant premodern form of authority. Shils argued, though, that the attempt to eliminate tradition and rationalize all of society overstates what has been done in modernity, and overreaches for what is possible to do in any society. He contrasted traditions, which grow out of our actual social practices, with ideologies, which grow from over-rationalizing theories. Tradition defines what is distinctive in each society. The traditional values and practices of *our* society command our loyalty, anchor our identities, and give direction to what we deem worth building up. To be sure, we criticize and modify traditions all the time. Still, we are moved by the love of our own little platoon and should change it, if we can, only in accord with its own genius, not with abstract rationalizations.

Baltzell argued that we want our elite to be honorable because we believe in the central institutions they command. We press the powerful to be worthy of the status that their positions should warrant. A central value of this elite must be that the top class has an obligation to be leaders for the good of the whole society. When the elite individuals are unified, they know, as Tocqueville argued, that self-interest, rightly understood, means that the smartest course

for themselves is to build up the good order of society for everyone. When the elites unify under a society-building consensus, they become a true *establishment*.

Baltzell's establishment has obvious affinities with Shils' elite consensus. Baltzell went beyond Shils, though, in filling out the sociological form of this leadership elite. Over time, the establishment renews society's leadership by drawing in the most able individuals from the subordinated classes. Incorporating rising talent from the periphery is the essence of the "aristocratic principle"; excluding talent simply because it comes from the periphery is the basis of dishonorable caste. Moreover, an aristocratic establishment converts an elite of individuals into a dense network of families through marriage and their trained lineages. At its best, the establishment forms a network of families, which incorporate the natural leaders of society into a vast social network of responsibility. While Baltzell and Shils use different metaphors to describe how the center includes the periphery in the social consensus, they reach the same end.

To these ideas from the old consensus theory, centrist thought adds two more recent developments: competitive ecology, and moral foundations.

The various conflict ideologies imagine social dynamics as a war between two parties, aiming at victory and domination. Modern societies, however, tend toward a different dynamic of change: competition. Instead of two parties fighting, we find three parties—two sellers, each trying to win over one buyer. This is obviously true in market competition. This same model applies to democratic politics. Likewise, to religious pluralism. Indeed, while we may speak of "culture wars," our actual cultural struggles are competitions. Multiplying the number of "sellers" and "buyers" does not change the underlying dynamic. The multiplicity of competitors, in overlapping institutional fields, creates an endlessly adapting competitive ecology. Competition means that social change is more evolutionary than revolutionary.

We can see the center at work in what are portrayed as polarized "culture wars." The extremes—the "left" and "right"—try to pull an institution's central values in one direction or another, based on a rationalized ideology about how the institution should work. The people in the middle uphold a different value. They are *loyalists* to the institution as it actually is. They hold on to its traditions because they love the institution itself. They can be convinced to gradually change the institution by an argument that shows how such changes are still in keeping with the institution's central values and developed traditions. The loyalists are traditionalists; the extremists are ideologues. The two extremist camps are not really at war with one another. They are competing for the loyalist center. This kind of competition is the norm in the market, in democratic politics, and in pluralistic civil society.

Emile Durkheim argued, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, that society is held together, at its heart, by a shared sense of the sacred—a collective conscience and collective consciousness. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt has discerned, through empirical studies, six “moral foundations” for a shared sense of the sacred. Haidt argues that these shared reactions are the basis for our “groupishness” as a species, which lets us create social super-organisms.

I have reinterpreted Haidt’s moral foundations in a more explicitly sociological way in “A Deeper Durkheimian Society for Haidt’s Righteous Minds.”⁴ Three of these moral foundations are found in any group, because they are designed to combat three problems faced by any group—the problem of cheaters, of subversives, and of traitors. The other three moral foundations are the basis of modern political disputes over which values should be central to society. I will say more about these essential moral dynamics below.

“Centrist sociology sees that order and change are equally important...change is only possible as a practice, and meaningful as an idea, within order.”

Haidt’s moral foundations have obvious affinities with Shils’ central values. My reinterpretation of the argument over moral foundations, especially between conservatives and liberals, goes beyond both Haidt and Shils. This “deeper Durkheim” argument better fills in just how the political forms of tradition and ideology actually interact within the central values of a society.

Centrist sociology sees that order and change are equally important. Social statics and social dynamics are complementary processes. Change is only possible as a practice, and meaningful as an idea, within an order. The bias of centrist sociology is that incremental change is the safest way forward. Radical changes almost always bring dangerous unintended consequences. Meliorism is a bias, a presumption, of centrist sociology, but not a law.

Centrist sociology sees all of social life (and, indeed, all of reality) as a dynamic ecology. Entities of all kinds compete with one another constantly. The competition is not a war with a final outcome, but a flow. The activity of making some spaces into meaningful places is an achievement of human civilization,

⁴ Weston, William. “A Deeper Durkheimian Society for Haidt’s Righteous Minds.” *Society* 51, no. 6 (December 1, 2014): 686–91 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-014-9841-7>>.

and a leap of faith of human understanding. We make social structures emerge into reality by investing every kind of resource into them. The centrist view is that a gradually moving equilibrium is the meta-condition for ecological competition.

Sociology as it has come to be practiced by conflict theorists has a bias toward change. This bias is driven by a premise that all existing social orders are unjust because they are unequal. This premise is usually taken for granted; it often functions as a dogma.

Reimagining the Sectors of Society

The most powerful sectors of modern societies are the state and the market. The “third sector” combines what is left—arts, culture, services of all kinds, education, religion, and, perhaps, family. In communist societies, the state attempted to run the market—mostly unsuccessfully. In capitalist societies, the market attempts to run the state—with greater success. Welfare states try to balance the two. European social-democratic welfare states lean toward the state; American-style welfare states lean toward the market.

The term used to describe the third sector reveals where the primary power lies in different kinds of societies. In market-oriented societies, the residual third sector institutions are called “nonprofits.” In state-oriented societies, the residual third sector institutions are called “nongovernmental organizations.” In both kinds of societies there is some appreciation for the importance of these “civil society” organizations, because they create the values which motivate pro-social action. Families and civil society organizations, according to Mary Ann Glendon and David Blankenhorn, are the “seedbeds of virtue.”⁵

Centrist consensus theory seeks a balanced and proportionate appreciation of all three sectors. That appreciation begins with putting first things first.

The Servant Sector

Families come first, historically and logically. Families are either the foundation of the first sector—or are prior to all sectoring of society. What most modern social thought treats as the last sector should really be considered the first. The quality that unites the first-sector institutions, especially in the family but discernible in the others, is service to others. The Servant Sector is the first sector. The model of the elite of the Servant Sector—which sounds like an oxymoron—is the *servant leader*. The self-sacrifice that is born in the

⁵ Glendon, Mary Ann, and David Blankenhorn. *Seedbeds of Virtue: Sources of Competence, Character, and Citizenship in American Society* (Madison Books, 1995).

servant sector is the foundation of social solidarity, which is the secret ingredient of the human super-organism.

All-Service Sector

Putting the Servant Sector first restores balance to what the other two sectors do and where they fit. The state, the All-Service Sector, is the second sector. It produces those practices that need to definitely be available to everyone, such as basic security. It is easy for the All-Service sector to become the all-controlling sector, when the admirable desire to serve all grows prideful. The state has the monopoly of legitimate violence, which provides a sore temptation to prevent possible bad actions by force. The state is even more necessary in modern society, due to our extensive division of labor. But it is also the most dangerous sector. The model of the elite leader of the All-Service Sector is the statesman and -woman.

Self-Service Sector

The economy, the Self-Service Sector, is the proper third sector. Production for consumption is essential for sheer existence; a system for reliably trading and distributing consumable products is essential for modern social existence. The market, the Self-Service Sector, produces a social benefit through the nearly paradoxical means of pursuing private profit, as Adam Smith showed. The profit-driven market is the most productive economic system ever devised. However, it is easy for the Self-Service Sector to become overweening. The profit-seeking class want more profit, fewer regulations, and, ultimately, monopoly. The first and second sectors work hard and constantly to keep the productive market going, without letting it get dangerously out of control. The model of the elite leader of the Self-Service Sector does not have as obvious a name, since the ideal of profit-making tends toward selfishness. “Capitalist,” “bourgeois,” “profiteer,” “producer,” “maker” – these all capture some ways of being an economic leader, but they are too narrow. Economic leaders tend to become rich; however, *being* rich does not capture the vital *doing* that economic leadership entails. Nevertheless, the actual leaders of the third sector see that their self-interest, rightly understood, requires working with, and within, the system created by the other two sectors for the long-term profitability of each producer, and of the productive system as a whole.

All three sectors are structured more by competition than by conflict. The public must always be won over and won over again. Even families need to repeat their central task of shaping virtuous people anew in each generation.

In a well-functioning society, the center pulls together, coordinates, and oversees the elite of all three sectors of society equally. The Servant Sector meets the state and the market on equal terms. In the familiar left-right

spectrum, politics becomes an ideological struggle between state and market, with every other institution forced to take sides, be sidelined, or go under. A centrist model, by contrast, makes it clear that preserving social order requires that all the sectors be important. In a well-functioning society, all three sectors are in balance, with each sector's parochial interests subordinated to the interests of the whole.

The intellectuals—the knowledge class—play a crucial role in preserving society's sacred values and applying them in a practical way. Intellectuals are not a job or class apart, but are found within each society's sector, by necessity. Intellectuals are in an irreducible dialectical tension with the managers—the corporate class, the “men of action”—within each sector. It is not always obvious who is in which role. Both roles are needed in the center. It is much easier to rise to the center if you are born to it; this is equally true for the intellectual and management roles. Families are the single most important teachers of each role. Still, some people in both roles rise from the periphery.

Schools are the institution created by the intellectuals to bind center and periphery. Schools bring the organic leaders of the periphery to the center and preserve the justice and legitimacy of the entire system. Schools are *not* primarily places for occupational training; jobs provide the actual training in how to do social tasks, especially management tasks. Education forms character in accord with the central values of society. Education helps teach the habits of virtuous living according to the norms of each society. Education teaches how to recognize the vicious habits which undermine the central values, as well as how to diminish those bad habits.

“A well-functioning establishment will help new, better social realities emerge which are...still connected with the best traditions of that society over time.”

The center-periphery model is inherently elitist. It is not more elitist, though, than market-based or state-based stratification systems, which are fostered by the left-right model. The center-periphery model is inherently consensual. More exactly, it is inherently pro-consensus, working to create consensus among the elite to prevent disastrous civil conflict. The consensus-creating process rests on both ideal and material factors, on convincing ideas and personal—especially familial—ties. The ideal type of a consensual elite institution coordinating all the sectors is an establishment.

Effective establishments know that the specific society they preside over grew from particular practices and traditions. As *rational* leaders, they try to overcome practices that are inefficient. As *consensual* leaders, they try to adjust conflicts of traditional practices among the several sectors. And as *wise* leaders, they try to make progress for the whole of society by diminishing vicious practices and increasing virtuous practices at the macrosocial level. An effective establishment renews itself by incorporating the rising stars from the several peripheries. In the process, the central values and institutions may be gradually transformed in the intellectual melting pot into something new. A well-functioning establishment will help new, better social realities emerge which are, in some intelligible way, still connected with the best traditions of that society over time.

A Centrist View of the Development of Modern Society

The Family as the Primary Center

The family is the original center of social life. It is still the first center of most people's lives. Most people love their families. They believe living their life in the family is meaningful. They do not need a great deal of convincing on that point. Families are partly natural and partly socially emergent realities. Family life is our model for how other groups emerge as real. The original "central values" are the ones that help the family flourish. We feel the highest call to preserve our family's life, even to the extent of laying down our own lives for them. We place a high value on our family's liberty to act as one, for the good of the familial whole. The family is the original human super-organism. This is true even as we appreciate that our family is part of a network of interdependent families and other institutions. Still, without some liberty—some relative autonomy—our family could not be real, be loved, be an agent in the world.

The aim of all human life is flourishing. The aim of family life is to flourish as a family. A healthy family wants to encourage the flourishing of each member of the family. Family is an unusual kind of group, in that its end, its sunset, is built into its function. We each live and die. We love and raise our children so that they may live and make families of their own. Some visions of extended families seem immortal, but this is a question of where the frame lies.

The core natural bond of family life is between mother and child. Human society's great cultural achievement is to create a bond between father and mother, and father and child, capable of being as strong as the bond of mother and child. The cultural achievement of turning men into husbands and fathers is the foundation of civilization. Cultures differ in how exactly they make

families. Some do not make the marital-pair bond the cultural center of how they imagine families. Still, on the whole, people keep reinventing the marriage of a man and a woman to raise their children because it works; it works because it reflects a deep truth about what is true about human beings. *Many different kinds of family structures can do the job of families well.* Still, the parental pair-bond remains the core model.

Families work as little societies because they motivate us to sacrifice labor on behalf of others. This motivation to self-sacrifice lies at the heart of all successful human social forms. Human society rests on a biological basis of concern and cooperation. However, human society would not endure without cultural institutions to hold it together and direct concerted action. Human beings have great flexibility to develop our cultures in different ways; as a tradeoff for that flexibility, we lack enough of the instincts that allow bees to make a beehive.

Human beings are the dominant organism on the planet because we can create enduring social super-organisms which continually call forth this sacrificial labor. Coordinating that labor is the function of leadership, ethics, mores, customs, and laws. Even in families, a vital task of the center is to include the periphery. The periphery of one family consists of other families. The inclusion is done by exogamy and intermarriage. The network of intermarried families is the seed of every larger social form.

For most of our existence in time and in the greatest number of cases, the basic form of human society was the hunting and gathering band made of extended families. These bands had, and can still have, a flourishing life. They have insecurities in relation to most environments in the world, though. These insecurities motivate smart people who love their families to look for ways to flourish more, and more reliably. Smart people will tinker with the world, will try things and learn things. The need for secure flourishing creates the market for turning this tinkering into new social technologies.

The Center of Settled Society

The step from living as a hunting and gathering band to settled life in larger groups with other families is a risky and fateful one. This step did not always work. Settled life creates new problems, as well as new benefits. One new technology of civilization is the creation of specific institutions for political, economic, and civic life. The leaders of each of these institutions together constitute the elite of society. Insofar as this elite works together they form an enduring leadership class. Another new technology of civilization is the creation of culture as the remembered wisdom of a society over time. The village is a new center, beyond the family, based on nature, solidified into structure, extended by culture.

Our ties to the village center are not quite the same as our ties to our families. Families that are more central to the village feel the tie more strongly; families that are peripheral to the village feel the tie less. The families and the leadership class that are central to the life of the village have more power than the peripheral families and the other classes. This is an inevitable structural effect of having a center and a periphery. Coordinating the actions of a trans-familial group requires creating some kind of stratification of power.

At the same time, the village's central families and institutions are attractive to those on the periphery. This attraction is not simply opportunism or false consciousness. We are social beings. We want to be included. Our safety is there, and our flourishing is there. And the more the center acts for the good of the whole, the more attractive the center is. The center exercises an institutional charisma on the rest of society. The actual central values of society matter; the actual functioning of the central institutions matters. One of those crucial functions is including the periphery. All societies function to some extent, but the more virtuous societies function better, flourish more, are loved more. The virtuous functioning of society depends more on the virtuous functioning of the center than on any other factor.

The ecology of villages produces larger societies, and larger conflicts of societies. The centers of commerce among villages become the centers of power and culture centers for these larger societies. The culture of cities defines civilizations, even in societies where most people did not directly interact with the city. The *cultural* center becomes the basis of the imagined communities that transcend the face-to-face village.

The largest metropolitan cultures interact in a whole spectrum of ways. Most interactions are peaceful and civil. Commerce lies at the heart of civilizational interactions. Every level of society needs to remain secure against external threats, and every level of society is capable of being a threat to others. The social centers develop defenses of society's boundaries, while allowing those boundaries to remain permeable to the myriad civil forms of interaction. Defining the boundaries is as much a cultural task as a physical one.

The center of a culture defines how it imagines flourishing. The center learns how to flourish, in part, by its accumulated internal wisdom. The center also learns how to flourish from the dialectical process of defining itself against other cultures and their notions of flourishing. The center of a culture interacts most profoundly with its own periphery. By assimilating its periphery, the center is also changed, amalgamating with the values and practices originating in the periphery.

The largest super-organisms that human beings have created that are capable of sustained coordinated activity with full power are nation-states. The largest

imagined communities which shape our understanding of meaningful action for flourishing are the world religions. These two kinds of communities are in essential relation to one another. States and religions also have irreducible conflicts with one another.

Some have imagined a world state and world religion. This would entail a world center. Barring sustained interaction with extraterrestrial civilizations, I do not see how one world could really happen.

The Metropolitan Center

The ideal type of the physical center of a society is the metropolitan capital of a nation-state. This center of state power and economic power also draws intellectuals who do the cultural work to create the consensus needed to run the society. The first movement of the consensus has to be among the metropolitan elites themselves. But the second movement, incorporating the periphery, is as vital to the longer-term coherence of the nation-state as a society.

The task of creating the collective conscience and consciousness in modern societies is a challenge because the division of labor relentlessly chips away at the collective in favor of the individual. Indeed, the very idea of an individual, that each of us has an individual identity that surpasses our social ties, is the fruit of the social process that created modern societies. We make our society's distinctive collective sacred out of various and sundry items, differing from society to society. We make our central values partly out of the remaining traditions inherited from earlier, more traditional eras; out of devotion to modern ideas of liberty and equality; out of embracing the modern institutions of democracy and capitalism and pluralism. The challenge of creating a collective consciousness and conscience in modern societies against the solvent of "individualism" is the subject of Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society*.

One source of collective consciousness that is deeply rooted in the collective conscience of any society is our shared desire to exact justice on those who threaten the integrity of society itself. This requires the "deeper Durkheim" development of moral foundations theory, mentioned above. Society is a super-organism which requires some sacrifice by its members, if they are to reap the benefit of unity. Most people accept the logic of that proposition: Some self-sacrifice is necessary, legitimate, and virtuous. In every group, however, there will be a few self-interested cheaters. They want to ride free on others' sacrifices, reaping the benefits of society without paying the costs. If cheaters get away with cheating with impunity, the middle of society's commitment to the self-sacrificing norm begins to waver. Justice requires effective sanctions on cheaters.

More dangerous to society than cheaters are subversives. Cheaters are petty thieves from the treasury of central values; subversives are big-time embezzlers. Subversives undermine the central values of society in favor of other values, however hazy those alternative values might be. Subversives undermine the legitimacy of the value *system* of society.

Most dangerous of all are traitors. They are foreign agents working for the central values of another society. Traitors treat the center of their own society as if it were the periphery of another society. Traitors aim to dissolve the center of their own society, in favor of incorporating it with another society. This treason may favor a literal incorporation of one's own nation-state into another. Or it may aim to replace the central values of one's own society with the ideology of another.

The task of devising a system of justice, authority, and loyalty that effectively deals with the threats of cheaters, subversives, and traitors is the main job of the center's intellectuals. These intellectuals may be formally employed in knowledge-class occupations, or they may be the more thoughtful members of other structural positions in the division of labor. The task of the central intellectuals is difficult because they must preserve the integrity of the central values, and show them to be legitimate, while dealing with these threats. The solution cannot create a legitimization crisis by being too soft to be effective, nor too harsh to be just; the legitimate solution must be centrist.

The division of labor keeps driving social development. Individualism increases. New institutions vie for power within the center. Various philosophical schools, which never quite die, keep arguing for different ways to achieve the needed consensus. The process of consensus-making never ends and can never rest. The process of including the periphery in the central consensus never ends and can never rest.

The nation-state is an imagined community. It is far too large and varied for anyone to know all of its people and all of its parts. Creating the vision of what unites the whole is the vital work of the consensus intellectuals. The first test of that vision is if it can create enough of a collective conscience and consciousness to overcome the unavoidable conflicts of interests among economic and political actors.

The second test of the unifying vision is more challenging: to get the provincial elites and the leaders of subordinated groups to see themselves as sharing in the nation's identity and destiny. This is hard because the nation's center is far away from the provincial mini-centers scattered through the geographic and social peripheries. The metropole tends to accumulate everything—money, power, culture—while extracting resources from the periphery.

The great cultural achievement which makes nation-states possible as imagined communities is *nationalism*. This image powerfully conveys the vision of nationalism from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*: an educated young adult in a provincial coffeehouse reads the news coming from the metropolitan center. Our reader is drawn into the events portrayed in the capital as part of a whole that embraces both places. This is the ordinary work of the center embracing the periphery. The real magic of nationalism, though, comes when our reader, in a provincial coffeehouse, imagines that there are other readers, in other provincial coffeehouses, reading the same news, feeling the same connection. From this vision comes an imagination of a whole *nation* of strangers who nonetheless share a collective conscience, a collective consciousness, a collective identity. To the ties of interest which connect each peripheral node to the center are added powerful ties of imagination from peripheral node to peripheral node to peripheral node. From such imagination, added to material interest, modern societies are born.

Heroic Centrism for a Flourishing Society

The task of sustaining and building the center is heroic because every group that makes a place builds on one great truth, while being beset by common threats to that truth. The one great truth is that we are a social species. Society will never include all the people who exist—that exceeds the limits of our imagined communities. We build up to our social group, and the place our group makes, from social molecules to Edmund Burke's "little platoons" to the wider units that our leadership class can imagine.

One kind of external threat to our place and group comes from other places and groups, most especially from rivalries among nation-states. The whole world is an ecology of groups, living in overlapping imagined places. They relate to one another by conflict, by competition, and by cooperation.

Three internal threats that beset any group are the ones I discussed above: cheaters, subversives, and traitors. Making the group, the place, the mission truly *real* requires some sacrificial giving. Cheaters want to reap the benefits of the group, the place, and the mission, without giving. If cheaters are not dealt with, the whole group and the whole place erode. The place loses its emergent reality. Even if there were only one group in all the world, there would be cheaters. This is why justice begins with the right social ethic for addressing the problem of cheating.

The other two threats come from subversives and traitors. Subversives and traitors are possible because other groups, with other places and missions, exist in relation to one other in an ecology. The heroic defense of the center entails the defense of the boundaries of our place and group against those other

groups, and against the enemies within who might help those other groups against us.

Defending against threats is the *negative* form of heroic centrism. Advancing the good for which our group exists is the *positive* form of heroic centrism. The more ambitious the good for which our group exists, the harder the task of achieving that good. The harder the task, the greater the glory.

Life is the baseline good for any group. Liberty is at least a negative good—to create a group in which the component parts are free to choose their specific aims. The *pursuit* of happiness may be the highest good that a society can plausibly aim at. Actually achieving happiness—flourishing, *eudaimonia*—as a whole society's aim seems too much to promise. But creating a social structure in which the component parts of society are helped and encouraged to flourish does seem to be an achievable end. There is heroism in promoting that end, and social greatness in achieving it, even provisionally.

Trimming vs Progress: Leading from the Center

Centrism has a point of disagreement with its close cousin, moderation. Moderation is more a style of action than a worldview or sociological model. Both centrism and moderation favor meliorism and incrementalism as a method of social change. Centrism, though, has a positive aim to its social action. The moderate, to use Michael Oakeshott's metaphor, tries to keep the ship of state in proper trim—not heading too far to one side or the other—as it sails into an unknown future. The moderate keeps society on course.⁶ Moderation, though, does not set the course; it offers no basis from which to critique the course or plot a new one. The positive program of moderation is nearly blank. Both moderation and centrism agree on moderation as a means, but they differ on moderation as the sole end of social action.

Centrism, by contrast, has the ongoing task of creating and maintaining the consensus of the elite around the central values of society. More importantly, centrism holds this elite to the larger task, created by those very central values, of incorporating the periphery. Incorporating the periphery justly is a complex and endless project. The various peripheral nodes need to be persuaded of the virtue of the center's values and the benefits of being included in the central institutions. The peripheral elite may have dreams of creating their own center. Incorporating the peripheral elite, the periphery's natural leaders, into the center, is fraught with opportunities to do it wrong. The elite's pride in the central values creates a constant temptation to condescend to those outside the center and outside the elite. The center's institutions' power creates a constant

⁶ Craiutu, Aurelian. *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

temptation to coerce the periphery into union with the center's empire. Equal opportunity for all people to move toward the center is in constant tension with all groups' effective subordination in the periphery.

The Rationalization of the Center

If centers grow organically, they cannot be entirely rationalized. The differences in what each society holds sacred are the heart of their distinctive cultures. Each society may be functionally equivalent in the sense that they each find a way to do what all societies need to do. But they achieve those functions in somewhat different ways, reflecting differences in their central values. Societies may be most similar in their technology to solve economic problems. This aspect of society drives the division of labor, which tends to rationalize production. But these similarities are at the most superficial level. The other central institutions of society are more different from one culture to another. The central values underlying those institutions are even more different from one culture to another.

A powerful idea of Weberian sociology is that the *rationalization* of everything is the master principle of modernity. Rationalization is the belief that any process might be conducted in a more rule-governed, efficient, means-to-ends way. The idea of rationalization is found everywhere. Reasoning to a more efficient way to do things is as old as thought. But the idea that all social practices *ought to be* rationalized is a modern idea. The notion that tradition is in itself bad, that doing things because they are “merely” customary is reason enough to redo them, is a distinctive central value of modern societies. To use Anthony Giddens' metaphor, the process of dis-embedding organic customary practices and re-embedding them in a rationalized form is a powerful tool of modern social integration.

Yet rationalization is also destructive of the subtle and distinctive things which give a culture—*our* culture—meaning to those who live it. The defense of tradition becomes a cry of the heart for conservatives in a society. Indeed, defending tradition because it is *our* tradition is often what makes people conservative in the first place. They are trying to defend what makes life worth living. Yet the very fact that these traditions developed organically, over time, without a central plan, means that it is often hard for conservatives to articulate what exactly they are trying to conserve and why. Moreover, if critical theorists can show that those in power benefit from these traditions—which is practically a given—then the critics offer a powerful argument against those traditions' legitimacy.

Rationalization as a master principle offers a severe temptation to hubris. The fact that we can increase the efficiency of some practices creates a temptation to believe we can do the same with *all* practices, that we can rationalize the

whole social structure itself. The ultimate social hubris is the belief that we have achieved fully rational central cultural values. This is what an *ideology* claims for itself. Yet the problem of rationalization for its own sake is that it can't ultimately legitimize itself.

As Weber famously said, rationalization becomes an iron cage. The world becomes disenchanting due to the very process that makes it work more efficiently.

Shils argues that consensus intellectuals should preserve *tradition*; ideologues (of left and right) run roughshod over society's central values in the name of a rationalized theory.

The best kind of conservatism comes from humility. We know that we cannot know the whole order of the world. We know that we cannot know the most meaningful way to live by our own reason. We see that there are always unintended, irrational effects of seemingly rational improvements. This does not make us give up on social change; rather, it makes us seek change cautiously, incrementally, melioristically. Conservatism does not need to be a defense of the status quo or the power of the currently powerful.

The best kind of progressivism comes from care for the harmed, as Haidt puts it. We know that even the best-intended social changes can create unintended harms and preserve hidden privileges. A tender heart for those harmed by society itself, married to a firm commitment to justice for all, both under the command of a self-critical reason, can lead to a better society for all. Progressivism does not need to be a bulldozer, flattening all difference and breaking all ties.

Progressivism and conservatism still have meaning in centrist theory, but they relate to the process of inclusion, not to the aim of the central values.

The best kind of conservatism can be a method of social change that still preserves what makes life worth living. This best kind of conservatism is also the best kind of progressivism. The best combination would be a progressive conservatism, or conservative progressivism.

In other words, centrism.

The Social Ethic of Centrism

As the center's leaders grow wise about governing society, they also, by a dialectical process, grow wise about protecting the periphery. This wisdom may come from a cry or a demand from the peripheral. Or it may come from the emergent wisdom of the central elite about what serves the long-term interests of the whole. Concern for the most powerful and for the least powerful classes

may also come by way of a revelation from a being more powerful than even the leadership class. All of this wisdom is transmitted by the dominated fraction of the dominant class, as Pierre Bourdieu infelicitously calls them, the intellectual specialists in accumulating and understanding cultural wisdom.

The social ethic of center and periphery is different than the social ethic of left and right. The left vs. right model of society inevitably devolves into a culture war. The attempt to create *principled moderation* is almost an oxymoron. The attempt will fail. Moderation works best as a style of action. It does not work as a theory of social order.

“The fundamental legitimacy of society comes from effectively suppressing the dangers to the sacred values of society, and from effectively incorporating into the center new leaders who embrace society’s central values.”

The social ethics of the center and the periphery work differently. The center preserves the traditional, organically developed values of a society. The politically oriented intellectuals of all kinds are the keepers of those sacred values. The powerful fraction of society, who lead and control its various institutions, also gravitate to the center. Indeed, their connections with one another constitute the empirical center of society. Each periphery's spiral has direct relations with the center, but they may not have direct relations with one another. In general, the dynamic of modern market society and liberal democratic capitalism is to draw the periphery closer to the center and draws its various elements closer to one another. This process of drawing together inevitably increases the opportunities for social conflict as well. This conflict's natural leaders are the peripheral intellectuals, who straddle the worlds of center and periphery.

Societies develop organically. The process creates distinctive traditions in different societies. The center's intellectuals try to understand, apply, rationalize, and coordinate these traditions into the central sacred values of society. This is an endless process. This process is endless because there is not a guaranteed unity of all the values. This process is endless because actual empirical societies incorporate people from other societies with other values—sometimes even engulfing other societies altogether. This process is endless

because smart people keep coming up with new ideas and new interpretations of old ideas, especially those provincial intellectuals who are constantly being drawn in from the periphery. And this process is endless because new things are made in the world, especially from economic activity in the market.

The fundamental legitimacy of society comes from effectively suppressing the dangers to the sacred values of society, and from effectively incorporating into the center the new leaders who embrace society's central values. Everyday justice comes from suppressing cheaters, traitors, and subversives. This is *maintenance legitimation*. The larger and longer-term project requires preserving the central values as meaningful values for all of society, the periphery as well as the center, the marginal as well as the powerful. This means that the sacred values of society need to include the value of peripheral life and work.

The sacred values of society are a tradition which can never become an ideology. That is, the central values are realized and nurtured in the lived practices of people. Sacred values are institutionalized (turned into social institutions) in the habitual practices of people. The people of the center may be closer to understanding the values and how to live them. The people of the center may exercise more power in society through their control of institutions. But the sacred values of society cannot be fully rationalized, in the center or elsewhere. Ideologies are exercises of pride and hubris by intellectuals who believe that, since they can rationalize *some* of society's sacred values, they can rationalize *all* that needs to be known to run society justly. They are wrong. The world will always be richer, deeper, and more mysterious than our theories. The sacred values can never be realized in full purity, as ideologues passionately demand. And the periphery will always generate resistance, some just, some not.

Happy Societies

Centrism offers a vision of a happy society, but not *the* happy society. One society's central values will not be identical to those of another, even if both societies are equally functional. Moreover, societies do not exist in a vacuum, but in the world's largest ecology. The societies of the world will interact—cooperating, competing, and sometimes conflicting. They will affect one another culturally. Some will fall apart; some will be absorbed by others. Every center is potentially the periphery of another center.

Centrism takes the longest view of the process of social life. An ecology never stops changing, evolving, adapting. The task of incorporating the periphery into the center, in a social world of many competing centers, will never end until the world ends. And when will the world end? No one knows for sure. Physicists estimate that the earth is about five billion years old; they also

estimate that the sun will expand and consume the earth about five billion years from now. The centrist view is that we are in the middle of a long story. We should develop virtuous habits, and virtuous institutions, for the very long haul.

Happiness as flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is an action of the soul in accordance with virtue. Aristotle began with individuals in mind; though really, they were “individual” men with a whole support structure of wives, children, servants, and ancestors. Centrist sociology must say something like, “Social happiness is an action of the central institutions in accordance with the central values.” The task that moves the central institutions is inclusion of the periphery. This is a task that never ends, just as the task of developing virtuous habits in a person never ends. Among the most important *institutional* habits to develop is the habit of including the periphery.

The process of flourishing is a living inclusion rooted in particular cultural soil. The aristocratic process looks constantly for the best arising from the periphery and from the next generation. Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Healthy social evolution occurs by incremental change, a melioristic spirit among the leaders, and the people voting with their feet.

The besetting vice of societies, according to centrist sociology, is to believe that the current institutions, the current understanding of the central values, and the currently powerful elite are ideal. No more inclusions of the periphery are needed. No more self-criticisms of hidden exclusions, subordinations, and misunderstandings of the central values are needed. The aristocratic process, which is inherently inclusive, hardens into a caste-making practice, which is exclusive. Tradition, the living faith of the dead, hardens into traditionalism, the dead faith of the living. Customary practices which grew for a reason become taboos when the reason is forgotten. Unhealthy social revolutions occur due to over-rationalized ideologies, applied with insufficient concern for the possible unintended consequences. The elite becomes authoritarian in the name of liberty, equality, or fraternity.

A happy society can institutionalize virtuous processes. When it succeeds, these processes become social structures. When they make an enduring society in a beloved place, social structures can emerge into something new. Both the statics and the dynamics will be in balance. A happy society will have the right balance of order, to live in, and of change, to keep improving. A happy society can become real.

We opened with Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. In it, Dr. King recalls the central values of American society—that “all men are created equal.” He doesn’t call on the nation to abandon these values, to make a revolution against them. Instead, he calls on America to live out the true meaning of its

creed. Dr. King was a natural leader emerging from the most oppressed of peripheries. He strove toward the central values of American society, with struggle. The best of American elite leaders recognized that deep gap between the nation's central values and its central institutions' practice. The ongoing civil rights effort, proceeding with sometimes agonizing deliberate speed, has changed the American center's actual practice. The contradiction of racial caste was broken, and its effects are being eroded. Martin Luther King himself has gone from an oppositional leader of the periphery to recognition by the central elite as the "last-born of the Founding Fathers." The process of ameliorating the American center and incorporating its many peripheries is not over. But if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

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