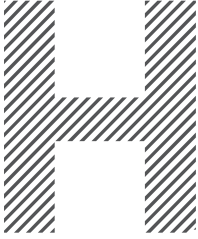


Fortifying Our Democracy in an Alienated Age

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How should we understand what now ails American democracy? The sheer scope of the symptoms is daunting enough. From partisan polarization to institutional sclerosis, culture-war animosities, mistrust, corruption, and cynicism, our political culture seems beset by endless troubles. Some—such as the challenge of balancing legitimate representation with effective government—are rooted in enduring challenges in our free society. But some are far more distinct to our time and more distressing and disorienting.

The scourges we face today involve, especially, a loss of trust, confidence, belonging, and solidarity. They sometimes express themselves in political terms as intense partisan divisions and a paralysis of governance. And they sometimes show up in more personal ways as loneliness, isolation, and even despair that leads to rising suicide rates and an epidemic of opioid abuse. These troubles have roots that run deeper than policy debates and electoral coalitions. They all reflect an underlying estrangement—a sense that this country is working for others, but “not for me.” They keep too many Americans from readily saying “us” and “ours” when speaking about the life of this society. At their core is a corrosive sentiment that might best be described as alienation and that poses a profound threat to American democracy in our time.

“Alienation” is a term we might, at first, be inclined to associate with some streams of Marxism insofar as they describe a process by which workers lose a sense of control over their own lives by losing control over the conditions and fruits of their work.¹ But the term has deeper foundations, particularly in Christian thought, as a way of conveying a sense of distance or disconnection driven by exclusion from grace—a feeling of observing the world as an outsider rather than participating in it and belonging to it.² This, in turn, suggests the sociological connotation of the concept, which illuminates its political meaning, as well. The great twentieth-century sociologist Robert Nisbet defined alienation as “the state of mind that can find a social order remote, incomprehensible, or fraudulent; beyond real hope or desire; inviting apathy, boredom, or even hostility.”³ This is how the social order of the United States appears to a growing number of our fellow citizens today.

But the alienation that pervades this period runs even deeper. It isn’t just a matter of feeling excluded or unrepresented or a matter of fraying social links and civic connections. It isn’t just about populism or resentment, either. In fact, for too many Americans, the very idea that this is all that contemporary alienation entails is itself a way of treating the problem as something wrong with “them” and not with “us.” But alienation shows itself in the attitudes of American elites and the public at large on the left no less than on the right. In fact, it might be fair to say that its most familiar populist political forms are actually the result of a set of less familiar but no less dangerous manifestations.

Four such deep-rooted forms of contemporary alienation deserve particular attention from anyone eager to preserve and reinforce American democracy in our time. Each amounts to something like a failure of responsibility: a failure of insiders to acknowledge obligations, a failure of partisans to acknowledge culpability, a failure to take ownership of our common past, and a

failure to think constructively about the future.

Together, these four forms of alienation amount to a grave and growing threat to American democracy. But properly understood, they could also point toward some ways forward for each of us, for our institutions, and for American philanthropy.

Four Faces of Alienation

The first face of our peculiar alienation might be best understood as “outsiderism.” It is the tendency of people with power inside many of our core institutions to think of and portray themselves as outsiders—even as victims of those very institutions—and to resist taking responsibility for the institutional positions they occupy.

This problem is particularly evident in our politics today. It is what we see, for instance, when, as president, Donald Trump tweets: “Department of Justice should have urged the Supreme Court to at least hear the Drivers License case on illegal immigrants in Arizona. I agree with @LouDobbs. Should have sought review.”⁴ To whom was the president speaking? And on whose behalf? He was behaving as an observer or an outside commentator on the work of the executive branch, rather than the ultimate insider exclusively charged with the enormous constitutional and legal powers of our government’s chief executive. Many members of Congress approach their institution the same way—not as the locus of legislative power in our government, which they ardently sought to share and are now responsible for exercising, but as a noxious and abhorrent force oppressing our society and leaving us all with frustrations and complaints they would like to channel. They often can’t wait to get off the floor of the House or Senate, find a camera, and start complaining about Congress.

But the same pattern is evident well beyond the political arena. People occupying key positions inside institutions (from journalism to the academy, religion, culture, and civil society) see those institutions as platforms from which to perform, frequently as stars in a morality play about their own marginalization. Too often, as a result, no one claims ownership of the institutions of our society, and so no one accepts responsibility for them.⁵

Everyone wants to be a rebel against the establishment. The advantage that rebels enjoy is that they are not constrained by obligations, but the disadvantage they normally suffer is that they have no real power. Many of today’s faux rebels, however, actually do have power. They just pretend they don’t to avoid being constrained by responsibility even as they deploy that power.

And if everyone is a rebel, there is no solid establishment against which to rebel. That is roughly our situation now, but our politics and culture take that as further evidence of the corruption of our establishments and thus as further cause for more intense rebellion rather than a reason to

reassert some sense of responsibility. The one thing we all agree on is that insiders are the problem, and so we are all in some sense left feeling like outsiders—excluded, marginalized, disaffected, and disconnected. This obviously contributes to a broadly shared sense of estrangement.

The second form of our alienation is related to the first but also to the intense partisanship of this moment. It involves what we might call “polarized catastrophism,” the idea that, generally, American life is on the verge of utter destruction and, specifically, that the blame lies with the other political camp. Many of us now implicitly approach politics with a sense that the country’s biggest problem is the party we disagree with. More urgent than economic challenges, cultural breakdown, public health crises, environmental degradation, foreign threats, or domestic needs—or rather, underlying those practical problems—is the conviction that the other party will use political power to harm the country’s future prospects. Even when we think of polarization itself, and recognize how it contributes to the dysfunction of our politics, we blame the other party for it and view our own political camp as merely responding to reckless provocations.

This, too, constitutes a failure to see ourselves as part of the country’s story—to imagine that we stand outside it or that it is happening *to* us rather than *through* us. We all conceive of ourselves as the victims of powerful forces and rarely acknowledge our own part in the drama. And because each party sees the other as the country’s foremost problem, the notion of progress through compromise seems absurd. The problem to be solved is the opposition, and so refusing to give ground becomes more important than gaining ground. As a result, each party is left with little to give in negotiations over policy particulars and little to gain.

This helps explain why there has been so little of such negotiation over policy particulars in recent years and why our elections are so rarely about substantive policy disputes. They are more frequently about struggles to dominate the narrative of catastrophism and to persuade the country that the next election matters because it is the last chance to stop the other side.

The tendency to put ourselves outside of the story we tell about our nation leads directly to the third mode of our distinctive contemporary alienation. This problem, which we can call “ahistoricity,” involves an alienation from our history as a society—an inclination to treat historical wrongs as if they have nothing to do with us and to treat historical achievements as if they aren’t ours to celebrate.

On the surface, these two sides of the coin of ahistoricity seem to be at war with one another. Elements of the cultural left suggest, for instance, that the United States was founded in racial injustice and is therefore not only thoroughly but permanently stained and irredeemable. They insist that white supremacy is the essence of the American story and systemically ignore and obscure the struggle *against* white supremacy and racial injustice—a story as old as our society and one that affords us enormous resources that could prove very valuable in the present. Their aim is to advance the cause of justice, but in practice they deny us the ability to do that together as a people by grossly distorting our common history.

Elements of the cultural right respond to such claims by insisting we can leave the American

history of racial injustice behind us, celebrate the progress we have made against it, and simply look past race altogether. Their aim is also to advance a just ideal, but theirs is no less a distortion of the role that history ought to play in the life of a society. A nation's existence spans the generations—it is one whole across time. This means we must be willing to accept our society's misdeeds and injustices as our own and to understand that they inevitably and unavoidably influence our present. If we want to celebrate the elevated and inspiring in our inheritance, which we should, then we must also lament the degraded and disgraceful. And we have to recognize that the sins of past generations extend into the present. Racial injustice is still with us today, not only as a shadow cast by our history, but as a present reality in the lives of too many Americans.

That reality, however, should send us reaching for the best in our own traditions, not denying and ignoring our past, but embracing it and finding in it the resources to redeem and revitalize our society. That would mean seeing that our past—all of it—is ours. Indeed, it is us. We fight over whether our past is irredeemably evil or unimpeachably good rather than acknowledging its complexity and drawing upon the good to struggle against the bad. The unwillingness to do that alienates us from our past.

And it also leaves us incapable of imagining our future together. This is the fourth form of the alienation that bedevils our society. We might call it “future-blindness.” Our common life at this point is shockingly devoid of serious consideration of the future. This is easy to miss as our politics and culture seem always to be wracked by intense partisan struggles. But few if any of these struggles are about how to build our future or about what the United States will require to be a stronger, better, healthier society in, say, twenty years.

This is partly generational, to be sure. Our political culture remains dominated by the oldest of the baby boomers (and even those a little older than they) to an unusual degree. At the time of this writing, we are approaching an election in which a seventy-seven-year-old challenger will take on a seventy-four-year-old incumbent. The Speaker of the House of Representatives is eighty years old. The majority leader of the Senate is seventy-eight. We should wish them all many more years of good health. Still, it should hardly surprise us that the political system they dominate seems mired in ancient feuds and has trouble thinking of the future as its own.

But there is more to the absence of the future in our politics. That peculiar void is a kind of sum of the other forms of contemporary alienation. Our outsiderism leaves us feeling as though we are mere observers of our own society's life, thus making the future feel as though it is someone else's responsibility. Our polarized catastrophism shortens our time horizons: If the next election will determine whether our nation lives or dies, who can think beyond it? Our ahistoricity means we tend not to see ourselves as links in a long chain that reaches both backward and forward. We assume some sharp break must come between our present and our future.

Restoring the First-Person Plural

Seeing the challenges facing our democracy through this lens can help us understand a little more plainly just what alienation entails and why it's worrisome. Simply put, our contemporary sociopolitical alienation amounts to a failure to think and speak of our society in the first-person plural—in terms of “us” and “we” and “ours.”

In one arena of American life after another, we find fellow citizens who do not think of themselves as insiders in our society, but as observers from the outside. In some cases they yearn to be insiders but feel rejected or excluded. In other cases they revel in the role of the outsider and ignore the responsibilities they have. Either way, it is destructive of the civic spirit necessary to sustain and revitalize American democracy.

In this sense, our alienation in its various forms is among the most serious threats our democracy confronts at this time. It is a deep, complicated, and multifarious danger. But to see that it amounts to a failure to think in the first-person plural is also to see our way toward addressing the problem and improving our democracy. We should make it a priority to force ourselves into the mode of the first-person plural and make it easier for others in our society to adopt that mode as well. This means resisting the lure of outsiderism in all its forms and seeking out, instead, opportunities to be an insider: a member, a citizen, a part of the whole.

We can do this in small ways in our own lives, to begin with. We can speak in the first-person plural about both ourselves and others. We can look for opportunities to play a formal role in a joint effort, to take ownership of a common problem, to act locally to answer some unmet need rather than standing around with our arms folded wondering when someone else will meet it.

But we will also need to look for more comprehensive ways to respond to this problem. In some political, cultural, academic, and professional institutions, this will require structural reforms aimed at changing the incentives that confront American elites and creating greater pressure for insiders to think institutionally and assume responsibility. In Congress, for instance, such change will require reforms of the budget process, the committee system, and the boundaries of transparency within the institution to encourage members to think of themselves as legislators rather than performers and to channel their ambitions into the institution rather than around it. Similar thinking will be required at the state and local levels and in universities, companies, and civic organizations.

Taking on these peculiar forms of alienation will also require a new language of civic engagement that emphasizes the first-person plural, reorients our expectations accordingly, and helps build a political culture focused on our common fate, common challenges, common strengths, and common history. In particular, we will need to understand the problems our society faces as problems for us all, not as roadblocks some of our fellow citizens create to stand in the way of others' aspirations.

For the most part, this does not amount to a traditional policy agenda. It requires a cultural change, almost a spiritual change. But for that reason, it does offer some real opportunities for philanthropy to help promote positive transformation. The standard of the first-person plural can serve as a kind of criterion for philanthropic giving: Is this project directed to helping Americans think of their country as belonging to all of its people? Is it geared toward solidarity? Is it likely to encourage the people it touches to see themselves as insiders in our society, responsible for some portion of its fate—good or ill? If it succeeds, will it help to combat our peculiar twenty-first-century alienation?

Questions such as these may not come naturally to the philanthropic sector in the United States. But they are the essential measures of civic engagement, social responsibility, and political renewal for the coming years. They speak to one of the thorniest and most profound threats to American democracy. And they suggest how we might mitigate the danger and rebuild our country's promise and potential—together.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, George Novack and Ernest Mandel, *The Marxist Theory of Alienation* (Atlanta: Pathfinder, 1973).
2. See, for instance, Kenneth D. Eberhard, *The Alienated Christian: A Theology of Alienation* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971).
3. Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), ix.
4. President Donald Trump tweeted this on March 21, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/976411208717950976>.
5. This pattern of institutional deformation was the subject of my book *A Time to Build* (New York: Basic, 2020).