"COMMUNITARIAN INDIVIDUALISM:" AMERICAN LIBERTY BOUNDED BY CONSCIENCE AND COMMUNITY

BRYAN G. DUMONT
Founder
American Ideologue

ABSTRACT

American liberty has long been understood as an exercise in individual rights. Yet historically, Americans have practiced their freedom not as autonomy untethered from social obligation, but as a liberty bounded by conscience and community: a tradition this paper terms communitarian individualism. Tracing its theological, historical, and sociological roots—from Puritan covenantal communities to frontier democracy to immigrant voluntary associations—this article argues that communitarian individualism synthesizes the philosophical tension between liberty and moral equality at the core of the American Ideology. Americans historically reconciled the tension not by suppressing one for the other, but by practicing freedom within shared norms and civic institutions. Five key habits—community engagement, peer-regulated morality, skepticism of centralized government, capitalism shaped by a Protestant ethic, and geographic mobility—operationalized this balance. The article concludes that as the moral and ideological foundations sustaining these practices have atrophied—eroded by technological individualism, declining religiosity, and overreliance on markets and the state—the outward forms of civic life have hollowed out. Reviving American liberty today will require more than rebuilding institutions; it will require recovering the ideology that once gave them meaning.

Keywords: American political culture, communitarian individualism, liberty and equality, voluntary associations, social capital, American Ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The United States was born of a revolution in the name of individual rights, yet Americans have historically practiced their freedom within a framework of conscience, community, and mutual obligation. In contrast to pure libertarian autonomy—the notion that freedom means liberation from all constraints—American individualism emerged as a liberty to be responsible: a freedom operating inside a shared moral order, supported by families, churches, civic associations, and local communities. This tradition gave rise to a distinctly American ideal: communitarian individualism.

The term itself is an oxymoron, but it captures a recurrent theme in U.S. history: the idea that true freedom flourishes only when tempered by conscience (inner moral restraint) and community (voluntary bonds among people). From the earliest Puritan settlers, who defined "liberty" as the freedom to do what is right under God's law, to nineteenth-century observers like Alexis de Tocqueville, who marveled at Americans' instinct for forming voluntary associations, to modern sociologists studying church groups, bowling leagues, and charitable organizations—the evidence consistently points to an individualism entwined with communal purpose.

Americans have generally rejected the extreme laissez-faire notion of the totally self-contained individual owing nothing to others. Instead, they developed an ethic of "self-interest rightly understood," wherein pursuing one's own good is achieved by contributing to the good of all. As Tocqueville famously noted, Americans "show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state."[1] In short, personal initiative and communal obligation have been two sides of the same coin in the American tradition.

Today, as American civic life frays and the foundations of shared belonging weaken, recovering this original synthesis—this fusion of liberty and community—is not merely a matter of nostalgia. It is a matter of national survival. many of those same customers.

I. AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

To grasp communitarian individualism, we must first distinguish American individualism from a more absolutist notion of libertarian autonomy. "Individualism" in the American context has never meant unbounded

license to do as one pleases without consequence. Rather, it has referred to a respect for the dignity and agency of each person—a belief that individuals should be free to pursue their own destiny—combined with an expectation that they will govern themselves responsibly and contribute to the communities to which they belong.

This tradition differs markedly from the caricature of laissez-faire autonomy, in which the individual is entirely "sovereign" and owes nothing to any external moral or social order.

Everett Carll Ladd, a political scientist of the late twentieth century, noted that Americans have historically placed "traditional limits on narrow self-serving in American individualism." [2] In other words, even as Americans champion personal freedom, they have imposed ethical boundaries on its exercise. Ladd argued that American individualism has never embraced a purely selfish or anti-social creed. It is "intense," to be sure—Americans are more individualistic in value orientation than many other peoples—but Americans also exhibit high levels of voluntarism, charitable giving, and community involvement—behaviors inconsistent with a philosophy of atomistic egoism.[3]

Ladd described American civic culture as one in which "the drift and consequences of American individualism are collectivist, though certainly not of a state-centered variety. It's a collectivism...citizens give themselves freely."[4]

The distinction between libertarian autonomy and American individualism can be further illustrated by attitudes toward moral obligation. A strict libertarian might say that individuals have no inherent duties except to refrain from harming others' life or property—a purely negative liberty. American individualism, by contrast, has always coexisted with a strong sense of responsibility to others—whether grounded in religion ("love thy neighbor") or republican citizenship ("ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country").

The Founders themselves did not advocate unbridled freedom. John Locke's political philosophy, so influential on the American founding, assumed a natural law of right and wrong that bounds individual rights. Locke wrote that although men in the state of nature have natural liberty, it is not a liberty to commit vice or destroy others; it is liberty "within the bounds of the law of nature."[5] Early American leaders echoed this. President John Adams warned in 1798 that "our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."[6]

Such statements reveal an enduring American understanding that individual freedom requires internal and communal checks—conscience, virtue, and voluntary moral obligation—or else it degrades into license and anarchy. Indeed, one might say Americans historically believed ian "ordered liberty." This term, used by the jurist Justice Benjamin Cardozo (and earlier by figures like Edmund Burke), captures the idea of liberty ordered by law and morality. Americans have sought liberty under God and the rule of law, not liberty as the absence of all restraint.

The New England Puritans explicitly distinguished between natural liberty (doing whatever one wishes, akin to animal instinct) and moral liberty (freedom to do the good under God's covenant).[7] That insight set the pattern for what followed. Even Ralph Waldo Emerson—so often cited as a champion of self-trust—rooted his ideal of self-reliance in a moral universe. In Emerson's time, the abolitionist movement (to which he belonged) mobilized individuals to act for the communal good of ending slavery, invoking not self-interest but moral duty.

American individualism has often manifested as a quest for spiritual self-direction more than social irresponsibility. The frontiersman seeking space in the wilderness, the religious dissenter seeking freedom of worship, the entrepreneur striking out independently—each was pursuing a personal vision, but rarely in contempt of moral norms. More typically, they carried a Bible, a code of conduct, or a set of communal expectations with them, even when they ventured far from established institutions. Everett Ladd and colleagues like Seymour Martin Lipset have empirically demonstrated that Americans differ from Europeans in valuing individual opportunity and limited government, yet Americans are also exceptionally religious, community-minded, and philanthropic. Survey data consistently show, for example, that Americans are more likely to believe that success is derived from individual effort, whereas Europeans are more resigned that success depends on forces beyond personal control.[8] Likewise, nearly twice as many Americans as Europeans chose "hard work" (as opposed to "luck and connections") as the main route to a better life.[9]

Americans simultaneously lead advanced nations in indicators of voluntary group membership and charitable giving. As one comparative study noted, Americans "are more likely than Europeans to see personal effort...as more

important for getting ahead in life," but also markedly less likely to favor heavy government intervention in caring for the needy.[10] Instead, Americans historically turned to civil society—churches, mutual aid societies, private philanthropy—to address social needs.

This cultural pattern indicates that the American individual has never been an island. He or she is embedded in voluntary institutions that shape character and sustain liberty. Whereas libertarian autonomy in its extreme form treats every constraint as an affront, American thought has historically distinguished between legitimate constraints (those arising from conscience, covenant, and communal consent) and illegitimate ones (those imposed arbitrarily by distant authority). The former constraints were seen not as threats to liberty, but as its necessary guardians.

II. THE SYNTHESIS IN THE EQUALITY-LIBERTY DIALECTIC

Understanding this distinctive American individualism allows us to see how communitarian individualism emerges as the synthesis within the broader philosophical dimension of the American Ideology.

The original dialectic—indeed, the tension at the heart of the Declaration of Independence—is between the liberty of the individual and the moral equality of all. Communitarian individualism names the synthesis that arises whenever Americans hold these ideals in balanced tension: an ethos in which personal freedom finds its rightful expression within a shared moral order, maintained by mutual obligations rather than by force.

Neither pure autonomy nor pure collectivism has ever defined the United States. Rather, the country's defining feature is the perpetual attempt to harmonize liberty and equality in real communities, with each new generation revisiting the paradox anew.

From the first settlements onward, Americans have grappled with integrating these two poles. In classical Hegelian terms, communitarian individualism emerges as the synthesis of a dialectic between:

- **Liberty**: the individual's natural rights and autonomy.
- **Equality**: the moral claim that all persons possess inherent dignity and must be treated accordingly.

The clash between thesis and antithesis becomes especially stark at the extremes:

- Maximize liberty unconditionally, and inequality skyrockets.
- Maximize equality unconditionally, and liberty is abridged.

Communitarian individualism is America's answer: personal autonomy existing within a community that upholds shared moral standards.

- **Communitarian**: Belonging, duty, and the moral worth of others.
- **Individualistic**: Agency, self-direction, and personal responsibility.

Thus, communitarian individualism is neither purely communal nor purely individualistic, but a perpetual balancing of both. The tension between maximal liberty and maximal equality is not a failure—it is the creative engine of American freedom.

III. THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF COMMUNITARIAN INDIVIDUALISM

A. PURITAN THEOLOGICAL AND COMMUNAL ROOTS OF AMERICAN LIBERTY

The seeds of America's communitarian individualism were planted by the Puritans of New England in the seventeenth century. Far from believing in unfettered personal freedom, the Puritans advanced a concept of liberty intricately bound to religious duty and communal covenant. Their influence on American culture and notions of selfhood was profound. As historian Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "Puritanism...was not only a religious doctrine; it also blended at several points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories."[11] The Puritans combined an intense personal piety (each individual standing alone before God's judgment) with a determination to build godly communities governed by covenanted rules. This fusion set the template for later American patterns of voluntary association and moral self-governance. Historian Mark Noll notes that early Americans developed a "conviction in the reciprocity of personal morality and social well-being," forging an enduring alliance between "a language of liberty and a language of virtue."[12] In practice, this meant that liberty was never absolute; it was liberty under God's law.

John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, articulated the Puritan view of liberty in a landmark 1645 speech often titled *On Liberty*. Winthrop drew a famous distinction between what he called natural liberty and civil (or moral) liberty. "There is a twofold liberty," Winthrop explained, "natural...and civil or

federal."[13] Natural liberty, he said, is the freedom "to do what [one] lists"—a freedom possessed by both men and beasts in which one may choose evil or good at will. This kind of liberty, Winthrop warned, is corrupt. It is "incompatible and inconsistent with authority" and if indulged would make men "worse than brute beasts."[14] In vivid language, he called unchecked natural liberty "that great enemy of truth and peace, that wild beast which all the ordinances of God are bent against, to restrain and subdue it."[15]

By contrast, Winthrop extolled civil or federal liberty, which he defined as liberty "to that only which is good, just, and honest"—essentially, the freedom to do what is right, as bounded by the moral law and covenants.[16] This liberty is the "proper end and object of authority," meaning it exists under the guidance of legitimate law and cannot survive without it. Crucially, Winthrop termed it federal liberty in reference to the Puritans' covenants (the term deriving from Latin *foedus*, covenant). It was the freedom one enjoys as part of a covenant community—analogous, Winthrop said, to the liberty a wife has in willingly submitting to the authority of a loving husband, or the liberty of church members under Christ. In such relationships, obedience to rightful authority is not oppression but "her honor and freedom."[17]

Winthrop's doctrine meant that for the Puritans, liberty was inseparable from virtue. The Puritans did not cross the Atlantic in 1630 to create a haven of individual license; they came to build a "City upon a Hill"—a model godly community—where each person's soul was free from the corruptions of the Old World but also bound by a collective purpose. In Winthrop's vision, if colonists claimed "natural corrupt liberties" and did "what is good in [their] own eyes," the result would be strife and anarchy.[18] But if they instead embraced "such civil and lawful liberties as Christ allows," then they would "quietly and cheerfully submit" to communal authority and enjoy true freedom.[19] This formulation embodies communitarian individualism: the individual is liberated through the community's covenant, not from it. Each person's conscience is sovereign under God, but that conscience obliges the person to live righteously and to uphold mutual responsibilities.

Puritan practice reflected this ethos. They established towns with a high degree of local self-governance (often through town meetings), but those same towns enforced strict codes of conduct derived from Scripture. Church membership was voluntary in principle—one had to have an inward conversion experience—yet church attendance and adherence to community laws were often compulsory. The paradox is only apparent: the Puritans valued voluntary commitment to a moral community so highly that they institutionalized it. They believed individuals freely consented to the covenant (both religious and civil); once having consented, they were expected to obey its rules. This is a kind of social contract theory infused with theology. As Tocqueville later noted, the Puritan settlers combined "the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty" from the very founding of America.[20]

Their Mayflower Compact of 1620 was an early expression of this: though drafted by Separatist Pilgrims (a group related to the Puritans), it declared the colonists' intention to form "a civil Body Politick" and bind themselves to laws "thought most meet and convenient for the general good," all under the overarching aim of advancing the Christian faith.[21] Freedom for them meant the freedom to form a godly community of their own design.

An illustrative episode is the enforcement of the Massachusetts Bay "Blue Laws." These were community laws prohibiting things like Sabbath-breaking, excessive drunkenness, or ostentatious dress—regulations we today might consider intrusive on personal choice. Yet in the Puritan mind, such laws protected the community's freedom to live according to conscience. If an individual refused to abide by the community's moral norms, he was seen as threatening the collective covenant and thus could be sanctioned (even to the point of banishment, as in the famous cases of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, who were exiled not for secular crimes but for disrupting religious unity). Although Williams and Hutchinson might be considered champions of a more pluralist, tolerant individualism in retrospect, it's telling that even they did not advocate libertine freedom—Williams left to found Rhode Island on the principle of freedom of conscience, itself a deeply held moral commitment, and he established a community in Providence with its own agreed-upon order.

The Puritan influence on later American values is evident in several ways. Religious liberty in America—ultimately codified in the First Amendment—was born from sects like the Puritans and Quakers who insisted on the right to worship (or not) according to conscience. But those same sects practiced a robust community life that moderated individualism. The New England town, often centered on a Congregational church, became a prototype of American local democracy. Tocqueville, during his visit in the 1830s, was struck by the strong "municipal spirit" in New

England towns, a legacy of the Puritan covenant tradition.[22]

Towns governed themselves, raised their own taxes, built schools and churches—fostering a sense of shared responsibility. Tocqueville wrote, "In America not only do municipal institutions exist, but there is also a municipal spirit which sustains and gives them life…The New England township…acts within a sphere beyond which it cannot pass, but within that domain its movements are free."[23] This local independence excited the attachment of citizens; they saw the town as their enterprise, and thus felt invested in its collective well-being.[24] The paradox was that the same religious zeal which in Europe might have been oppressive (state-imposed orthodoxy) in America became a source of local solidarity and participatory freedom.

The Puritans also inculcated the idea that each individual had a calling—a notion later identified by sociologist Max Weber as central to the "Protestant ethic." Every person's duty was to work diligently at their God-given tasks, not only for personal gain but to glorify God and serve the community. Success was a sign of God's blessing (in Puritan theology), but it carried an injunction: to use one's talents for the common good. Frugality, industry, and education were Puritan virtues that became American hallmarks. Importantly, these were pursued within communal frameworks—e.g., the family farm, the congregational church, the village school. Thus, from early on, the American individual was imagined not as a lone wolf but as a steward of both personal and communal destinies.

In summary, the Puritans gave America a model of liberty under covenant. Their "city upon a hill" ideal held that a community of righteous individuals, freely bound together by shared principles, could achieve a greater freedom and societal success than any lone individual or coercive authority could impose. This model established a pattern repeated in various forms throughout American history: whether it was frontier settlers organizing wagon trains and town councils, immigrants forming mutual aid societies, or neighbors forming committees for the local schoolhouse, the prevailing ethic was that freedom required cooperation. As one historian put it, the dominant strain in early American life was "ordered liberty"—a freedom intentionally structured by moral norms and community institutions.[25]

B. THE FRONTIER: INDIVIDUALISM SHAPED BY COOPERATIVE COMMUNITY

In American mythology, the frontier is often depicted as the testing ground of rugged individualism. The image of solitary pioneers braving the wilderness, taming the land with axe and rifle, has become a cultural archetype. Indeed, historian Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 *Frontier Thesis* argued that the existence of a moving frontier line—"free land" continually opening to settlement—was the defining factor in shaping American democracy and character. Turner claimed that the frontier produced "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness… that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism" in the American character. [26] According to Turner, as each generation moved westward, Americans shed old European social structures and reinvented themselves as self-reliant, equality-minded citizens.

There is truth in this narrative: the frontier did foster independence, courage, and innovation. Yet Turner's own analysis also hinted at another truth—that frontier individualism worked for both good and for evil, and crucially, that it was tempered by certain communal impulses.[27] On the frontier, liberty was indeed expansive, but survival often demanded cooperation. The frontier thus offers a vivid case of communitarian individualism in practice: settlers were individualistic in spirit, yet they leaned on community for mutual aid, security, and the creation of order where formal government was absent.

As Turner noted, the pioneer's individualism could be extreme—sometimes lawless (the "evil" side)—but out of necessity, frontiersmen and women formed collective arrangements. One of the first things pioneers did upon settling a new area was to establish basic institutions: they convened town meetings, raised militia companies, built churches and schoolhouses, and organized posses or "regulators" to enforce justice in the absence of courts. The iconic image of a "barn raising," where an entire community would assemble to help one family build its barn, exemplifies frontier mutual aid. Each homesteader, acting alone, could not easily erect a large barn; together, dozens of families could raise one in a day, moving from farm to farm until everyone was served. This practice, common on the 18th- and 19th-century frontiers, underscores that even fiercely independent farmers recognized their interdependence. They voluntarily traded labor, knowing that helping one's neighbor today meant that neighbor would help you tomorrow. Such reciprocity was not mandated by any government—it arose organically as a cultural norm. Frontier diaries and recollections are replete with accounts of neighbors helping each other harvest crops, fight prairie fires, or care

for the sick. The law of the frontier might have been "every man for himself" in theory, but in practice a more accurate adage was "pull together or perish."

Legal and political structures in frontier territories also balanced individual initiative with community governance. In many western settlements, "mining camps" or new towns drafted their own codes (often called "miners' laws" or "town charters") through collective meetings. These grassroots legal systems established rules for property claims, dispute resolution, and criminal punishment long before federal marshals or state governments arrived. Historian Richard Maxwell Brown documented the tradition of "communal justice" on the frontier—vigilance committees formed by respectable citizens to curb theft, violence, or anarchy in the absence of formal courts.[28] While vigilance committees sometimes devolved into mob justice, in their ideal they were a collective assertion of community standards: free individuals banding together to protect the peace and uphold shared norms of right and wrong.

Another insight into frontier communitarianism comes from Tocqueville's observations during his travels in 1831. Tocqueville visited frontier areas like Michigan and noted both the adventurous spirit and the voluntary collective efforts of settlers. He wrote of Americans' propensity to form associations even for smaller needs, famously saying, "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations... if they want to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association."[29] On the frontier, this might mean a church association, a temperance society, or a committee to petition the government for a new road or postal route.

Tocqueville remarked with some astonishment that where in Europe a noble or the state might undertake an enterprise, in America individuals did so cooperatively: "in the United States you are sure to find an association" leading any new undertaking.[30] The frontier settlers exemplified this by establishing claim associations (to defend land claims against outsiders), cattlemen's associations (to manage common ranges), or simply ad hoc groups to build infrastructure. These voluntary bodies often had charters and elected officers—essentially miniature self-governments formed by private citizens.

The frontier church is a particularly instructive institution. The revivals of the Second Great Awakening (early 19th century) often took the form of camp meetings on the frontier—large gatherings where itinerant preachers would draw scattered settlers together for worship and community. Out of these revivals grew new congregations and denominations (such as the Methodists and Baptists exploding in number) that provided spiritual community as well as practical social support. The frontier church was typically built by the collective labor of the faithful, and it served as a social center. On the prairies or in the mountains, the church (or the traveling circuit preacher) tied isolated homesteads into a network of shared faith and mutual care. It was common for frontier churches to organize help for needy families or for women's groups (sewing circles, Bible studies) to double as relief societies.

Tocqueville, again, noted that in America, religion was a communal force that nurtured liberty by cultivating virtue and bonds of fellowship: "Religion in America... must be regarded as the first of their political institutions... for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions."[31] On the frontier, this was palpably true—churches and religious norms restrained excesses of individualism (such as lawlessness or familial abandonment) and provided moral justification for community cooperation.

Frederick Jackson Turner himself acknowledged that as frontier communities matured, they developed more structure. Territories sought statehood (implying acceptance of the Constitution and Union), towns incorporated, and schools and local governments took root. The vigilante individualist gradually gave way to the settler-citizen, invested in the rule of law that he and his neighbors created. The very process of frontier settlement can be seen as a series of acts of communal organization by enterprising individuals. For example, the wagon trains that headed west on the Oregon Trail in the 1840s often created their own written constitutions at the trailhead (e.g., in Independence, Missouri). Emigrants would elect officers, agree on rules for travel and conflict resolution, and swear to help each other along the perilous journey. These were spontaneous social contracts made by people who fiercely insisted on going west of their own free will, yet realized they needed a community of the road to succeed. Many such wagon train compacts survive in diaries—evidence of Americans' instinct to balance freedom and order even in the most liberty-rich endeavor of striking out for new land.

The frontier also introduced a new kind of community that was not based on kin or ancient custom but on voluntary affinity: people banded together with relative strangers because they shared a dream of a new life. This fostered what Turner called the "plasticity" of American society—a

flexibility in social arrangements and a willingness to form new groups on the fly. Americans became adept at what we would today call networking, except it was for barn raisings and town foundings rather than professional advancement. The upshot is that the frontier did not, contrary to myth, produce a nation of loners; it produced countless tight-knit communities forged in hardship. As one scholar later quipped, "individualism may have driven the pioneer to the frontier, but only community could sustain him there."[32]

It is important to note that frontier communitarian individualism also had limits and exclusions. The freedoms and communities being built often explicitly left out certain groups—notably Native Americans and, in many areas, free Blacks or immigrants of certain ethnicities. Frontier communities could be insular and hostile to outsiders; the same communal spirit that bonded the members could manifest as violence or injustice toward those deemed not part of the circle (e.g., vigilante expulsions of Chinese miners or the displacement of indigenous tribes). This reminds us that communitarian individualism, as an ethos, was historically bounded by racial and cultural lines. Yet even in those lamentable cases, the pattern holds: individuals claimed freedom for themselves as a community, while denying it to others who were not admitted into that moral community. A critical analysis thus must acknowledge that whose conscience and community counted was often contested and could be tragically narrow. The ideal of liberty bounded by conscience applied, in the minds of many 19th-century Americans, chiefly to those within their perceived in-group (white, Christian settlers). Over time, however, the circle of inclusion did expand through struggle and reform, extending the principles of communal obligation and rights to formerly excluded groups (the abolitionist movement, for example, appealed to Americans' religious conscience and republican values to recognize the enslaved as part of the community of equal souls).

In sum, the frontier era reinforced two seemingly opposite American traits: a spirit of bold individual enterprise and a habit of voluntary cooperation. Turner's "dominant individualism" was real—the frontiersman was often distrustful of authority and proud of personal independence. Yet American individualism on the frontier never existed in pure isolation; it was embedded in frontier democracy, sodbuster neighbors, mining camp codes, and church fellowships. The settlers' very lack of a distant government made them lean more heavily on one another. Historian Daniel Boorstin aptly described the result: "Americans on the frontier learned that freedom was most secure when it was buttressed by community. The pioneer, flung into an undefined social space, reinvented society through countless acts of joining and cooperation."[33]

C. IMMIGRATION: THE "SECOND FRAGMENT"

Louis Hartz described the United States as a "liberal fragment" of Europe—a society founded by settlers who transplanted a very unique segment of mostly devout, fiercely independent, and industrious members of a budding new middle class.[34] Our ideological DNA was borne of this strange bunch: the values of Protestant bourgeois settlers and their dissenting ethos and middle-class outlook stamped early American culture and institutions with an enduring liberal character.

Hartz's thesis emphasized the uniqueness of this founding fragment and its uniform liberalism. Yet subsequent waves of immigrants—arriving into an established liberal order—constituted what we might call a "second fragment society." These newcomers were not passive passengers on a pre-set course; rather, they were self-selected reinforcements of the American ideology. Each major immigration wave effectively re-founded America in spirit, replenishing and even amplifying its foundational liberal values by bringing new energy and personal commitment to the creed.

Every act of migration is, at its core, an expression of human agency—a bold individualistic choice. To leave one's homeland in search of a better life is rarely passive; it is typically the most enterprising, ambitious, or desperate individuals who choose the uncertain road of relocation. The millions who crossed oceans to reach the United States did so as active agents of their own destiny, embodying a spirit of risk-taking and self-reliance. They opted out of the familiar bonds of home—often fleeing class-bound societies, state persecution, or stagnant economies—and chose a republic free of feudal hierarchy, where individual effort promised advancement. This self-selection produced immigrant streams inclined toward America's ethos. Nineteenth-century newcomers were drawn by the vision of America as a "land of opportunity" where anyone could succeed through hard work. In effect, those who most believed in self-making were the ones most likely to uproot themselves to pursue it.

Crucially, immigrant self-selection favored traits that dovetailed with American individualism: initiative, self-reliance, and tolerance for risk. Those content with Old World certainties tended to stay put, whereas those who boarded ships were willing to stake their future on

personal effort. Frontier life provides one illustration. The frontier's harsh conditions demanded independence and perseverance, and many immigrants who ventured to the frontier exhibited a rugged individualism in line with that of native pioneers. More generally, an Irish farmer fleeing the 1840s famine, a Chinese villager sailing for Gold Rush California, or a Jewish family escaping Eastern European pogroms each demonstrated extraordinary faith in their own capacity to forge a better fate. This mass exercise of agency injected into American society countless individuals for whom liberty and self-reliance were not abstractions but personal imperatives.

Upon arrival, immigrants did not simply melt into American life as passive converts. Rather, they actively recharged the nation's entrepreneurial culture through their labor, ingenuity, and ambition. Time and again, immigrant Americans proved to be dynamic economic actors, starting businesses at higher rates than the native-born and seizing opportunity in every sector. Historians of the nineteenth century have long noted the upward mobility of immigrant communities—a testament to the alignment of their aspirations with the American Dream. For example, Italian immigrants around 1900 channeled their grit into small enterprises. In Boston, "many Italian Americans started their own businesses"—from pushcart produce stands to barbershops—and by 1900, an Italian-born merchant ran the city's largest fruit wholesale business.[35] Such stories played out nationwide. Whether selling produce or opening small shops, newcomers strove to become masters of their economic fate.

This vigor was not limited to one ethnicity. Jewish immigrants, for instance, achieved rapid upward mobility within a generation. Arriving with little, many Eastern European Jews in New York rose from pushcart peddlers and garment workers to shop owners and professionals. By the early twentieth century, observers noted their high rates of education and quick ascent into the middle class. Irish Catholic immigrants, too, climbed the occupational ladder: those who had begun as unskilled laborers in the 1840s saw their children become skilled tradesmen, entrepreneurs, and even elected officials—a classic rags-to-respectability trajectory. These successes reinforced the national ethos of self-making. Rather than undercut the ideal of meritocracy, immigrant achievements affirmed it by offering proof that an individual's talent and effort could triumph over humble origins.

In the modern era, immigrants start businesses at nearly double the rate of native-born citizens—a continuation of historical patterns. [36] Consider Andrew Carnegie, a penniless Scottish arrival who became a steel magnate, and Levi Strauss, a Bavarian Jew who built a denim empire during the Gold Rush era. Such narratives rejuvenate the belief that America is the land where talent and toil can generate extraordinary success. By their triumphs, immigrants have acted as ideological reinforcements of the American Creed, renewing its promise that individual effort can yield advancement.

Like the frontiersmen and Pilgrims before them, immigrants embraced and extended the tradition of civil society. Far from remaining isolated, they organized a rich array of ethnic associations—churches, fraternal lodges, unions, benevolent societies—that helped their own people and also enriched American civic life. As one account notes, "in immigrant neighborhoods these societies functioned as an extension of communities," providing support such as loans to start businesses, aid to families of injured workers, and funeral insurance.[37]

Every major immigrant group built such institutions. Irish Catholics, for example, founded the Ancient Order of Hibernians in New York in 1836 as a fraternal society to help Irish immigrants settle and to combat anti-Catholic discrimination. Chinese immigrants on the West Coast formed clan associations and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (the "Six Companies") to assist newcomers and defend their community against prejudice. By the early twentieth century, Italians in New York had hundreds of mutual aid societies, such as the Sons of Italy, which pooled members' dues to support those in need and help families start small businesses. Eastern European Jews formed *landsmanshaftn* (hometown societies)—by 1910, New York City had as many as 2,000 such organizations. These provided members with synagogues, free loan funds, and even hospitals.

Immigrant voluntary associations served a dual purpose. They helped newcomers navigate American life, while also inculcating in immigrants the habits of democratic citizenship. By managing insurance funds, running schools, or petitioning local authorities, immigrants practiced self-government at a grassroots level. Moreover, many immigrant-led associations reached beyond their own ethnicity. Labor unions organized by immigrant workers fought for rights that benefited all workers; ethnic charitable institutions (hospitals, orphanages, schools) often served anyone in the community regardless of origin. In creating these voluntary networks, immigrants amplified the American tradition of voluntary communitarianism. They proved that a nation of self-

reliant individuals could also be a community of neighbors who freely support one another.

Immigrants exercised the liberty to reinvent themselves—they came to America to enjoy freedoms (economic opportunity, religious choice, escape from tyranny) unavailable at home. At the same time, their presence posed a question of equality: would these newcomers be accepted as full and equal members of society? By striving for the American Dream, immigrants challenged the nation to live up to its creed that merit—not birth or caste—should determine destiny.

Crucially, immigrants reinforced rather than undermined America's liberal consensus. Most sought inclusion, not revolution. Even when immigrants led social conflicts—labor strikes or radical movements—these were eventually absorbed into the democratic process rather than toppling it. By continually reviving debates over liberty and equality, immigrants prevented ideological stagnation and kept American society moving closer to its professed ideals.

IV. FIVE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITARIAN INDIVIDUALISM

Although communitarian individualism can be defined philosophically—as the dynamic balancing of liberty and equality in the American tradition—it is not merely a theory. It has always taken concrete form in the habits, institutions, and cultural practices of American life. The American Ideology lives not only in founding documents but in the everyday ways Americans have organized their freedom: through voluntary associations, peer-enforced norms, skeptical attitudes toward centralized authority, a moralized capitalism, and a restless spirit of movement.

To identify the defining features of communitarian individualism—*primus inter pares* among the four cardinal values of the American Ideology—I applied four criteria:

1. **Pervasiveness**: the trait must be widely (though not universally) distributed across the American experience, transcending region, class, or ethnicity.
2. **Persistence**: it must endure across historical periods, showing resilience through changing circumstances.
3. **Exceptionalism**: it must reflect something distinctive about the American tradition, not merely a universal human pattern.
4. **Creative Tension**: it must visibly embody the dialectical balancing of individual liberty and moral equality at the heart of the American Ideology.

Applying these tests, five characteristics emerge as the clearest and most enduring manifestations of communitarian individualism:

- Community engagement
- Moral conformity and peer-regulated behavior
- Skepticism of government
- Capitalism shaped by the Protestant work ethic
- Geographic mobility

Table 1. Defining the Five Traits of Communitarian Individualism

Characteristic	Pervasiveness	Persistence	Exceptionalism	Creative Tension (Liberty–Equality)
Community Engagement	Americans of all ages form associations for every civic purpose	Civic engagement sustained across centuries; decline noted only recently	U.S. voluntary association rates far higher than Europe	Voluntary associations channel individual initiative into collective welfare
Moral Conformity & Peer Regulation	Majority opinion and peer enforcement shape norms nationwide	From Puritan community standards to modern peer-driven norms	Informal sanction often substitutes for legal coercion unlike in Europe	Peer norms moderate personal freedom without requiring government coercion
Skepticism of Government	High trust in military and police, low in Congress/federal power	Rooted in colonial experience and Hartz's liberal fragment thesis	Americans much less likely to expect state welfare compared to Europeans	Community solves problems locally; liberty preserved from overreach
Protestant Work Ethic & Capitalism	Protestant ethic pervades American views on work and wealth	From Franklin to Carnegie to Gates: Wealth linked to public duty	U.S. leads in philanthropy and voluntarism among wealthy nations	Economic freedom balanced by moral obligation to share prosperity
Geographic Mobility	Historically over 20% moved annually in postwar America	Mobility remains an aspirational ideal despite recent declines	Americans relocate for opportunity far more than Europeans	Moving demands forming new associations, recreating civic life

Each of these habits reflects the American instinct to pursue freedom not apart from communal life, but through it. They are not merely customs; they are the operational form of our ideological commitment to communitarian individualism—the living ways Americans have negotiated the perpetual tension between individual striving and mutual obligation.

1. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: FROM TOCQUEVILLE'S ASSOCIATIONS TO PUTNAM'S BOWLING ALONE

One of the clearest expressions of America's fusion of individual initiative with communal life is the nation's longstanding culture of community engagement. Observers have marveled at Americans' proclivity to form and join all manner of associations. Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1830s, devoted an entire chapter of *Democracy in America* to this phenomenon. He wrote with admiration that "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations… religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute."[38]

Whenever a need or shared interest is perceived, Tocqueville noted, some group of individuals will voluntarily come together to address it—whether it's building a church, organizing a temperance campaign, establishing a library, or hosting a county fair. The key point is that they do this not by government direction, but through private initiative in concert with others. Tocqueville regarded this habit as a bulwark of both liberty and community. By participating in associations, individuals learned the "skills of freedom"—cooperation, deliberation, compromise—and met their fellows on equal footing, reinforcing social trust. He famously contrasted this with Europe, where centralized authorities or aristocrats undertook many tasks that in America were handled by associations of citizens.[39]

In Tocqueville's analysis, Americans succeeded in combining individualism with cooperation: each person pursued their interest, but quickly saw that joint action was often the most effective means to achieve it. This he encapsulated in the concept of "self-interest rightly understood." The doctrine teaches that by doing good for others in small, everyday ways, one ultimately does good for oneself. [40] It eschews grand self-sacrifice but encourages "daily small acts of self-denial" for the community. Tocqueville observed that this doctrine had "found universal acceptance" in America, to the point that Americans would often explain their altruistic actions in terms of enlightened self-interest rather than pure virtue. Thus, joining a volunteer fire company or a benevolent society was seen as both helping neighbors and protecting one's own family and property by keeping the town safe and cohesive.

This propensity for civic engagement continued (with ebbs and flows) into the twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century, analysts could still say that voluntary associations were the lifeblood of American community. Scholar Arthur Schlesinger Sr., in 1944, famously wrote that the "key to American character" is the tendency to join, that Americans are "a nation of joiners." [41] He pointed to the vast numbers involved in churches, fraternal clubs (Freemasons, Elks, Odd Fellows, etc., counted millions of members), hobby clubs, and civic improvement leagues. This thriving civil society meant that Americans typically spent many hours per week in group activities outside the home and workplace, whether it was a PTA meeting, a lodge ceremony, a Scouts troop, or choir practice. Such participation was effectively a school of democracy: individuals learned to cooperate, sometimes to lead, sometimes to follow, and to negotiate rules and bylaws together. It was an exercise of freedom (one chose to join or not), but once part of a group, one adhered to its norms—again balancing liberty with self-imposed constraint for the greater good of group success.

By the late twentieth century, however, commentators began to worry that this rich associational life was deteriorating. The most prominent voice here is Robert D. Putnam, whose 1995 essay "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" (expanded into a 2000 book) documented significant drops in many traditional forms of civic engagement. Putnam noted, for example, that between the 1960s and 1990s, participation in town meetings, club meetings, church groups, unions, and even family dinners had decreased markedly. He famously used the metaphor that more Americans were bowling than ever before, but league bowling (a social sport) had plummeted—meaning people were literally "bowling alone." This served as a colorful indicator of a broader atomization. Putnam's research, using data like the General Social Survey, showed that membership in traditional civic organizations fell by perhaps 10–50% depending on the type, from roughly the 1960s peak to the 1990s. [42]

2. MORAL CONFORMITY AND PEER-REGULATED BEHAVIOR

American freedom has also been bounded and guided by the force of social norms and peer regulation—that is, the informal enforcement of community standards through

expectation, praise, and disapproval. From the "city upon a hill" Puritan villages to small-town America and even in modern workplaces and online communities, Americans have exhibited a tendency to keep an eye on each other's conduct and uphold certain shared values through social pressure. This is a delicate facet of communitarian individualism: on one hand, it risks stifling individuality if taken to an extreme (as in oppressive conformism); on the other hand, it represents communities taking responsibility for moral order without heavy-handed government intrusion. Historically, Americans often preferred peer enforcement of norms to legal enforcement, reserving law for the most serious offenses and relying on community mores to regulate much behavior.

Tocqueville remarked on this in an intriguing way. He noted a paradox: politically, America was very free, but socially, it could be quite conformist. "I know of no country," he wrote, "in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America."[43] Tocqueville was observing that the tyranny of majority opinion in America was powerful. Once a moral or political idea became dominant, those who disagreed felt enormous social pressure to keep silent or feign agreement. In early 19th-century America, to be openly atheist, or an open dissenter on patriotic or majority religious values, was to invite ostracism. Tocqueville recounted that the majority "raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion: within those barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them."[44] Essentially, even absent official censorship, social sanction could be severe—affecting one's reputation, business, and friendships.

America's penchant for local, peer-driven justice also appears in phenomena like the "tarring and feathering" of miscreants in colonial times or the extralegal shunning of profiteers during crises (e.g., price gougers in wartime might be publicly vilified). While such vigilante actions sometimes violated individuals' rights, they reflected a cultural instinct to self-regulate community standards without always waiting for courts. A more benign form was the "Committee of Ten" or similar community councils that some towns formed to address issues like public morals, cleanliness, or youth delinquency, issuing recommendations and socially enforcing them.

America's inheritance of moral conformism from the Puritans persists in a variety of ways today. In the "exceptional" social conservatism of many Americans compared to other Western nations, peer regulation continues—albeit in new forms—sometimes controversially through what is now termed "cancel culture" on social media, where public opinion (often a peer network magnified by the internet) can lead to someone being ostracized or losing opportunities if they violate perceived community norms of discourse. This is a double-edged sword: it can be seen as democratic accountability (people collectively expressing disapproval of offensive behavior), but also as mob rule jeopardizing free expression (echoing Tocqueville's fear of majority tyranny). The fundamental mechanism is the same age-old one: communal pressure shaping individual behavior. Americans today navigate a plethora of peer communities—both physical and virtual—each with norms (political correctness in some, religious orthodoxy in others, professional ethics in career circles, etc.). One's freedom in any given circle is moderated by those norms. An academic, for instance, enjoys intellectual freedom, but if he espouses ideas far outside the consensus of his peers, he may face professional marginalization; a teenager has freedom of dress, but if she dresses dramatically outside her peer group's fashion norms, she may face ridicule or isolation at school.

Conformity is often undesirable—especially for a country that prizes liberty (and indeed Tocqueville warned it could choke off intellectual progress)—but it also reflected the degree to which Americans themselves policed the boundaries of acceptable conduct, thus reducing the need for state policing. For example, well into the twentieth century, many American communities enforced morality through social means: public shaming of adulterers or drunkards, church discipline for congregants who strayed, gossip networks that kept tabs on domestic abuse or neglected children, etc. In small towns, certain behaviors (failing to keep your yard tidy, missing church persistently, mistreating your family) would earn one a bad name. In effect, one's neighbors were a kind of jury of character. A person of ill repute might find himself informally punished—perhaps no one would hire him, local storekeepers might extend no credit, and respectable society would avoid him. This was not the state acting, but a peer-regulated system of rewards and penalties for behavior. Conversely, those who upheld community standards—honest dealings, charitable works, churchgoing, sobriety—were rewarded with trust and social capital, which brought tangible benefits in an era when a handshake and reputation could secure you a loan or a business partnership.

A classic American institution, the "temperance society" of the nineteenth century, illustrates peer regulation.

These societies, often led by local churches or reformers, asked individuals to sign pledges abstaining from alcohol. Members would encourage each other in sobriety and apply moral suasion on those tempted to drink. Before Prohibition became law in 1920, the temperance movement relied mostly on this voluntary pressure. Similarly, Sabbath observance was encouraged by community expectation; businesses in many towns simply did not open on Sunday because customers and employees alike embraced (or at least bowed to) the norm of a day of rest. Blue Laws enforced some of this legally, but peer pressure did much of the work. If a shopkeeper opened on Sunday, he risked community censure or boycott by his neighbors who saw it as violating shared religious norms.

Peer-regulated behavior often took on a specifically American flavor in the context of youth organizations. Groups like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts (founded in the early twentieth century) instilled values of trustworthiness, loyalty, helpfulness, and so on—effectively creating peer groups where good conduct was expected and reinforced. The Scouts oath and law became a community standard among those youth, influencing their individual choices (not to cheat, to help others, etc.) even outside troop meetings. Likewise, in schools, the prevalence of student-run honor codes and disciplinary committees (especially in colleges and later high schools) showed a belief that peers could govern themselves by agreed norms, punishing cheaters or plagiarists through peer tribunals rather than only top-down administration.

We should also note the role of families and churches as communities that have curtailed absolute individual autonomy through conscience and teaching. The family is the most immediate community for most individuals, and American family life—while emphasizing raising children to be independent—has traditionally imparted strong moral guidance. A child learns boundaries (don't lie, don't steal, treat others kindly) largely at home, through parental authority and example. That authority is not democratic, but it is anchored in love and responsibility; it is a micro-community where the child's eventual freedom is nurtured by initial constraint and socialization. For many Americans, religion further buttresses this.

One interesting example of peer regulation is the enforcement of work ethic among peers. In many American communities, laziness or idleness was frowned upon. The Protestant work ethic, particularly strong in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, meant that an able-bodied man who refused to work would face social disdain. In small communities, someone who did not "pull their weight" might be chastised informally. Conversely, communities rallied to support those who couldn't work (due to injury or misfortune)—organizing barn raisings or harvest help for a sick farmer, for example—but even then, there was an expectation that the recipient was grateful and would do likewise when recovered. This mutual expectation reinforced diligence and reciprocity as norms. It was rarely codified in law but potent in practice.

From the standpoint of communitarian individualism, peer-regulated behavior has been a way Americans prefer to maintain moral order—as opposed to heavy government surveillance or draconian laws. It aligns with the national ethos of limited government and strong civil society. Social sanctions, while unofficial, have bite without invoking state force. As long as multiple overlapping communities exist, an overly punitive norm in one can be mitigated by finding acceptance in another. But where a norm is universal (for instance, patriotism during war, or anti-communism during the 1950s Red Scare), the peer pressure to conform can become nearly as coercive as law. During the McCarthy era, many felt compelled to conform in their political expressions to avoid being blacklisted—a case where communitarian impulse (national security concern) arguably went too far in suppressing individuality. This underscores that balancing community and individualism is an ongoing negotiation. Healthy peer regulation works best when it operates on clearly unjust or harmful behaviors (like ostracizing a chronic thief in a small town), and when society remains pluralistic enough that social dissent is possible somewhere.

Moral conformity and peer-regulation have acted as informal social "laws" in America. They reflect how communal values channel personal choices. Americans historically relied on family, church, neighbors, and colleagues to maintain standards, thereby reducing the need for an overbearing state and reinforcing a sense of moral responsibility. When these mechanisms function well, they cultivate responsible individuals who internalize communal virtues (honesty, duty, temperance). When they function poorly (as in bigoted enforcement of Jim Crow norms in the South, where communities enforced racial segregation through social and violent means), they can violate basic principles of liberty and justice.

3. SKEPTICISM OF GOVERNMENT

One of the most commonly cited attributes of the American Ideology is a deep-rooted skepticism of government power beyond one's own community. Put very simply: Americans do not appreciate strangers telling them what they can do. Although it can sometimes appear as a reflexive anti-statism, it actually follows from a far deeper and more coherent conviction: that wherever possible, free individuals and their local associations should address society's needs. From the Revolution onward, Americans have resisted remote authority that might erode personal responsibility or local initiative. Americans trust communities first, not paternalistic governance. This distinctive skepticism toward centralized power traces back to three intertwined, but analytically distinct, roots.

The first and most explicit root is Lockean liberalism, which shaped the Founding. John Locke argued that government's sole legitimate purpose is to secure individuals' natural rights—life, liberty, and property—and otherwise allow them to govern themselves. [45] American revolutionaries internalized this principle, channeling it into the nation's founding documents. Thomas Jefferson famously distilled it in his 1801 inaugural address, calling for "a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, [but] shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits."[46] In practice, this meant that as long as government prevented harm—whether through policing, judicial enforcement of contracts, or national defense—Americans believed it had fulfilled its core function. Any step beyond that could easily provoke suspicion of encroachment.

This Lockean orientation survived multiple eras: from the colonial refusal to accept "taxation without representation" to the modern preference for limiting government's role in private and economic affairs. Even today, polling consistently shows Americans reluctant to endorse wide-scale intervention in matters like income redistribution or guaranteed employment—views deeply consistent with Locke's conception of government. Americans are not opposed to government per se; they endorse it wholeheartedly when it protects rights or adjudicates disputes. But government that drifts too far beyond securing liberty is often viewed as illegitimate or unnecessary, fueling the skepticism popularly mislabeled as "anti-government" sentiment.

The second root of American skepticism toward centralized authority is a communitarian moral imperative: the belief that welfare, charity, education, and moral development are the rightful responsibility of local communities, not distant officials. Here again, the resistance to state action was not based on abstract theories of efficiency but on moral grounds: to leave a neighbor's needs to be addressed solely by bureaucrats would be, in the American view, a profound moral failing. Civic life was structured around a deep cultural ethic: if your neighbor is in need, you step up, rather than appeal to a far-off authority.

Historically, this manifested in local mutual aid, congregational ministries, and voluntary associations. Tocqueville famously observed that whenever Americans identified a common cause—be it building a schoolhouse, caring for the poor, or advancing moral reform—they formed voluntary associations rather than waiting for government action.[47] That impulse rested on a powerful sense of voluntary duty: each individual, guided by conscience and local norms, had a responsibility to contribute to the welfare of their community.

Polling data has consistently found Americans less inclined than their European counterparts to prioritize equality over liberty. When asked which is more important, Americans are nearly twice as likely to say that "*freedom to pursue life's goals without state interference*" over "*state guarantees nobody is in need*."

	"Which is more important…"	
	Freedom to pursue life's goals without** state **interference	***State guarantees nobody is in need***
U.S.	58%	35%
Britain	38%	55%
Germany	36%	62%
France	36%	64%
Spain	30%	67%

Source: Pew Research Center, " The American-Western European Values Gap", November 17, 2011.

Similarly, Americans have been less inclined than Europeans to believe government –instead of individuals and communities--should play the primary role in providing for the poor.[48]

Many Americans continue to view direct, personal, and communal action as not merely more effective but morally superior to centralized welfare systems. It preserves both personal agency and the bonds of genuine compassion that arise between neighbors rather than between bureaucrats and clients.

These attitudes are not solely pragmatic; they are deeply moral. They reflect an older American belief that one's obligations to others are personal and proximate—rooted in shared community life, not abstracted into administrative structures.

The third and perhaps most foundational root of American skepticism toward centralized authority is its irrelevance, a cultural inheritance explained most clearly by Louis Hartz's seminal thesis. In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz argued that the United States was founded as a liberal fragment of Europe—a society that never experienced feudalism. [49] Because American colonists lacked the historical experience of living under a lord or centralized ruler responsible for their welfare, they never formed the habit of looking upward for help. There was no expectation that salvation—whether economic, moral, or social—would come from above.

Instead, Americans developed the instinct to look laterally, to families, churches, and local communities. From the earliest settlements, it was simply assumed that neighbors would organize their own schools, churches, and charities. The state, when it existed at all in people's daily lives, was at most a distant framework for enforcing contracts or defending the territory from external threats. For everyday life, it was not relevant. As Hartz points out, the liberalism of the American tradition is less a conscious ideological choice and more a default condition—the inevitable product of a society that never lived under a comprehensive social hierarchy.

This irrelevance persisted deep into the nineteenth century and even into the early twentieth. Before the New Deal, Americans confronting hard times typically turned first to family, church, fraternal lodges, or local relief funds—not to the distant federal government. Mutual aid societies among immigrants and working-class communities functioned as private safety nets, reinforcing the communal ethic without invoking centralized bureaucracies. Even today, America remains distinctive among developed nations in the extent to which private philanthropy and decentralized local institutions continue to handle education, healthcare, and welfare tasks often assumed by the state elsewhere.

Religious freedom further reinforced this ethos. By disestablishing official churches, the First Amendment left spiritual life entirely in the hands of voluntary communities. Tocqueville recognized that religion in America was powerful not because it was enforced but because it was freely chosen and locally sustained. This disestablishment fostered a pluralistic communalism, where different communities—Congregationalists, Catholics, Quakers, Jews—tended to their own moral and social needs independently of the state.

Thus, the skepticism toward centralized authority was never driven primarily by ideology or even by grievance. It was driven by cultural habit: if no feudal lord ever provided for you, if your schoolhouse and hospital were built by your neighbors, why would you assume that a remote government should take on those tasks? Americans were not reflexively "anti-government"; they were pragmatically and historically non-reliant on it.

Taken together, these three strands—Lockean liberalism, communitarian localism, and the Hartzian absence of feudal expectations—created a bias for voluntarism that has persisted throughout American history. Americans have expected government to play essential roles: securing borders, upholding laws, ensuring basic civil rights. But when it comes to solving local social or economic problems, the instinct remains to trust communities first.

This tradition manifests repeatedly: families, fraternal organizations, churches, and local charities taking the lead in education, poor relief, and healthcare. The voluntary impulse is so ingrained that even today, Americans maintain vastly higher rates of private philanthropy and volunteering compared to European counterparts. The U.S. healthcare system is still distinguished by the prominence of nonprofit hospitals. And American skepticism toward centralized welfare states reflects not heartlessness, but a different cultural memory: that citizens and neighbors, not faceless bureaucracies, should first extend the hand of aid.

This broader understanding also clarifies why it is a mistake to call Americans reflexively anti-government. Americans have consistently supported government institutions that perform their historically legitimate functions—defense, law enforcement, and the protection of individual rights. Longitudinal surveys show that the U.S. military and local police have commanded some of the highest levels of public trust across all institutions. Gallup polling, for example, consistently ranks the military as the most trusted institution in American life, with public confidence exceeding 60% even in turbulent political time. [50] Confidence in local police also remains comparatively high relative to trust in Congress, the press, or other organs of governance. [51] Similarly, Pew Research Center data reveal that Americans view the military and

law enforcement as "doing the right thing for the country" at rates dramatically higher than most other institutions.[52]

When government acts to secure liberty, defend the nation, or ensure fair play in the economy, it commands broad respect. It is only when the state seems to drift beyond its classical purpose—or when it appears to replace rather than empower local communities—that American skepticism rises to the surface. Americans view government as a referee and protector, not a substitute for the civic work of free individuals bound together in mutual responsibility.

In that sense, the enduring skepticism toward government power is not an anomaly. It is the protective shell of the deeper American Ideology: a belief that true liberty requires not atomized individuals, nor an all-encompassing state, but self-reliant citizens in active communities, stewarding both freedom and responsibility with vigilance and care.

4. CAPITALISM, THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC AND THE MORAL ECONOMY

Economic individualism—the right to pursue one's livelihood and property freely—has always been a core part of American liberty. Yet American capitalism did not develop in a moral vacuum. It was significantly shaped by what sociologist Max Weber called the Protestant work ethic, and by local communities setting norms for fair dealing, charity, and mutual aid in markets. In America, the pursuit of profit has often been couched in ethical terms: work is seen as a calling; wealth carries a duty of stewardship; and local business communities enforce standards of trust. This is another face of communitarian individualism: the economic sphere, supposedly driven by self-interest, was historically regulated by conscience and community expectations rather than just by government or raw greed.

The Protestant work ethic concept, famously articulated by Weber in 1905, refers to the Calvinist-influenced belief that hard work, frugality, and diligence are not only economically useful but also signs of personal virtue and even salvation.[53] Early Americans, particularly in New England and other Protestant-settled regions, deeply internalized this ethic. It provided a moral framework that justified and energized individual enterprise. A farmer clearing land or a merchant building a trade saw labor as virtuous; idleness was sin. This inner drive meant individuals pushed themselves to succeed, but not merely for material gain—they did so to fulfill what they perceived as a moral obligation to use their God-given talents. Benjamin Franklin's famous maxims ("Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise") capture the flavor of this moralized approach to economic behavior, even in a somewhat secular form.

The link to community comes in how this ethic was reinforced and rewarded socially. A person known to be hardworking and thrifty in a town would gain respect and trust; one who was lazy or dissipated would face community reproach. Religious congregations often kept an eye on members' habits—for instance, 17th-century Puritan church records sometimes disciplined members for "disorderly conduct," which could include excessive debt or neglect of vocation. This indicates that economic conduct was a communal concern. At the same time, Protestant theology (especially in its Puritan form) discouraged overt envy or attacks on wealth honestly earned. Instead, it tried to channel wealth toward benevolence.

We see this in the tradition of American philanthropy. From the colonial era onward, successful individuals were expected to give back—whether by endowing a church, funding a college (as John Harvard did), or contributing to relief of the poor. Andrew Carnegie's 1889 essay "The Gospel of Wealth" is a classic statement: Carnegie, a self-made steel magnate, argued that the rich have a duty to live modestly and distribute their surplus wealth for the common good, stating, "The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced."[54] Carnegie proceeded to give away most of his fortune to build libraries, universities, and cultural institutions across America. His actions were widely lauded, reflecting an American expectation that great wealth be used in a communitarian manner. Rockefeller, Ford, and other titans followed suit, establishing major foundations. Importantly, these philanthropic acts were voluntary and often locally focused (Carnegie libraries were built in small towns nationwide, responding to community proposals). This tradition continues today with wealthy individuals like Bill Gates or Warren Buffett donating large portions of their wealth, often referencing a sense of social responsibility.

At the everyday level of the local moral economy, small American communities fostered a kind of capitalism tempered by neighborliness. Think of a small-town general store in the 19th century: the proprietor likely extended credit to farmers until harvest, knowing and trusting them personally; prices might be adjusted if someone fell on hard times; overt price-gouging would be noticed and the merchant possibly shunned. Business

reputations were built on honor and fair dealing as much as on shrewdness.

In many areas, farmers formed cooperatives (like mutual insurance companies, grain co-ops, rural electrification co-ops)—collective economic enterprises serving individual members' needs. They exemplify how Americans merged individual and communal interests: each member benefits individually (cheaper insurance, fair prices) by participating in a jointly owned entity that operates on principles of mutual aid. Similarly, credit unions began as community-based financial co-ops offering credit at reasonable rates to members, as an alternative to profit-driven banks. All these examples show a willingness to pursue economic self-interest through collective self-help mechanisms, rather than solely competitive ones.

Religious influence on the economy persisted well into modern times. Blue laws (closing most businesses on Sunday) across many states ensured a communal day of rest, even for those who might have wanted to stay open longer for profit. This was a collective decision to subordinate economic activity one day a week to higher values. In some communities, church or social organizations effectively regulated certain trades—for instance, the Methodist Church in the late 19th century often preached against the manufacture or sale of alcohol (leading many Methodist entrepreneurs to avoid those lines of business), while Quaker merchants famously refused to deal in slaves or war materials on moral grounds, sometimes at economic cost. These are instances of conscience overriding profit motive, yet often winning respect and loyalty from customers who shared those values.

American capitalism also encouraged local charity and welfare pluralism. Before the welfare state, for example, labor unions not only bargained for wages but frequently provided benefits to members—union-run hospitals, strike funds, death benefits to widows, etc. Ethnic fraternal orders did similarly. This created a patchwork where no worker was guaranteed a safety net, but many found one through belonging to these communities. It was a moral economy in the sense that mutual aid was considered integral to economic life, not separate from it.

On the flip side, when raw economic individualism seemed to produce severe exploitation or inequality, Americans responded with communitarian correctives. The Populist movement of the late 1800s arose among farmers who felt at the mercy of distant banks and railroads; they sought to organize politically and cooperatively to secure fairness (their Omaha Platform of 1892 cried out against the concentration of wealth and for measures to return power to "the plain people" organized in their communities).[55] The Progressive movement in the early 20th century likewise attacked child labor, unregulated food industries, and unbridled corporate power in the name of public welfare—essentially asserting that unfettered individualism in the market must be reined in for the community's sake. They succeeded in getting some government regulation, but also in promoting private reforms (like business ethics codes and professional licensing standards to uphold service quality).

Even consumer culture in mid-20th-century America had communal tints: the rise of Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions Clubs often included local business leaders who networked not just to advance their businesses but to undertake civic improvement projects. There was an understanding that good citizenship and good business went hand in hand. President Calvin Coolidge, known for his pro-business stance, still emphasized that "the chief business of the American people is business," but quickly added that accumulation of wealth must serve broader ends: "We are compelled to recognize it as a means to well-nigh every desirable achievement... So long as wealth is made the means and not the end, we need not greatly fear it."[56] Coolidge insisted that wealth was justified only insofar as it contributed to expanding knowledge, liberty, and culture.[4] In that same speech (1925), he warned that wealth should not be idolized and noted a historically high level of philanthropy and public-spirited use of wealth in America.[4] Such sentiments from a pro-business president show that American capitalism expected self-restraint and service from the capitalist.

On the ground, small businesses in America often anchor community life and feel a responsibility to it. One might consider how, even today, local businesses sponsor Little League teams, donate to local causes, or allow their premises to be used for community events. This tradition goes way back. It is partly enlightened self-interest (good PR), but also a genuine ethic that being part of a community means giving back. Contrast this with a purely libertarian view where a business owner might say, "I owe the community nothing beyond paying employees and taxes." Many American business owners would disagree and see their role as community stakeholders.

The concept of a "moral economy" also appeared during certain social movements. For instance, during the Great Depression, some communities formed "self-help cooperatives" where unemployed individuals pooled

skills and resources to generate goods and services for themselves—bypassing the cash economy—an act of communal self-reliance in economic hardship. And in the 1960s, figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his later years, advocated an Economic Bill of Rights and the Poor People's Campaign, which argued for economic justice not in terms of class struggle but as a fulfillment of American ideals of community caring.

In modern times, with globalization and corporate giants, the local moral economy is under strain, but we still find examples: the resurgence of interest in localism (farm-to-table food movements, local credit unions, shop-local campaigns) is driven by a desire to re-infuse economic life with community and accountability. The 2008 financial crisis led to some revival of mutual aid (like time banks, where people trade services hour-for-hour)—a very grassroots American response echoing older patterns.

Overall, American capitalism has been most successful and most accepted when it operates within a moral and communal context. When the market's excesses cause harm, Americans instinctively reach for community solutions (and sometimes government as a backup) to restore balance. The Protestant ethic supplied an internal governor—telling the individual capitalist to work hard but be humble, to prosper but also to share. Community norms provided an external governor—rewarding fair play, punishing sharp practice (at least reputationally), and cushioning the vulnerable through charity.

Communitarian individualism in economic life thus means each person strives to be industrious and enterprising, but also recognizes obligations to fairness and generosity defined by their community or faith. It means economic freedom, but not the freedom to defraud or to ignore the plight of neighbors.

5. AMERICAN MOBILITY

If there is one feature of American life that requires no lengthy explanation—one feature recognized by historians, by everyday citizens, and even by foreign observers—it is our relentless mobility. From the earliest days of settlement to the present, Americans have moved: across oceans, across continents, across state lines, always chasing the promise of a better life, a fresh start, or the simple assertion of personal freedom. Movement is woven into the very fabric of the American identity.

Unlike the settled peasantries of Europe or the rigid hierarchies of traditional societies elsewhere, Americans embraced motion as a right, a virtue, and even a moral aspiration. The idea that a person might uproot themselves in pursuit of opportunity—whether to claim new land, start a business, or seek a freer life—became an expectation, not an aberration. The image of a family packing up a wagon, a Dust Bowl refugee driving west, a suburban family seeking a better school district, or a retiree relocating to sunnier climates—all evoke the same deep-seated belief: we move because we are free, and we move because we hope.

This relentless mobility is so deeply embedded in American culture that we scarcely notice how distinctive it is. Few nations in the world have ever matched America's willingness to migrate internally, nor its celebration of that migration as a virtue. Historians from Tocqueville to Frederick Jackson Turner to contemporary sociologists have remarked on this phenomenon.[57] But it is also deeply ingrained in our popular imagination.

The celebration of mobility animates countless American myths and icons: the covered wagon on the frontier, the locomotive racing westward, and most enduringly, the automobile and the interstate highway system. From Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath to Jack Kerouac's On the Road, from Route 66 lore to the contemporary ideal of the open road, Americans have sung hymns to mobility for generations. Is there any image more synonymous with American freedom than hitting the highway, the landscape unrolling toward a limitless horizon?

And this is not merely cultural window-dressing. Mobility is a moral expression of our ideology. It embodies both key halves of the American soul: personal autonomy and communal reinvention. The freedom to move is an assertion of individual self-determination. Every time Americans pull up stakes and strike out for greener pastures, they exercise one of their most deeply held rights: the right to choose their own destiny. Movement itself becomes an act of liberty.

Yet at the same time, mobility has never led Americans into isolated anarchy. Movement demands rebuilding community. As Americans settle in new places—whether frontier towns, immigrant neighborhoods, suburban developments, or Sun Belt cities—they have always faced the same necessity: to create anew the associations, institutions, and moral bonds that sustain civic life.

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner recognized this dynamic on the frontier, observing that even the most rugged pioneers had to cooperate: they had to organize schools, churches, roads, and courts.[58] Sociologist Richard

D. Brown similarly noted that out of the "lawlessness" of constant movement emerged communal structures—barn-raisings, vigilance committees, claim associations—that stitched society back together.[59]

Every relocation necessitated a communal re-founding. Upon arrival in a new town or city, Americans did not wait for distant governments to provide the essentials of life; they built them. The PTA, the volunteer fire company, the town meeting, the mutual-aid society—these were the spontaneous creations of people who understood that liberty without community is a dead end.

The same dynamic applied to the great waves of immigrants who poured into American cities. Almost by definition, these newcomers uprooted themselves—whether from rural Ireland, Italy, China, or Eastern Europe—and landed in fluid, unfamiliar neighborhoods. They had little choice but to organize for collective support: ethnic benevolent societies, churches, cultural clubs, labor unions. Over time, these voluntary entities became not just enclaves for the transplanted, but also building blocks of broader civic life. Indeed, because immigrant neighborhoods were often newly formed, they had to create or re-create associations from scratch, forging a stronger sense of communal responsibility than if they had merely inherited old institutions.

Mobility's communal dividend was not confined to foreign arrivals. The twentieth century witnessed massive internal migrations as well: African Americans moving from the rural South to Northern industrial cities, Dust Bowl refugees heading west to California, and, later, the growth of Sun Belt cities. Each wave confronted the challenge of building or adapting community from the ground up. Whether a group settled in Chicago's South Side or Los Angeles's suburbs, the impetus for forging civic structures remained: to find or found a new church, a community center, a political club, or a mutual-aid society, anchoring newly found liberty in a sense of belonging.

Thus, mobility did not erode American community; it kept community alive. The act of moving, far from dissolving civic ties, constantly renewed them—forcing people to reforge bonds, invent new networks, and invest in fresh shared endeavors. Mobility is not only a characteristic of American communitarian individualism; it is its source of continued renewal. It works like this:

- Personal Autonomy: Americans asserted their freedom to move, seeking better prospects—an expression of individuality and self-determination.
- Communal Necessity: Upon arrival in a new environment, they had to create or join community institutions to handle shared problems—building roads, organizing schools, providing relief for the needy. This necessity spontaneously renewed civil society.
- Perpetual Renewal: Because movement was frequent and widespread, local associations never became static or irrelevant. They constantly adapted to fresh waves of migrants, newcomers, or returning natives. Each relocation forced a communal re-founding.

Mobility in America not only transported social capital to new locales; it actively instructed Americans in the ethos of self-reliance and civic duty. The very social acceptance—and sometimes the social pressure—to leave one's hometown in search of greener pastures functioned as a kind of national catechism in personal autonomy. It taught generations that independence, self-reliance, and striving were sacred virtues.

The celebration of mobility was a recurring theme in popular culture—especially with the advent of the automobile and the interstate highway system. What image captures American freedom more vividly than the open road stretching toward new horizons?

Over time, this cycle of movement and reinvention prevented civic life from growing stale. Newcomers demanded adaptation; returning natives brought back ideas from elsewhere. In this way, mobility strengthened, rather than threatened, American community. It taught Americans both the primacy of individual self-determination and the equally vital practice of collective engagement. Indeed, each relocation was, in effect, a communal re-founding: a living reenactment of the balance between liberty and social obligation that lies at the heart of the American Ideology.

Each exodus—whether westward across prairies, northward to booming factories, or outward to sprawling suburbs—led to the same outcome: a congregation of self-chosen individuals, voluntarily forming associations, schools, mutual-aid societies, and civic traditions to meet the needs of their new lives. Mobility did not dissolve civic life; it re-created it. The perpetual flux of neighbors—fellow travelers in a new place—kept liberty brimming with possibility and tied it to fresh obligations. One chose one's community just as one had chosen to move.

This unique characteristic, although often overlooked, may in fact be one of the most essential features of

communitarian individualism. Without movement, the risk is complacency or cynicism; with it, each new wave of strivers catalyzes a renewed civic tapestry. Stagnant towns and neighborhoods, lacking the creative disruption of newcomers, often lose the spark to build, organize, and reach across lines of difference.

Yet today, for the first time in American history, mobility is in retreat. After holding steady at around 20% annually for most of the twentieth century, the rate of Americans changing residence has fallen to around 8–10%, the lowest recorded levels in modern times.[60] Fewer Americans are pulling up stakes to seek new horizons. More remain rooted in economically stagnant communities, feeling trapped, resentful, and disillusioned.

Year	Annual Mobility Rate
1948	20.2%
1960	19.5%
1985	17.7%
2000	14.0%
2010	11.6%
2020	9.3%
2023	8.7%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Geographical Mobility: 2022–2023.

This decline is no trivial matter. Mobility historically forced the renewal of civil society. Moreover, if fewer people are coming or going, the impetus to form new civic associations diminishes. Without the regular disruption of newcomers and fresh ambition, many American towns and neighborhoods risk what Tocqueville might have called democratic lethargy: a slow sinking into isolated individualism and helpless grievance.[61]

Thus, the drop in mobility may help explain some of the broader pathologies afflicting American life today: rising loneliness, declining institutional trust, and the populist rage of communities that no longer feel capable of renewal. Stagnation—whether economic, social, or civic—was historically remedied by the American habit of movement.

When that habit fades, renewal becomes harder to achieve.

In America, liberty endures precisely because it never stands still. We are a people in motion—not just physically, but in our perpetual willingness to refashion our towns, our institutions, and ourselves. Where movement exists, so too does the impulse to form new connections, to establish a volunteer fire hall or a community center or a local relief fund—whatever the fresh challenge demands. Our restlessness, at its best, becomes a restlessness to build anew.

V. CONCLUSION

From the time of John Winthrop's Puritans, the American experiment has shown that individual freedom thrives best within a lattice of conscience and community. What appears as rugged individualism in the United States has always been supported—and bounded—by the ligaments of faith, family, association, and localism. Americans defined liberty not as the absence of all obligations, but as the freedom to create obligations of one's choosing. This core American value—communitarian individualism—has been a constant throughout our history: from the covenants of the early colonies, to the town halls of Tocqueville's New England, to the barn-raisings of the frontier, to the ethnic mutual-aid societies of immigrant communities, to the volunteer spirit of civil society, and even to the norms of "corporate social responsibility" in American capitalism. At each juncture, Americans have balanced rights with responsibilities, autonomy with attachment.

The evidence shows that American liberty is fundamentally a social enterprise. The nation's canonical thinkers understood this. John Locke's ideals of life, liberty, and property, transmitted to the New World, were implemented through a social contract in which communities secured those rights collectively. [62] The Founders and leaders like John Adams insisted that republican self-government required a virtuous, moral people—otherwise, free institutions would collapse. [63] Alexis de Tocqueville, the keenest foreign observer of the young republic, famously described this principle as "self-interest rightly understood," praising it as an ethic that "disciplines a number of persons in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, self-command," gradually directing them toward virtue. Tocqueville argued that this doctrine—that one best serves oneself by serving others—was the dominant American creed, and the "chief remaining security" against the excesses of selfishness, isolation, and grievance.[64]

Our analysis has shown Tocqueville's insight in action: whether in the form of 19th-century neighbors cooperating to build a school, or 20th-century suburbanites organizing a PTA, Americans have proven adept at reconciling personal ambition with the common good.

The sociological and polling data surveyed support this thesis in concrete terms. Compared to other Western peoples, Americans place a higher premium on individual initiative and distrust of government, but they also lead in measures of private voluntary action—charitable giving, volunteering, churchgoing, and the like. American culture historically expected the individual to be self-reliant, but also morally self-regulating and socially responsible. The decline of certain forms of civic engagement in the late 20th century has indeed raised alarms about fraying social bonds.

Yet, in all the hand-wringing over declining PTA memberships or the near-vanishing of the Elks Lodge, we may have missed a deeper shift: the slow evaporation of the very beliefs and values that once made these organizations feel indispensable. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* triggered a national conversation on fraying social capital, pointing to declining membership and community engagement as evidence that we no longer come together the way we once did.[65] Yet Putnam's metrics, focused on formal memberships and volunteer hours, only captured the outward symptoms. What truly sustained those robust associations was a shared moral purpose—a widely and deeply held conviction that freedom means making our own choices free from coercion by the state, but that freedom must be guided by virtue—which for Americans was "self-interest rightly understood."

Over decades, technology, the market, and an ever-growing state have quietly chipped away at the necessity of that moral imperative. The bonding agent that once compelled Americans to form PTAs, staff volunteer fire squads, or gather at local lodges has thinned in ways we scarcely noticed.

Many of the immediate tasks that once required communal action now seem more easily outsourced. After all, if Amazon delivers groceries to your doorstep or a state-funded agency provides social services, why bother organizing a ladies' auxiliary or a mutual-aid committee? Rapid communication apps let us keep in touch without in-person gatherings or the formal rituals that once anchored civic societies. And although government programs and capitalist innovation have undeniably solved many material problems—accessible healthcare, expanded schooling, instant connections—they have also, often inadvertently, dissolved the unmet need all these activities were designed to meet.

Meanwhile, the decline of religion leaves for many communities and individuals a void in the formation of these virtues. When religion retreats from public life, so too do the insistent calls for community as an article of faith. The result is that many Americans, especially younger generations, have forgotten how—and why—to build and sustain physical communities designed not around abstract causes or faraway threats, but around the people around us. We see the structural emptiness in shuttered clubhouses and meeting halls, but beneath that emptiness lies a lost sense of meaning. Without a narrative that elevates communal ties to a moral necessity, it's easy to treat them as hobbies or expendable relics of an earlier era.

Yet if the communitarian side of the equation has grown more tenuous, the individualism side can be just as hard to sustain under modern conditions. Purely autonomous freedom isn't as effortless as it may look: independence also demands a cultural consensus that self-reliance and ambition are virtues worth sacrificing for. Historically, that consensus was built up by local norms that told people, "You can and should make it on your own," yet also reminded them, "Your neighbors, church, and family need you." The result was a dual pressure: on one hand, to prove one's personal success (everything from "keeping up with the Joneses" to starting a business), and on the other, to remain deeply engaged in communal ties (attending to a sick neighbor, donating time at the church fundraiser, or paying an elderly parent's bills).

Communitarian individualism expects an enormous amount of us.

With pure libertarian individualism, one can rely on a simple creed: "Pursue your own goals; the rest is not your concern." In pure egalitarian collectivism, one can look to a central authority—government or a strong communal hierarchy—to enforce cohesion. But communitarian individualism occupies a precarious middle ground that demands quite a lot from the culture and from each individual:

1. Moral self-restraint without top-down coercion: Communitarian individualism rejects the state as the means of forcing virtue or mutual aid. Yet, it equally rejects the notion that everyone is simply on their own. Instead, it requires individual consciences to be robust enough—and widely shared enough—to produce reliable care for neighbors.
2. Unwritten norms require cultural catechesis: Each generation must learn and embrace the tension: that you are free to pursue personal ends but also obliged—by conscience, not by law—to help your

community. That learning does not happen automatically.

3. Social capital is being eroded from causes outside our control: Communitarian individualism thrives on trust, local engagement, and volunteerism. Yet social trust can erode due to economic dislocation, partisan polarization, or technological shifts.
4. Dialectics, tensions, and paradoxes are complicated: Ideologies leaning heavily toward either pure freedom or enforced solidarity are simpler. Communitarian individualism is a subtler balance, requiring constant articulation and renegotiation.
5. Constant renewal: Because the synthesis of liberty and belonging isn't static, it must be reasserted and renegotiated with every generation's crises.

Hence, from both sides—community and individuality—the demands of communitarian individualism are substantial. It flourishes when people believe that self-reliance is sacred and neighborly duty is a part of a good life, something taught in families, churches, workplaces, and civic clubs. The erosion of those teaching institutions leaves a vacuum.

Thus, while it may look like Americans are drifting into easy "lone wolf" autonomy, the truth is that living out communitarian individualism—pursuing personal goals while actively honoring communal ties—requires a stable moral environment that is neither fully public nor purely private. And maintaining that equilibrium, as we have seen, is by no means inevitable.

This atrophy of underlying beliefs has gone on almost imperceptibly, slowly enough that few recognized what we were losing. Only in retrospect, confronted by loneliness epidemics, civic fragmentation, and hyper-polarized politics of "negative partisanship," do we start to wonder how the old social glue dissolved.

We talk about reanimating the PTA or trying to "bring back the neighborhood," but we miss the fact that the moral impetus that once demanded neighborly bonds has been subsumed by a culture of convenience, technological fixes, and centralized solutions.

And so, even if we revive the outward forms—new clubs, new gatherings—without that deeper sense of obligation and purpose, we risk building hollow shells. If we want the real thing—authentic community that fosters belonging, moral formation, and mutual aid—then the conversation must turn to why individual liberty in service of community matters just as much as liberty or equality alone.

This is why ideology matters.

In closing, the American tradition demonstrates that liberty neither means nor thrives in social emptiness. Rugged individualism did not make America great alone; it was rugged individualism cooperating through institutions of mutual trust. The "self-made" man or woman in America typically benefited from family encouragement, borrowed ideas and capital, learned in community schools, and prospered in a society governed by norms and laws that others upheld.

\

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, pt. 2, chap. 5.

[2] Everett Carll Ladd, The American Polity: The People and Their Government (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 213.

[3] Ibid., 214.

[4] Ibid., 2154

[5] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), II, §§ 4–6.

[6] John Adams, *Message to the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts*, October 11, 1798.

[7] John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd ser., vol. 7 (Boston: 1838), 31–48.

[8] Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 31–32.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Pew Research Center, "On Economic Policy, Western European Public Opinion Deeply Divided Along Traditional Ideological Lines," 2018.

[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 1, pt. 1, chap. 2.

[12] Mark Noll, "Our Puritan Heritage," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* (Fall 2010),

https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/18/our-puritan-heritage.

[13] John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, vol. 7 (Boston: 1838), 31–48.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, pt. 1, chap. 2.

[21] Mayflower Compact, 1620, in *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp.

[22] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, pt. 2, chap. 5.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), 149.

[26] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* for 1893 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1894), 199.

[27] Ibid., 200.

[28] Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 85–110.

[29] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 5.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 22.

[33] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), 127.

[34] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955).

[35] Thomas O'Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Political History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 85.

[36] Robert W. Fairlie, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Small Business Owners, and Their Access to Financial Capital," *Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy* (May 2012), https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/rs396tot.pdf

[37] Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 134–136.

[38] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 5.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 8.

[41] Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., "Biography of a Nation of Joiners," *American Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (October 1944): 1–25.

[42] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[43] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 1, pt. 2, ch. 7.

[44] Ibid.

[45] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), II, ch. 2.

[46] Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.

[47] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 5.

[48] Pew Research Center, "On Economic Policy, Western European Public Opinion Deeply Divided Along Traditional Ideological Lines," 2018.

[49] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

[50] Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," 2023, available at [Gallup Confidence Survey].

[51] Ibid.

[52] Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government and Other Institutions," 2022.

[53] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner's, 1958 [1905]).

[54] Andrew Carnegie, "The Gospel of Wealth," *North American Review* 148 (June 1889): 653–664.

[55] The People's Party, Omaha Platform, 1892.

[56] Calvin Coolidge, "The Chief Business of the American People," speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, January 17, 1925, available at [Coolidge Foundation].

[57] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, pt. 2, chap. 5.

[58] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996 [1893]), 33–35.

[59] Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600–1865* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 78–81.
[60] U.S. Census Bureau, *Geographical Mobility: 2022 to 2023, Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023.
[61] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, pt. 2, chap. 5.
[62] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. Book II, Ch. 2, Sec.6.
[63] John Adams, quoted in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, vol. 9 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 229.
[64] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, pt. 2, chap. 5.
[65] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).