

Reading and Misreading *Habits of the Heart**

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Really important texts are those susceptible to being richly and diversely misunderstood. An author can always aspire to that dignity.

—William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays*

Habits got a most propitious launching. Peter Steinfels reviewed the book on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. The same week Ken Woodward gave the book a big play in *Newsweek*. We were told that that is the perfect one/two combination to send off a book that will sell well. Perhaps even more important, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a talk based on *Habits* that I gave at Claremont College just weeks before publication. The account was accurate enough but the headline (not written by the reporter) said, “New Book Attacks Christian Right.” This inaccurate headline assured that the article would be very widely reprinted, not only in the U.S. but in the *European Herald-Tribune*, the *Singapore Times*, etc. You can’t buy that kind of publicity.

As the book reviews began to come in, they were not by any means all positive. An ideological pattern developed: both the right and the left hated the book. The neo-conservative right—Richard Neuhaus, Robert Nisbet, et al.—had nothing but contempt for us. Michael Novak’s review was entitled “Habits of the Left-Wing Heart.” We were really surprised by this reaction. Neo-conservatives, especially religious ones, were always talking about family, neighborhood and intermediate associations. These figured prominently in our book. What we learned was that none of that mattered if you attacked the free market. In the end, that was where neo-conservatives had all their chips. Only later did we learn that in some right-wing circles the book was seen as pro-homosexual because of a couple of side-comments that most readers never noticed.

The Nation had a review symposium with six reviewers, five of whom hated the book. Barbara Ehrenreich, in the funniest of all the reviews, asked why five

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atheistic social scientists thought it was a good idea to go to church—not something we actually said in the book. For her it was unimaginable that the five of us were practicing our several faiths, and statistically she was certainly right about social scientists. To some feminists our defense of marriage was suspect, but the main criticism from the left was that we weren't radical enough. I feel Ehrenreich revealed the deeper source of left-wing hostility. The prejudice against religion is still the only acceptable prejudice among the cultural elite. We could not be forgiven for being soft on religion. Not long after the publication of *Habits*, I spoke at a symposium on ethics at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. One of my commentators, a distinguished American historian, opened by saying: "Bellah shouldn't be allowed to teach at a public university. He should teach at Notre Dame. No, at Bob Jones University." He did not realize that I would not even be allowed on the campus of Bob Jones University.

Only gradually did two enduring critiques of the book come out:

1. *The book was not sufficiently inclusive racially.* At first most minority groups embraced the book. I was asked to speak at the annual meeting of the largest Japanese-American Buddhist denomination, whose leaders said they saw exactly their problems in the book. Vine Deloria asked me to a conference of American Indian leaders in Phoenix, where he said that the problem of the reservations was beautifully summed up by the portraits of the manager and the therapist in *Habits*. Cornel West vigorously defended the book for giving an accurate assessment of American culture and other African-Americans told us that they saw the problems of the black middle class reflected in the book. But a bitter review by Vincent Harding asking why we left out black Americans changed all that, at least in the African-American academic community. Cornel West, who had early on championed the book, six years later called *Habits* "incredibly superficial" (in a review of *The Good Society*). The irony is that we did have a number of blacks in our interview sample, but they sounded so much like everybody else that we didn't mention their presence. I had written a book that talked a lot about race: *The Broken Covenant*. The focus of *Habits* was on class, especially the middle class, as we made clear from the beginning of the book. On this one I am still unrepentant: if we had included more non-whites, it wouldn't have changed the substance or the argument of the book, even though it would have made it more politically correct.

2. *The book was too "communitarian."* It may be hard to realize today, but the whole liberal/communitarian debate was subsequent to the publication of *Habits* in 1985. It is true that Michael Sandel had published *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* in 1982, but the issues were just beginning to be discussed when we finished *Habits*. Amitai Etzioni had not yet started the Communitarian Movement. The related issue of civil society didn't really emerge until the fall of communism at the end of the eighties—it wasn't even in the index to *Habits*. Nonetheless *Habits* got caught up in the "communitarianism debate" and was often cited as a particularly dangerous example of communitarianism.

For example, Craig Calhoun in his 1995 book *Critical Social Theory* attacks us as arguing that all our problems can be solved at the local level. He quotes Manuel Castells as saying, “When people find themselves unable to control the world, they simply shrink the world to the size of their community,” and then adds: “This is a fundamental misrecognition built into the bulk of localist, populist politics today.” This is true enough. Alan Wolfe’s book *One Nation, After All* gives plenty of evidence that this is the case, and we also give examples of this mistake in *Habits*. But to this last sentence Calhoun appends the following note:

Indeed [this misrecognition] appears in the work of knowledgeable social scientists seeking to reach a broad public audience, as for example in *Habits of the Heart*, a best selling book by Robert Bellah and several colleagues. *Habits* calls for a renewal of communitarian commitments and a reigning in of American individualism, without seriously considering the political, economic, or social structural features of American society which fundamentally differentiate today’s community life from that which supported New England town meetings. Problems of scale, the vulnerability of local communities to corporate and government decisions over which they have little control (or even potential for control), and the distance between most people and their political representatives are side-stepped in favor of an implication that getting involved in local organizations and community activities is sufficient to a major resocialization of American life. (Part of the basis for their notion of the sufficiency of such involvements is the authors’ focus on the satisfaction which they believe individuals will reap from such commitments, as distinct from the practical efficacy of those commitments.) Despite the perceptiveness and readability of the book, one concludes that its avoidance of these hard issues raised by the tension between system-world and life-world was a condition of its reaching the extraordinarily broad audience it did.

Now if you want “misrecognition” this is it. What makes it so astounding is that Calhoun’s criticism of us comes right out of the book itself.

In the very first chapter we describe a man named Joe Gorman who lives in a New England town that still has a town meeting. We show how Joe believes that just “getting involved” is all there is to citizenship. And then we show, just as Calhoun says, that the town has little control over its own fate, that Joe Gorman himself works for a large corporation that has no commitment to the town, and that only a larger engagement with economic and political realities would begin to meet even the problems that arise in this town. We describe in detail Joe’s false consciousness in believing that the town, which we call Suffolk, is the same as it was in colonial times. We do have a chapter called “Getting Involved,” and we do show that Americans “reap satisfaction,” as Calhoun puts it, from their involvement, but we point out the serious limitations of purely face-to-face volunteerism and the chapter ends with the move from volunteer to citizen. Indeed the next chapter is called “Citizenship,” which, we argue, is often personally very difficult, but indispensable in our complex modern society. The penultimate chapter of our book is entitled, “The National Society,” where the focus is entirely on large-scale issues. One must ask not only how Calhoun could so misread us, but how he could adopt almost literally the argument of the book

as a criticism of it. One cannot discount a degree of envy—it is perhaps no accident that twice Calhoun refers to the book's public success (and if you take a look at *Critical Social Theory* you will see why it never became a best seller)—but I don't want to attribute what seems a willful misreading entirely to *ad hominem* causes. Rather, I think the stereotype of “communitarianism” as a position that focuses solely on the local and the face-to-face, has become so widely established that even those who have read the book (though perhaps not carefully or recently) could say the same thing that Calhoun said about it. Perhaps even some readers of this article imagine that is what we said. If so, please read not only the book but the introduction to the 1996 University of California Press paper edition.

An even worse example of misreading comes from a 1993 book by Derek L. Phillips called *Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought*. By 1993 the caricature of communitarianism was in full bloom. Phillips characterizes “communitarianism”—and he includes Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre along with Bellah, et al.—in three ways: (1) We favor cultural homogeneity and consider pluralism as the enemy. (2) By community we mean a geographically bounded territorial unit, so that the small town is our ideal type. (3) We advocate, in his words, “giving up the ‘politics of rights’ for a ‘politics of the common good.’”

But in *Habits* our definition of community is not at all geographically bounded: we explicitly include everything from the family to the nation as a community or a potential one, and our definition is deeply plural, since we recognize the positive significance of the wide variety of culturally heterogeneous communities in America and also the fact of plural membership. Above all, according to *Habits*, we do not belong to one and only one community, but to many overlapping and cross-cutting communities, and that is part of the vitality of our society. Nor do we “advocate giving up the politics of rights” in the least. We are not so foolish as to think that in America we can possibly do without the politics of rights. We do argue for a politics of the common good, but not in any zero-sum relation to the politics of rights. Nonetheless, I can see how someone who actually believed what Phillips wrote about “communitarianism” might think of it as proto-fascist, sympathetic to racial cleansing, etc., etc. The very idea of communitarianism prompts paranoid hysteria in a certain kind of totalitarian liberal.

In *Habits* we pointed out that “community” is a popular word in America, at least in all sectors of society other than academia. But this very popularity is deceptive because it so often lacks substance, instead connoting a warm, fuzzy feeling closer to what we call “expressive individualism.” So, in *The Good Society* we moved away from community as our central term and focused on “institutions” instead. This may account for the fact that *The Good Society* sold only about a tenth as many copies as *Habits*.

I might mention one more discussion in *Habits* that has taken on a life of its own and given rise not only to misunderstandings but to a variety of readings beyond anything in our book. In the chapter on religion, we discussed a woman

to whom we gave the pseudonym “Sheila Larson,” whose faith was so private and personal that she called it “Sheilaism.” In the terms of our categories of basic American values, she was an example of expressive individualism. She was, by profession, a nurse, and we tried to present her as a caring person. Clearly the argument of *Habits* was not very sympathetic to a religious point of view that would produce as many religions as there are individuals. But we had no intention of ridiculing her.

Nonetheless a number of people defended Sheila, taking us as more critical of her than we in fact were. Some took us as insensitive to her as a caring, vulnerable woman. Indeed, a web site appeared claiming to speak for “Sheila” herself, although many details in her blog proved that she was not the person we interviewed. For example, she claimed that all five of us had interviewed her, something which never happened with any of our informants. In fact it was Steve Tipton who interviewed her. In the web site she presented “her case” against our insensitivity. That web site has disappeared but if you Google “Sheilaism” you will still find many entries. A number of these are from a variety of Christian groups who decry private spirituality replacing religious belonging. But others defend privatized religion. One such site even attributes the term to Peter Berger. Clearly, Sheilaism has long left the confines of *Habits of the Heart* and is living a life of its own.

Finally, let me point out that widely read books are often susceptible to misreading, as the McNeill quote I started with suggests. How many people, including sociologists, think that David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* was a defense of “inner-directed” Americans in a world where “other-directedness” was becoming dominant? Alan Wolfe repeats that assertion in *One Nation, After All*. Yet, as any careful reader of *The Lonely Crowd* knows, Riesman’s typology is fourfold: tradition-directed, inner-directed, other-directed, and autonomous, and he rejects inner-direction as vigorously as he does other-direction. For Riesman, being inner-directed means being controlled by a tyrannical and narrow-minded super-ego. It is in no way the position he wants to defend. If it could happen to the all-time social scientific best seller, why not to the authors of *Habits* as well?