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The Philosophic Root of Contemporary American Anti-Institutionalism

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Introduction

One of the deepest trends in contemporary American political culture is an anti-institutionalism that threatens all our communal endeavors. In fact, anti-institutionalism is one of the few—if not the only—elements of shared political culture that remain in our hyper-partisan context. Alas that is a vice and not a virtue. Aside from the military, there is not a single institution in American life—social, political, or religious—that retains the same level of public trust and public favor as it did in the recent past. Faith in our institutional leaders, moreover, has fallen precipitously, with Americans under the age of thirty trusting the leaders of all institutions less than their parents did and far less than their grandparents did.[1] Whether one is speaking of churches, schools, banks, hospitals, media outlets, businesses (especially mega-corporations), or Congress, Americans' confidence in our public institutions is slipping across the board.[2]

Many scholars have sought to understand why Americans are so wary of institutions, but their answers leave much to be desired. Generally speaking, there are three categories of reasons given for the growth of American anti-institutionalism: bad actors, perversions of

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institutional purpose, and political partisanship. Over the course of the following pages, we will take a look at the most convincing of these arguments—including Hugh Heclo's argument for "performance-based distrust," Yuval Levin's argument about the rise of "performative institutions," and Jean Bethke Elshtain's argument that institutional disengagement is a result of increased partisanship. Our goal here will be to identify what is correct about their analyses, assess what is lacking, observe what they share in common, and, ultimately, deepen them.

Taken individually, these arguments contribute vital insights into the problem of institutional decline, and yet each is insufficient to explain the whole story. Nevertheless, these arguments point us toward a more profound cause and help us find the deeper current. This paper concludes by arguing that it is, in fact, the American penchant for individualism—especially expressive individualism—that has led Americans to distrust and withdraw from institutions. If we are concerned with Americans' fraught relationship to institutions and hope to address this problem, then we must look to its philosophical roots, which reside in the American view of the self.

What Is an Institution?

We are a society that seems to no longer understand what is an institution, nor can we articulate what is an institution's function and value. Ironically, the sheer ubiquity of institutions renders them obscure to us—hidden in plain sight. The one thing we know as a society is that we distrust them. Nevertheless, there has been a revival of interest in institutions—especially in their "mediating" function—after a half-century of silence, in part because many of our social illnesses are traceable to our declining institutional participation. The best recent scholars of institutions and institutional decline are Hugh Heclo and Yuval Levin, who have expended great effort to provide us with a vocabulary by which to discuss, assess, and critique changes long underway in the American political landscape. What used to be obvious to all—the central importance of institutions to human flourishing—has burst once

again to the forefront, with leading intellectuals grasping to understand what we have for decades taken for granted.

First, we turn to Heclo's definition. Heclo has a capacious—one could say "idiosyncratic"—understanding of what is an institution, using the term to refer to things as disparate as a handshake, the game of baseball, chivalry, Congress, religion, and the family.[3] For Heclo, the term *institution* is reductive if its definition cannot comprehend such variegated uses. Accordingly, he has scoured the scholarly literature from disciplines as varied as political science, business administration, and social psychology and enumerated more than twenty formal definitions of "an institution."[4] Some of the definitions he uncovered stress its *formality*—"a formal governmental organization defined by public laws"—whereas some are highly *informal*—"a set of interpersonal rules about behavior, especially about making decisions." Some emphasize *custom*—"a settled habit of thought common to the generality of men tied to the community's status system"—and others emphasize *law*—"the body of laws that establish the set of rights and obligations in force." Still others try to split the difference: institutions are "the rules of the game in a society, or more generally, the humanly devised constraints for structuring human interaction . . . made up of formal constraints, informal constraints, and their enforcement characteristics."

All these different definitions arise from disciplinary presuppositions and the associated perspective one brings to bear on institutional analysis. In general, these definitions fall within a handful of schools of thought, including the statist school, social systems school, historical-institutionalist school, rational choice school, and cognitive school. That is, the definitional differences emerge as one considers an institution in relationship to the state, society, history, human reason, or individual agency. Their usefulness is thus limited to those narrow areas. While the differences are interesting, it is their *shared elements* that merit our attention here. What, in other words, is the essence of an institution—the common denominator among all institutions?

Heclo attempted an answer himself, arguing that institutions are "inheritances of valued purpose with attendant rules and moral

obligations . . . [which] constitute a socially ordered grounding for human life."[5] Heclo's definition emphasizes the "normative," or moral, element of institutions, which "implicates the lives of individuals and collectivities in a lived-out social reality."[6] In a simpler formulation, he states that all institutions are "authoritative rules for behavior."[7] Whether formal and legal, like a contract, or informal, like a handshake, an institution must have both an implicit social purpose and a normative logic. An institution involves individuals, but it is something categorically different than a simple aggregation of individuals. This is because institutions entail a social purpose larger than any of the individuals therein, a purpose to which those individuals are expected to conform.[8]

Yuval Levin, in his recent book *A Time to Build*, sketches out a similar but perhaps simpler understanding of an institution—one that emphasizes its fundamentally communal nature. Institutions are, for Levin, "the durable forms of our common life" and the "frameworks and structures of what we do together."[9] Some institutions, Levin argues, are "formal"—that is, they are "organizations" that are "technically and legally formalized"—and some others are informal, but all institutions are "forms" in the original sense of being a structure, shape, or contour. Accordingly, an institution is that which gives structure, shape, and purpose to a group of individuals. Levin puts it this way:

> [A form] is the shape of the whole, the arrangement that speaks of its purpose, its logic, its function, and its meaning. An institution, in this sense, is different from a group of people in the same way that a form is different from the matter of which it is composed. . . . The institution organizes its people into a particular form moved by a purpose, characterized by a structure, defined by an ideal, and capable of certain functions.[10]

Here, it is helpful to think metaphorically (or perhaps one should say metaphysically). Take, for example, the form of a table. Its material substance (in this case wood) is given a form—the form of

a table. This can be understood in terms of its shape—a flat horizontal surface upon four vertical legs—or in terms of its function—a place on which to rest various implements. However, the idea of form is more truly said to unite both shape and function, contour and purpose, just as the shape of a table follows from, aims at, and coheres with its purpose. Moreover, the material aspects of the table, must be made to *con*form to the form of the table, both originally through construction (form*ation*) and continuously through upkeep or maintenance (*re*form).

Taking these insights from Heclo and Levin, one could venture to define an institution as comprising the inherited social rules governing collective endeavors, which enshrine the values and the norms by which we expect others to behave in pursuit of some definite end. This is what I think Levin is after when he describes institutions as a social form. Where the material substance of the table is wood, the material substance of an institution is individuals. The particular arrangement of individuals, or the shape given to them, coheres with its ultimate end or purpose, such as a church, which is directed toward the collective worship of God, or a baseball team, which is directed toward winning the game of baseball. The individuals are expected to conform their wills to the purpose of the institution, and indeed the institution entails the process of individual formation. An institution, understood as a social form, is therefore the difference between an undifferentiated mass of individuals and a family, church, school, or baseball team—all of which are relationships between individuals based on an inner logic that is directed toward some purpose larger than the individuals composing them.

Institutions both enable and limit individuals, giving them a role to play in a group. We are enabled to take on a task bigger than our individual selves and individual desires; yet we are limited by the institution's moral code and expectations for belief and behavior. Institutions are, in Levin's words, "by their nature formative" because "they structure our perceptions and our interactions, and as a result they structure us."[11]

Hugh Heclo and the Argument for Performance-Based Distrust

Having understood how an institution is defined, we can now proceed to ask why Americans have such deep distrust and perhaps disdain for institutions. The most common, and perhaps most intuitive, of these explanations places the blame on bad institutional actors. According to this perspective, there has been a litany of cases in which those who operate within institutions—or perhaps lead them—have used their positions therein in illegal or immoral ways. A skepticism of institutions on the part of Americans is therefore reasonable because actions by prominent individuals within our institutions have merited our skepticism. According to this argument, we distrust our institutions *because they deserve it*.

The late Hugh Heclo is the best defender of this argument. "Today's institutions," Heclo says, "have gained our distrust the old-fashioned way. They earned it. We might call this performance-based distrust. It draws its power from the experience of millions of ordinary people hearing about all sorts of breaches of trust by those in positions of institutional authority."[12] To put his argument in simple terms, Americans have lower trust in the institutions of public life because they have witnessed a veritable chronicle of institutional misuse and abuse.

In the realm of business, one immediately thinks of Enron, Big Tobacco, and Bernie Madoff—names that have become virtually synonymous with duplicity or corruption. In the political arena, Heclo compiled a list of nearly forty episodes since 1950 in which our political leaders betrayed public trust—including, most obviously, Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, and the impeachment of Bill Clinton.[13] In organized religion too, Heclo suggests, "high-level clerical misconduct" has made us all wary of religious institutions. Scandals in the Catholic Church and prominent televangelists' hawking of religion for personal gain have marred the image of American religious institutions. Similarly, the images of major charities like the United Way and the Red Cross have been tarnished by unethical uses of charitable donations. Even the world of sports has been marred by cheating and performance-enhancing drugs.

All in all, nearly every year since the 1950s a scandal or breach of trust has dominated public attention, which has little by little eroded the public's confidence in our institutions. We simply expect better from our institutions and their leaders. Heclo puts it this way: "Institutional failure, and the distrust it engenders, is the result of people continually failing to live up to the legitimate expectations attached to their positions of responsibility."[14] What underlies our distrust of institutions is, for Heclo, a theater of disappointment in which individuals use an institution improperly or immorally.

Heclo is half-right in his analysis, for such obvious breaches of the public trust cannot but hurt our collective view of institutions. Nevertheless, there are two problems with his analysis. First, even a litany of unethical actions by our institutional leaders does not account for the society-wide collapse in institutional trust. It might lead us to distrust this institution or that institution, this leader or that leader, but something other than ordinary institutional corruption must be taking place for the distrust to have metastasized and spread throughout our entire society. After all, institutional corruption is as old as institutions themselves; and selfish leaders are perhaps more common in history than their public-spirited counterparts.

Second, Heclo cannot account for how Americans are growing more distrustful with each subsequent generation. As Robert Putnam and others have shown, social distrust is now at record high levels and growing. According to Pew Research, nearly half of American young adults (eighteen through twenty-nine years of age) have "low social trust"—a subjective measure describing confidence in other members of society—whereas only about one-fifth of American seniors (sixty-five and older) have low social trust. Contrary to Heclo's contention, it is precisely those individuals who lived through all of Heclo's episodes who are most trusting among Americans. Lack of trust seems to be growing with each generation, and one simply cannot in good faith place the blame on the shoulders of corrupt institutional leaders. So, we must look elsewhere.

Yuval Levin and the Rise of Performative Institutions

Yuval Levin's recent analysis brings us closer to the mark. He argues that we are skeptical of institutions because individuals have come to use them as "platforms" for their own self-achievement, rather than submit themselves to some group identity and group formation. He argues, in other words, that there has been a revolution in the *purpose* of institutions.

This is not to say that Levin downplays the role of bad actors in institutions—of "corrosive insiderism," to use his phrase. However, Levin thinks that this or that instance of corruption cannot explain the broader collapse of institutional trust in America. Moral failings and abuses of power can account for some of our distrust of institutions, but they cannot explain our rampant distrust of all institutions. Levin critiques perspectives like Heclo's this way:

> If we were to look at one institution or another on its own, it might be easy to come up with plausible explanations for this decline in trust. Some specific scandal, failure, or controversy could probably help explain each case. But to see that nearly all of our institutions have been losing the public's trust at the same time is to recognize that deeper forces are at play, and that what has been happening might be best understood as a shift in how we think about institutions more generally.[15]

The "deeper force" to which Levin alludes is the rise of "outsiderism," a new phenomenon in which our institutions now "exist to display individuals and give them prominence . . . without stamping them with a particular character, a distinct set of obligations or responsibilities, or an ethic that comes with constraints."[16] Whereas *insiderism* connotes a failure to be formed according to an institution's internal moral logic—such as a priest who fails to live by his own sexual ethic—*outsiderism* connotes leveraging an institution for individual display beyond the wall of the institution—such as a congressperson using his or her office to gain national prominence. The revolution in our understanding of institutions is, as Levin puts

it, a move from institutions as "molds" (which form us) to institutions as "platforms" (for self-display).

This institutional evolution, from molds to platforms corresponds to a movement from thinking of institutions as "formative" to thinking of institutions as "performative." It is precisely this movement, Levin suggests, which has produced our widespread institutional distrust. That is, whether or not our institutional representatives act in morally reprehensible ways, Americans are now inundated by the phenomenon of individuals using institutions as pedestals for self-expression or self-display. To put this another way, the specific actions taken upon an institutional pedestal are of less importance than the mere fact that institutions are now used to elevate the status of individuals in the public eye. Levin says, "the more performative approach to institutions we increasingly see involves people with an institutional position using it as means of being seen and heard in the larger society. Such people define their roles not against a standard intrinsic to the institution but as expressions of themselves, acting *on* institutions more than *in* or *through* them. And so, in a sense remaining outsiders even while exercising institutional power."[17] In short, as the formative aspect of institutions is sacrificed to the performative, institutions are less about self-renunciation and more about self-promotion.

Throughout American life we see individuals try to leverage institutions as a means of becoming a celebrity—a person, in Daniel Boorstin's famous description, "known for being well-known." In the presence of so many celebrity seekers, Levin suggests, Americans have become skeptical that our institutions can or will provide anything of real benefit to the rest of us. The common denominator of classic institutions like the church, the family, and local associations was that they molded or shaped their members in a specific fashion; whereas the common denominator of today's institutions is individual self-expression and self-performance (to say nothing of self-enrichment). Levin suggests that the military and the police are the exceptions to our collapsing trust in institutions precisely because they are the "most unabashedly *formative* of our national institutions."[18] According to his logic, the

more performative an institution, the more they engender our distrust. Our declining trust in institutions then, in Levin's telling, is caused by those leaders of society who find in our institutions a stage for their own performance.

Levin has certainly moved the argument in the right direction, and his identification of the rise of performative institutions is enormously helpful; however, Levin does not account for the individualistic presuppositions that undergird our contemporary anti-institutionalism. Our society does not reject institutions because they are too amenable to individual personality; our individualistic society demands precisely such expression be possible. We might be aggravated when some other individual obtains more notoriety or success through an institution than we do, but the institution's responsiveness to our individuality is precisely what we demand as an individualistic society.

As will become more clear in the conclusion, growing individualism demands that our institutions better adapt to our individual identities and personal preferences. This also helps to explain another contemporary phenomenon: the celebrated rise of social media. Social media is the quintessential performative institution because all varieties of social media have internalized the ethic of expressive individualism. Contrary to Levin's argument, we do not distrust institutions because they have become performative; we have created performative institutions because we distrust traditional institutions. In other words, in our American culture we have been habituated to distrust the formative aspects of traditional institutions.[19] In short, while Levin points us in the right direction and gives us the useful distinction between formative and performative institutions, the truth is that underlying philosophical influences have turned us against formative institutions and have even caused us to gravitate to those institutions that will be platforms for our individuality.

Jean Bethke Elshtain and Social and Political Polarization

Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that social and political polarization is the root cause of our institutional distrust. Yet, her argument is

not that we hate other partisans enough to leave institutions; her argument, rather, is that we are so committed to toleration and so eager to avoid conflict that we have neglected any sort of serious communal activity. This is because all institutional participation, if not all communal life, becomes more difficult to navigate as our fellows become further divided on partisan grounds. Elshtain puts it this way:

> Contemporary distrust of organized politics and organized religion goes hand in hand. Both involve public expression, collectivities of persons involved in a shared enterprise, rules and convictions, and sometimes hard-hitting encounters. That we seem not to have the stomach for either suggests our capacity for democracy itself is growing ever more anemic.[20]

She goes on to say that we want the "spring showers [and] lovely gardens" of democratic deliberation, but we refuse the "thunderstorms"—that is, the uncomfortable moments of disagreement and compromise. We relinquish the good of social interaction provided we can at least avoid the bad. We are, in other words, socially and politically risk averse. This is, for Elshtain, an institutional vicious cycle: our desire to participate in public institutions is down because we are divided; we are divided because our institutions no longer bring us together.

Elshtain is certainly on to something, and it helps explain a crucial factor that is typically ignored: our partisans distrust different institutions. As Gallup puts it, "Partisans on both sides increasingly see institutions in the U.S. not as beneficial and necessary, but as part of an effort by the other side to gain advantage and to perpetuate its power and philosophical positions."[21] Republicans, for example, have dwindling trust in mainstream media, the branches of government, and educational institutions, whereas Democrats no longer trust the family, the church, and the market.[22] Pew Research suggests, moreover, that Republicans have higher levels of trust in military, religious, and business leaders than do

Democrats; whereas the contrary is true for educational and media leaders.[23] Sometimes, however, partisans distrust the same institution for different reasons. For example, both liberals and conservatives have begun to distrust the police since 2020, the former as a result of the events associated with the Black Lives Matter protests and the latter because of police enforcement of Covid-19 lockdown policy. This fact about growing distrust of police complicates both Levin's and Elshtain's arguments.

Overall, one must respond to Elshtain by pointing out that our declining confidence and trust in institutions predated political polarization by many years. In fact, our declining institutionalism is likely the root cause of political partisanship, not the other way around. Levin put the argument this way: "As different institutions come to be seen . . . as platforms for displaying individuals, they also come to lose their distinctions from one another and so tend to become homogenized into increasingly interchangeable stages for the same sorts of cultural-political performances."[24] What he means is that the rise of performative institutions makes such institutions suitable weapons for our now-pervasive culture war. However, it very well could be precisely the opposite, with the collapse of mediating institutions making possible our political polarization.

Or perhaps both are caused by a third thing, which is what I will now suggest. The deeper cause, I argue, is individualism.

Alexis de Tocqueville, Expressive Individualism, and the American Distaste for Institutions

There is a paradox at the heart of American society that merits our consideration here: we distrust the group more than any individual composing it. The whole is greater (in distrust) than the sum of its parts. Even in a hyper-partisan era, no member of Congress merits our distrust as much as the institution of Congress itself. No single news or entertainment outfit is as distrusted as "the media." Americans have high levels of confidence in their doctor or pastor, even as their confidence in the medical system and organized religion has collapsed. This fact, repeated time and time again across our institutions, points to Americans' curious preference for

individuals over groups—for individual, over collective, efforts. This phenomenon suggests that our growing distrust in institutions must relate most fundamentally to our individualism.

Alexis de Tocqueville was the first person to perceive that distinctly American, or democratic, character trait he called "individualism." Tocqueville defines it this way: "Individualism is a considered and peaceful sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw to the side with his family and his friends; so that, after thus creating a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself."[25] It is, as Tocqueville says, a "sickness" that is unique to "democratic times."[26] Individualism, Tocqueville specifies, is distinct from egoism. Whereas egoism is a radical prioritizing of oneself over others; individualism is a kind of solipsism—a physical and psychological distance from others.

Since the time of Tocqueville, many of our leading social scientists have employed the concept of individualism to understand contemporary American culture—foremost among which are Robert Bellah and Robert Putnam. Bellah, in particular, identified two distinct types of individualism, which he called "utilitarian" individualism and "expressive" individualism. Both versions share an ontological priority of the individual over the group, but they contain almost precisely inverted understandings of human nature. Whereas the former could accurately be described as an understanding of human nature that places responsibility with the individual and celebrates the Puritan virtues of industry, frugality, and self-discipline, the latter is an understanding of human nature which sees those virtues as fundamentally injurious to human individuality.[27] Authenticity, the highest virtue of expressive individualism, lies, not in the disciplining of one's inner desires, but in their unlimited expression.

Here is the philosopher Charles Taylor on the nature of expressive individualism:

> [By expressive individualism] I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own

> way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.[28]

In short, expressive individualism consists of two primary components: a desire to manifest one's internal self or personality and a corresponding rejection of all that constrains the self—whether that be social norms, tradition, laws, or religious strictures. It is, as Taylor puts it elsewhere, the simple idea that "each one of us has an original way of being human" and that it is the job of each "to discover what it is to be ourselves . . . without consulting pre-existing models."[29] Whereas the classical and Christian tradition taught that the self must be refined through discipline, moral rules, and tradition, the Romantics and Transcendentalists (and others who followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau) taught Americans that they could be their authentic selves only if they cast off such limits. For this reason, expressive individualism is encapsulated nicely in Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous phrase "the only sin is limitation."[30]

This idea—expressive individualism—is central to understanding our society's profound distrust and distaste for institutions. While there have not yet been any quantitative studies showing the growth of expressive individualism specifically, one can at the very least note that Carl R. Trueman has persuasively argued that expressive individualism filtered into the American popular consciousness as a result of the sexual revolution of the 1960s—precisely the time period that began our collapse in institutions.[31] Trueman goes so far as to declare that expressive individualism is "the normative type of self" in contemporary American society.[32] The threat expressive individualism plays to institutions can be seen arising from the very definition of an institution. We previously defied institutions as "social forms." Institutions are *forms* in the classical sense—constituting both the shape and purpose of some matter. They are *social* forms in that they give a certain shape to human relationships in order to achieve a collective purpose larger than the individuals composing it.

My argument here is that we Americans distrust institutions *tout court* because they are forms, and forms, by definition, place limits on our individuality. Let us unpack the logic here. In an institution—any institution—individuals are expected to conform to the pattern set therein—to live and think *institutionally*, as Heclo has put it. That is, the role of each individual in an institution entails abiding by an implicit or explicit moral code, a set of expectations arising from the purpose of the institution itself. Persons therein live with the knowledge that their beliefs and behaviors must align with the institution. The institution itself, moreover, places constraints or limitations on each individual, and through a process of formation (or "molding," in Levin's terms), the institution teaches each individual how best to serve the communal interest. This process of institutional formation, therefore, rewards certain behaviors and punishes others, incentivizes certain desired qualities and disincentivizes others—and in all cases places constraints on the individual for the sake of the collective.

This is not to say that an institution must only produce cookie-cutter individuals. Far from wanting an undifferentiated mass of individuals, the institution is interested in forming individuals for various roles that help it pursue its ultimate objective—just as a baseball team coordinates roles as disparate as pitcher and shortstop toward the overarching goal of winning baseball games. All nine positions in baseball, different as they may be, are comprehensible only as a part of the whole and within the broader rules of the game. So too do other institutions train individuals to have various roles within their overarching framework. All this to say that an institution does not obliterate individuality entirely, but all institutions do, quite profoundly, mold its development, guide its action, and elevate its purpose.

Traditionally speaking, institutions place real demands on individuals. Upon entering an institution, individuals subordinate their self-interest to the interest of the whole, which necessarily entails the painful renunciation of individuality, personal choice, or self-expression—painful, that is, to contemporary Americans. There was once a time when we thought it worth our while to subordinate

ourselves to society's institutions and that our individual sacrifice would pay dividends at the level of the broader society. Daniel Yankelovich, in a quote cited by Levin, gave perhaps the best expression of this phenomenon in *New Rules: Searching for Meaning in a World Turned Upside Down*, his study of the social revolution of the twentieth century:

> Throughout most of this century, Americans believed that self-denial made sense, sacrificing made sense, obeying the rules made sense, subordinating the self to the institution made sense. But doubts have now set in, and Americans now believe that the old giving/getting compact needlessly restricts the individual while advancing the power of large institutions . . . who use the power to enhance their own interests at the expense of the public.[33]

Our present distrust in institutions in America is therefore not simply a symptom of institutional corruption, a turn toward performative institutions, or even a symptom of our growing partisanship, rampant though they might be; our distrust of institutions is the result of our growing individualism.

Tocqueville wisely perceived that Americans, as a result of their profound individualism, disdain "forms and formalities."[34] Americans instinctively shrug under the weight of institutions, and they bristle at any and all impositions, which are thought to be yokes needlessly placed on individuality. We have an aversion to the process of being formed, and we flee institutions because they are the most salient source of formation in American society. We leave institutions in order to be more radically independent—free, that is, to pursue our individual desires in a manner we see fit. As Tocqueville noted, forms—and therefore institutions—incense our hatred because they stand between us and our "easy and present enjoyments." If Americans "throw themselves impetuously toward the object of their desires," as Tocqueville says, then institutions are (to modify a phrase from William F. Buckley) that which stand athwart our desires yelling stop.

Institutions, so understood, are the antithesis of individualism; institutional thinking and living, as Heclo might say, sees refinement where individualism sees enchainment. Self-renunciation is anathema to those who have so deeply believed in a gospel of self-fulfillment. American individualism, if it is anything, is a disposition to resist unwanted and external formation. As this disposition grows, we are tempted to throw off institutions entirely.

All this is not to say that Elshtain, Heclo, and Levin are simply wrong; it is to say only that Tocqueville perceived the deeper truth. Partisan polarization is certainly implicated in this process, as Elshtain suggests, but it is a difference of direction not a difference in kind. That is, conservatives and liberals may differ in the types of institutional formation they most distrust, but both sides are united by an underlying fear of being formed against their will. The right and left are *united* by individualism and *divided* by what sort of institutional impositions they find most detestable. As Wade Clark Roof has found, something deeper than polarization is occurring in American society, at least with regard to religion:

> The rift between these two theological camps in the so-called cultural wars attracts much attention in the media, but the real story of American religious life in this half-century is the rise of a new sovereign self that defines and sets limits on the very meaning of the divine. An individualistic ethos, the rise of the therapeutic mentality, and a growing consumerism have all conspired to create a new cultural definition of the self in the United States. . . . What appears to have emerged is the "self-contained individual" . . . a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning.[35]

This new sovereign self seems not to be more prominent on either side of the aisle, and its rise proves even more consequential than our polarization, for what invisibly unites us has even more power than what visibly divides us.

Heclo is right, moreover, to note that our current distrust of institutions is built on decades of immoral or illegal actions on the

part of those wielding institutional authority; however, as mentioned previously, institutional corruption is nothing new. History is the story of individuals amassing unto themselves and abusing power. What has changed, therefore, is not the actions taken within our institutions but their visibility. And they have become more visible because we are particularly attuned to distrust them. We fixate on that of which we are suspicious, not vice versa. We have profound anthropological or philosophical reasons for distrusting institutions, and institutional corruption is merely the final straw. We are particularly attuned to institutional wrongdoing because the rise of expressive individualism has taught us to be skeptical of institutions as a whole.

Finally, Levin is certainly right to highlight the revolution in our understanding of institutions that has occurred over the twentieth century, and he does us a great service by documenting the general movement away from formative institutions and toward performative institutions. This is an argument of profound insight, to be sure; however, one must again note that the causation might be precisely backward. We are not anti-institutional in response to the rise of performative institutions; our anti-institutionalism caused us to demand a new sort of institution, one more amenable to individuality. And this is precisely why our society has demanded performative rather than formative institutions, for performative institutions are merely the institutional counterpart of expressive individualism.

This suggests two possibilities to our original question: either a withdrawal from institutions as stifling of individual personality or a transformation and restructuring of institutions such that that they are more amenable to individuality and individual choice. Perhaps, however, there is a third way moving forward: perhaps we as a society might come to realize the profound benefits we all would receive from formative social institutions. We might, moreover, grow tired of the clowning, preening, and gratuitous self-displays characteristic of performative institutions and long for those formative institutions that stamp individuals with a deep, moral character. Perhaps someone will point out, as did Tocqueville,

that greater individualism tends to lead to anomie and inquietude and that true meaning and purpose come from submerging oneself in meaningful institutions and communal endeavors. If this were ever to happen, it will need to be modeled by our leaders. Upon witnessing the tendency of American democracy to break down "forms"—including social forms—Tocqueville went so far as to suggest that American statesmen must encourage an "enlightened and thoughtful cult of forms."[36] That is to say, Tocqueville wanted those of influence to uphold institutions with an almost fanatical religious zeal. While this full-throated defense of institutions is unlikely in our current setting, a good start might be for our leaders to cease speaking ill of institutions, like religion and the family, that have historically drawn us out of ourselves.

If one is concerned with the health of our social, political, or religious institutions and believe them as necessary to human flourishing, then we must be attuned to the ways in which our individualism leads us to distrust and abandon those institutions that do not accord with our individual preference; however, there is also the perennial temptation for Americans to build new, more individualistic institutions. All of us tremble at the former, while few of us have even begun to perceive the latter. Individualism, as I have here suggested, is the key to understanding our deep disdain for institutions and the paradoxical effects of that disdain in our society. We must all realize the perennial human tendency to remake institutions in our own image.

Notes

1. Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, "Trust and Distrust in America," Pew Research Center, July 22, 2019, p. 6, accessed July 9, 2023, https://www.people-press.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/07/pew-research-center_trust-distrust-in-america-report_2019-07-22-1.pdf.
2. See Gallup's In Depth: Topics A to Z: "Confidence in Institutions," accessed July 22, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx.
3. Heclo himself uses all these examples of institutions in *On Thinking Institutionally*.

4. See Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45–56.
5. Hugh Heclo, 38.
6. Hugh Heclo, 38.
7. Hugh Heclo, 35.
8. Such a distinction can be seen, e.g., in chapter 1 of José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*.
9. Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus: How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 19.
10. Yuval Levin, 19–20.
11. Yuval Levin, 20.
12. Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, 15.
13. Hugh Heclo, 18–22.
14. Hugh Heclo, 25.
15. Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build*, 30–31.
16. Yuval Levin, 33.
17. Yuval Levin, 35.
18. Yuval Levin, 34. However, one must note that since 2020 even the police have become distrusted by Americans.
19. This goes back at least as far as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman in the American context. See my dissertation for the full argument: Jacob Wolf, *Harmonizing Heaven and Earth: Democratization and Individualism in American Religion* (PhD dissertation, Boston College, 2020), https://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir:108949.
20. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Religion and American Democracy," in *Religion, Politics, and the American Experience: Reflections on Religion and American Public Life*, ed. Edith L. Blumhofer (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 24.
21. Frank Newport, "The Impact of Increased Political Polarization," *Gallup*, December 5, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/268982/impact-increased-political-polarization.aspx.
22. Rainie et al., "Trust and Distrust in America," 7.
23. Rainie et al., 10.
24. Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build*, 36.
25. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, English ed., ed. Eduardo Nolla, and James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Press, 2012), 882.
26. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 881nA (emphasis mine).

27. See my chapter "The Evolution of Individualism in America" from my *Harmonizing Heaven and Earth*.
28. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 475.
29. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 61.
30. For the argument that Emerson is an expressive individualist, see my "Ralph Waldo Emerson: America's Prophet of Expressive Individualism," in *Perspectives on Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2021): 247–61.
31. See Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* and his more recent *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, both published by Crossway Books (Wheaton, IL: 2020 and 2022, respectively).
32. Carl Trueman, "How Expressive Individualism Threatens Civil Society," in *Backgrounder: White Papers of the Heritage Foundation*, no. 3615, May 27, 2021, p. 12, http://report.heritage.org/bg3615.
33. Quoted in Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, 35.
34. Here it is helpful to remember Tocqueville's most profound insight: "Men who live in democratic centuries do not easily understand the utility of forms; they feel an instinctive disdain for them. I spoke about the reasons for this elsewhere. Forms excite their scorn and often their hatred. Since they usually aspire only to easy and present enjoyments, they throw themselves impetuously toward the object of each one of their desires; the least delays lead them to despair. This temperament, which they bring to political life, sets them against forms which slow or stop them each day in some of their desires." Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1271.
35. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 130.
36. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1271.