COMMUNITY, CONFLICT, AND RECONCILIATION

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RESUMO – O artigo enfoca a abordagem social-pragmatista da concepção política de comunidade, especialmente à luz dos desafios decorrentes da tendência de conceber a democracia sem comunidade e de obscurecer os problemas e distinções entre conflito e reconciliação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Comunidade. Conflito. Democracia, Pragmatismo, Reconciliação.

ABSTRACT – The article deals with the social pragmatist approach to the political conception of community, especially in light of the challenges posed by the tendency to view democracy without community and blur the problem and boundaries between conflict and reconciliation.

KEY WORDS – Community. Conflict. Democracy. Pragmatism. Reconciliation.

My topic in this paper will be community in the midst of divisiveness. After yet another of our quadrennial festivals of self-loathing that we call presidential campaigns, can anyone maintain that participation in the processes of our democracy makes us better? It was not always this way; often participation in political life was seen as a positive good. The Social Pragmatists, thinkers like John Dewey, James Hayden Tufts, and George Herbert Mead – as well as many others in America's past – praised the life of the active citizen. Tufts wrote in 1918, for example, that "a democratic government is a splendid government in many ways, but it will not run itself." This need for citizen involvement was an advantage, he maintained, because active participation in the processes of self-government itself leads to citizen growth. As he phrased it, "we believe in democracy as rule by the people" because we believe that participation in the democratic process "makes people more intelligent, free, and responsible" (1918, 394, 405). In deliberative attempts to advance our communal interests through greater citizen involvement, we thus have the possibility of learning how to govern ourselves better. At least that is how things seemed to Tufts and others at various points in our history. Things seem different to me now. At present, our political practice is failing. Our society is deeply divided. Our fellows are suspicious of, and hostile toward, each other. Our community is broken.

We need to remember that Tufts's view was never the only one, and that our common life has often been spiky. We have had periods of far greater discord than at present – we had a Civil War once – and we have crawled back from many other instances of social fragmentation since then. A very short list of such conflicts would begin with two major "red" scares and three unpopular wars in Asia. In addition,

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we have often disagreed violently over the worthiness of potential and actual immigrants, the acceptability of ways of religious worship, and the relative merits of various racial groups. Many times in the past, Americans have found themselves divided; and each time we have, more or less, managed to put the conflict behind us and return to a semblance of communal living.

No doubt we will somehow right ourselves again this time. Hoping to learn something from the past, however, I am interested in considering how Pragmatism might be able to help in this process of reconciliation. When I suggest that the Pragmatic approach might offer us some assistance in reconstructing American community, I am not suggesting that I believe it offers us, in a Jamesian fashion, the means to reunite today's "tough-minded" and "tenderminded" citizens by helping the latter become more open to facts and the former more appreciative of principles (James 1975, 13). Our current problem is of a different sort, and my suggestion is more Deweyan: by reemphasizing the fundamental importance of community to democratic practice, it might be possible to redirect our political interactions away from our current model of divisive combat toward cooperative inquiry.

Specifying Our Current Problem

While there are perhaps any number of ways to try to approach the core of our contemporary troubles, I will attempt to do so by concentrating on what I think are the four central aspects. The first of these is the assumption on the part of many politicians and their supporters that there is only one solution to any of our problems and that they are in possession of this solution. In any intellectual endeavor, of course, such bankrupt absolutism would be rejected immediately. In a similar fashion, *absolutism* has no place in cooperative social inquiry; but, as we all know, it functions quite successfully in contemporary politics. There, the belief that our side has divined the "true path" that must be followed without wavering operates as a powerful motivator. When Dewey wrote in 1908 of the difference between "customary" and "reflective" (or modern) society, he emphasized that in the former, "it does not occur to any one that there is a difference between what he ought to do, i.e., the moral, and what those about him customarily do, i.e., the social" (MW 5:387). For Dewey, the great advantage to what he saw as our increasingly "reflective" society was its ability to address our problems from a number of perspectives; but, nearly a century later, the "customary" acceptance of absolutism remains a powerful force.

A second aspect of our contemporary American situation is the often unasserted assumption that any political position should be articulable in a small number of categorical sentences, preferably one. Some political positions, as we know, demonstrate this sort of *oversimplification* – this group is our enemy; that country is our friend – but surely this quality alone does not make them good positions. Our contemporary situation calls for careful cooperative deliberation leading toward circumspect action; but a large number of our politicians, and an alarming number of our citizens, view nuance as obfuscation and subtlety as a sign of weakness. To think in tentative terms – to think at all, it often seems – is to appear indecisive; and a populace used to oversimplification will find no value in nuanced subtleties.

Rather than engaging in the sort of cooperative inquiry that respects a plurality of opinions and assumes complexity of social problems, our climate of absolutism and oversimplification attacks those who do not share our simple creed as being "bad" Americans. Our politicians use *partisanship* as a divisive tool to "energize the troops" through hatred of the "enemy"[1]. They deliberately focus upon issues like the war, abortion, homosexuality, and religion in public life to foster this divisiveness within our society. In their terms, they try to "drive a wedge" through the electorate. Rather than question their own commitments to absolutist oversimplifications as a source of disaffection among members of the electorate, our politicians attempt to overcome voter apathy by demonizing those citizens who fail to share their views. And, by an effect that resembles Gresham's law in economics, intelligent dialogue is driven from the realm of public discussion by negative messages better suited to the marketing of household products than to choices about the future direction of the Republic.

Finally, this cluster of absolutism, oversimplification, and partisanship is sealed off from a major source of criticism by Americans' *chauvinism*, our exaggerated patriotism that makes us suspicious of all outsiders. We find ourselves at present in a climate where no "foreign" evaluations of what we do – whether it be continuing inappropriate executions or driving wasteful vehicles or waging preemptive war – need be considered, because those who offer such criticisms are by definition not Americans. By walling ourselves off in this way, we are eliminating any possibility that someone might be able to show us the difference between what Mead called "the principles of [our] community" and "the prejudices of [our] community" (1934, 217). The American self-image has long included the assumption that we are different from – and probably better than – other peoples. Some level of collective self-satisfaction may, in fact, be necessary for social stability; and, no doubt, Russians and Filipinos and Saudis and Czechs have some of their own problems with chauvinism. Americans seem at present, however, uncontrolled in our rejection of whatever is not "American"; and our excessive self-regard borders on hatred of foreigners. In our misguided attempt to "strengthen" America, we have forgotten Dewey's fundamental message that a society has an inside and an outside. As he noted in 1916, there are two criteria for evaluating any social group. The first is internal: its level of shared interests; the second is external: its interaction and cooperation with other groups. As he wrote, we need to ask: "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?" (MW 9:89)[2]. We, on the other hand, seem to be trying to build a strong society by turning within.

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[1] Cf. Mead: "Without parties we could not get a fraction of the voters to come to the polls to express themselves on issues of great public importance, but we can enroll a considerable part of the community in a political party that is fighting some other party" (1934, 220; cf. 314).

[2] Cf. Dewey: "A member of a robber band may express his powers in a way consonant with belonging to that group and be directed by the interest common to its members. But he does so only at the cost of repression of those of his potentialities which can be realized only through membership in other groups" (LW 2:328).

Collectively, these four factors make our contemporary politics a mess. This mess is, as we all know, a source of great mirth for the writers of late-night television; but I find myself unable to enjoy it. Perhaps this is because I disagree with H.L. Mencken's evaluation of democracy as "incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing," an amusement that was moderated only by his admission that "democracy may be a self-limiting disease" (1949, 157, 168). For me, our contemporary mess is a serious problem, and one that we cannot solve until we recognize its source in our weakened community. Additionally, in all four of the aspects to which I have pointed, I have suggested that our politicians have failed us; but we all know that the situation is more complex and that the solution must come from us. No absolutizing candidate or officeholder could ever succeed if we did not fall for such pronouncements, and no oversimplified rationale would ever be presented if we routinely demanded better analyses. They may push all of our partisan buttons to get us to react in a visceral fashion, but we need not respond as expected; and our blindness to the perspectives of other lands is at least in part voluntary. Thus, the solution to our current problems is not just to get different politicians. If it is to come at all, the solution will have to come from us, by forming ourselves into better communities.

Considering a Response

Before we turn to considering how we might make our communities better, it would probably be a good idea to step back a bit and ask some critical questions about American community and how it has been understood. We step back, of course, for distance and orientation, grounded in the assumption that in social processes there are no distinct breaks or complete novelties. The hopes that were so powerful in the work of the Social Pragmatists were based upon assumptions, recognized and felt, that have now been called into question; but, to determine if these assumptions are to be abandoned, we must understand them more fully. Repairing the current situation of community will be made easier by recognizing how we have understood community, its values, and its possibilities in the past[3].

C. Wright Mills long ago stated that the presumed deficiencies of contemporary American political practice that I have been discussing – the lack of inquiry, the lack of dialogue, the lack of faith in our fellows, and so forth – have nothing to do with politics in the first place. For Mills, politics is about acquiring and holding power, and any worrying about the condition of the larger community is a costly diversion from this realistic task. He saw all such talk about American democracy as being delusional anyway. He noted, for example, in *The Power Elite* of 1956, that the inherited ideas of American democracy are "a set of images out of a fairy tale: they

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[3] Of course, I am not alone in suggesting that we will face the future better if we make use of the resources of our past. Other attempts to address our recent and current social and political problems through a reconstruction of our inherited philosophical tradition include the following baker's dozen volumes: West (1989); Hickman (1990); Campbell (1992); Hollinger and Depew (1995); Seigfried (1996); Stuhr (1997); Eldridge (1998); Harris (1999); McKenna (2001); Sullivan (2001); Gavin (2003); Lekan (2003); and McDonald (2004). Each of these volumes offers, in its own way, a reading (or readings) of our philosophical past and an indication (or indications) of how we might use it to benefit our current social practice.

are not adequate even as an approximate model of how the American system of power works. The issues that now shape man's fate are neither raised nor decided by the public at large. The idea of a community of publics is not a description of fact, but... an assertion of a legitimation masquerading ... as a fact" (1956, 300)[4]. In response to Dewey's 1927 claim that "every serious political dispute turns upon the question whether a given political act is socially beneficial or harmful" (LW 2:245), Mills could only laugh. Dewey, he continued, has no recognition of the fundamental clefts in American society. In his dissertation of 1942, Mills noted that Dewey "never seriously questioned a fundamental and ultimate communal homogeneity of society"; but, for Mills, "what is a 'problem' to one 'group' is not at all problematic to another; it may well be a satisfactory 'solution'". For Mills, Dewey's understanding of the nature of American society was simply mistaken. Dewey assumes, he continued, "a relatively homogeneous community which does not harbor any chasms of structure and power not thoroughly ameliorative by discussion. Always there must be the assumption that no 'problems' will arise that will be so deep that a third idea-plan would not unite in some way the two conflicting plans. But this model of problem posing does not concern itself with two social interests in a death-clutch" (1964, 405, 412–13). Some of Mills's stridency here is, no doubt, posturing; but his point that political activities are misanalogized when thought of as cooperative inquiry is one that we need to consider.

A similar position was offered by John Herman Randall Jr. in 1935. For Randall, the issue was not a complete disanalogy between politics and cooperative inquiry, but the tactical weakness that results when one group is trying to conduct politics as cooperative inquiry and its opponents are not. He was writing specifically about what he saw as the limitations of the Pragmatic approach to politics in the face of communist and fascist challenges to liberal democracy; but, without suggesting that we are facing that level of a problem (just yet), it may still be useful to reconsider what Randall had to say. He suggested that tactics like absolutism, oversimplification, partisanship, and chauvinism offer an advantage in political fights. Randall wonders as follows: "Can the liberal really fight for intelligence in the name of the experimental attitude? Can men oppose intolerance and power with the tentative, inquiring, searching, provisional temper of mind, the temper that has abandoned certainty, finality, and the burning faith that human feeling and action so deeply demand? Can men fight for a Right they know to be relative and hypothetical? Can they really struggle valiantly for an ideal they know may be revised tomorrow?" (1935, 260)[5]. If our answers here are negative, then we cannot hope to overcome in any fundamental way our present mood of hostility and suspicion. All we can hope to do is to counter-attack, to use our own absolutistic oversimplifications in just as partisan a fashion to defeat our "enemies". The sad part is that the continued use of this particular

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[4] Cf. "America is now in considerable part more a formal political democracy than a democratic social structure, and even the formal political mechanics are weak" (Mills 1956, 274).
[5] Cf. George Raymond Geiger: "How can a liberal social philosophy, which develops from a type of thinking that compares and appreciates all the elements involved, get things done, especially in crisis periods?" (1939, 365).

tactical response will eventually make Mills right, and we will have a society made up of social interests in a "death-clutch".

If this response seems like embracing defeat rather than advancing democracy, then we will need to offer some way to foster cooperative inquiry. Perhaps we should begin by emphasizing a distinction. On the one hand, there is the series of political issues about which a society must decide: whether to build a new high school or a new prison, whether or not to ban smoking in public places, how to adequately fund health care, whether to tax ourselves or our children, and the like. On the other hand, there is the procedural context in which we decide these various issues: how we conduct the processes of democratic interaction. It is my belief that we must begin with this procedural context. We can deal adequately with specific political problems, and ultimately with the four flaws of current political practice mentioned above, only if our society has a commitment to community as the necessary precondition for democratic practice. Both Mills and Randall admit that our social problems are solvable only within community, although they – and Mills more than Randall – have grave doubts about its existence.

For the Social Pragmatists, however, the potential existence of community is a matter of faith in our common life. Dewey wrote in 1925 that "shared experience is the greatest of human goods", and he continued in 1939 when he wrote that "democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained" (LW 1:157, 14:229). Thus, fostering community is more important than winning elections or passing bills; and, whatever the tactical benefits of partisan divisiveness may be, Dewey believed that they are outweighed by the broader benefits of cooperative inquiry because the process of shared living will lead to a better life for all concerned. Still, even if we accept these assumptions, we must answer a number of questions like the following: How might we convince the vast majority of our fellow citizens that lack of cooperative inquiry, not warding off the presumably disastrous policies of their opponents, is our main problem? How can we expect that an electorate that expresses a desire for toughness, religious orthodoxy, and nationalism will be won over by the call for openness and pluralism and cooperation?

Democracy in Search of Community

Contemporary American political practice demonstrates the problem of trying to maintain democracy without community. We have at present all of the forms of democracy – campaigns and elections and systems of representation – but little of the spirit that would make these democratic forms come to life. Cooperative inquiry plays little or no role in our political life. Our democracy is driven by partisanship as a weapon for overcoming our opponents, and absolutism as a justification for refusing to explore contrary viewpoints. Our political discussions do not move beyond oversimplification and reject any real criticism as "foreign". But American political practice need not be this way.

The only possible solution that I see to this situation – other than the shortsighted but soothing enjoyment of its "idiocy" – is a recommitment to the processes of

community life. As Dewey wrote of democracy in 1938, "through mutual respect, mutual toleration, give and take, the pooling of experiences, it is ultimately the only method by which human beings can succeed in carrying on this experiment in which we are all engaged, whether we want to be or not, the greatest experiment of humanity – that of living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others". He had written earlier that "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience". Democracy is thus founded upon faith in our fellows, the sort of faith in others that is in such short supply at present. In 1939, he praised "the habit of amicable cooperation" as essential to democratic living. "To take as far as possible every conflict which arises", he wrote, "out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree – even profoundly – with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends" (LW 13:303, 14:228; MW 9:93). All of these emphases seem quite alien at present.

Recovering community would mean a number of things. One of these is increased participation, brought about by fostering the involvement of all citizens in the processes of self-government. It was this sort of involvement that we saw Tufts praising earlier for making citizens "more intelligent, free, and responsible"; but such participation differs significantly from our spectator role in current electioneering. Dewey wrote in 1937 that "the key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed ... as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together". Much more than occasional voting – which can only *tally*, not *form*, values – fuller participation leads to the sort of ongoing face-to-face discussions that would undermine absolutism and oversimplification. Dewey emphasized in 1942 the power of personal interactions when he wrote in praise of "the American method of back-and-forth give-and-take discussion until [the] final decision represented a workable consensus of the ideas of all who took part" (LW 11:217; MW 8:443). Out of this participation and these discussions emerge the processes of mutual persuasion by means of which a better public opinion is formed.

This issue of the formation of public opinion in a democracy is often mistakenly lumped in with propaganda or indoctrination; but it remains an essential aspect of ongoing social life. Tufts discussed in 1933 the importance of considering "the agencies for forming public opinion, and of education in respect to both the ends and the means of good government" (1933, 194). In a similar fashion, Dewey warned in 1927 that "opinion casually formed and formed under the direction of those who have something at stake in having a lie believed can be *public* opinion only in name". While Dewey did not have talk radio and cable television in mind – just the print media that we now think of as largely obsolete – his recognition of the potential of mass media for malforming public opinion is clear: "The public press, which reaches almost every individual and which circulates cheaply and rapidly, affords an organ of unprecedented power for accomplishing a perversion of public opinion" (LW 2:346,

7:361). Our perverse public opinion – infected with oversimplification and absolutism, and shaped by partisanship and chauvinism – should indicate the extent to which reconstructing our political practice is an educational problem. For the Social Pragmatists, of course, all social problems are educational problems.

Although their claim is contested, it is surely no surprise that Dewey and Tufts and Mead believe that social reconstruction is fundamentally an educational, rather than a political, task. Dewey, for example, never tired of reiterating the importance of education to democratic community. In 1916, for example, he wrote: "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife. Moreover, it is only education which can guarantee widespread community of interest and aim. In a complex society, ability to understand and sympathize with the operations and lot of others is a condition of common purpose which only education can procure". Twenty-two years later he continued in the same vein that "every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself", and that education plays an essential role because democracy "has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems and conditions of the social life of which, as the years go by, we are a part, a social life that is changing with extreme rapidity from year to year" (MW 10:139, LW 13:299).

At the present time, however, little of the Social Pragmatists' emphasis upon the relation of education and democracy seems to be appreciated. As a society, in fact, we have been strongly committed of late to what can only be called mis-education. We have been teaching each other – and our children – that there is no need to "understand and sympathize with" others because we have the correct answers and they do not. Similarly, we have been teaching that the process of social change does not need to be understood, but to be reversed. We have also been teaching that democracy is a system of ordered combat in which the goal is victory and the means are open. Our message has been that the "result" is more important than the "process", that democracy is possible without community. Dewey noted in 1923 that our system of education must help prepare our citizens "to be members of communities, recognizing the ties that bind them to all the other members of the community, recognizing the responsibility they have to contribute to the upbuilding of the life of the community" (MW 15:158). In our schooling and social practice, we have been educating a different kind of democratic citizen, and we are experiencing the sad results.

The Possibilities of Reconciliation

We have been considering aspects of our current democratic situation, a situation in which increased levels of absolutism, oversimplification, partisanship, and chauvinism have undermined the life of the community. It may be possible to have majoritarianism without community; but we should not call the resulting state "democracy". Solving our present impasse will mean working to reestablish community. Some of the aspects of this effort I have already pointed to: increasing the participation of citizens in the processes of self-government, emphasizing the role of cooperative inquiry, fostering public opinion based upon mutual persuasion, and recognizing the importance of uncovering communal values. Another aspect of

this effort to recover community I have not mentioned. This is learning to work with those whose ideas we reject and whose policies we oppose. To move out of our current fragmented state, we may need to compromise on issues that we now regard as uncompromisable, and abandon values that we now regard as unabandonable. If we were politicians, this about-face would be easy; but we are not. We actually believe what we say. The question for us is: how might reconciliation be possible? Let us consider one model from our collective past.

A little over 140 years ago, on 4 March 1865, Abraham Lincoln offered his Second Inaugural Address. Speaking during the last phase of the Civil War, Lincoln was a drained man, working within an America that was far more divided than it is now. Even so, he thought that reconciliation was possible. In his address, he phrased his intention as follows: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace" (1953, 333). Perhaps there is something that we can learn for our time from Lincoln's approach to reconciliation.

The most noticeable aspect of this address, just hinted at in the passage I quoted, is its deeply religious tone. After experiencing the unending horror of his first presidency, Lincoln was able to interpret this great tragedy only in religious terms. Both parties, he notes, "read the same Bible, and pray to the same God"; each side "invokes His aid against the other". After four years of this slaughter, Lincoln maintains that neither side could claim that its prayers had been "answered fully". His interpretation of the indecisive struggle is not divine indifference, however, but that "the Almighty has his own purposes". For Lincoln, it seems, the slaughter was too much for humans to understand; all that we could do is accept the mystery and struggle on "as God gives us to see the right". "Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away," he writes. "Yet, if God wills that it continue ... so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether'" (333).

Could Lincoln's approach to reconciling the two sides of his deeply split state be of any use to us now? For starters, this final theme of resignation would not seem to be very helpful. It may be true that our situation will only get better when it gets better; but such resignation precludes the possibility that we might speed reconciliation along. Perhaps there is more to be gained from emphasizing other aspects of Lincoln's position. Could a lack of malice and an increase of charity, for example, facilitate reconciliation? With this hope in mind, I would like to consider the evaluation of Lincoln by a more recent figure who, in spite of his own religiosity, spoke a language in many ways parallel to that of the Social Pragmatists: Reinhold Niebuhr.

Niebuhr reads Lincoln's stance in the Second Inaugural Address to be a combination of piety and skepticism. What Niebuhr calls Lincoln's "dilemma of faith" results from the fact that "the drama of history is shot through with moral meaning; but the meaning is never exact. Sin and punishment, virtue and reward are never precisely proportioned". We might be more comfortable with less religious terms

here; but his position describes pretty accurately that aspect of the human condition in which happiness seems to be independent of merit. For Niebuhr, part of what this "dilemma of faith" means is that it is possible to recognize a serious moral wrong and yet find it less serious than another. In Lincoln's case, his "moral abhorrence of slavery" had to be held in check because of the primary importance of preserving the Union. Lincoln's higher duty was as "a responsible statesman" rather than as an abolitionist (1964, 74-75). Here, while we might dispute Niebuhr's example, the principle of prioritization is in general right, and his insight into Lincoln's thinking is accurate. Moreover, there is something here that we might use in our attempts to repair our broken community. We can work together most easily with those whose policies we abhor, it seems, when we are collectively opposing others whose policies we abhor even more. There is, of course, a great deal of truth to this fundamental human insight; and we all recognize the kind of social fusion that is possible when divergent segments of society come together in the face of an "external" enemy. Still, no one would characterize the resulting "fused" situation as a strong community[6].

Perhaps concentrating on Niebuhr's emphasis upon Lincoln's skepticism will be more useful to us. He writes that Lincoln managed "to avoid the error of identifying providence with the cause to which the agent is committed". By means of his skepticism, Lincoln was able "to cast doubt on the intentions of both sides" in the Civil War and "to place the enemy into the same category of ambiguity as the nation to which his life was committed" (75). Even on so strong an issue as the seemingly unambiguous question of slavery itself – "wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces" – skeptical Lincoln's view was: "Let us judge not that we be not judged" (1953, 333). Could we perhaps follow Lincoln here and step back from our strongly held positions to allow for more flexibility in our moral stances? Could we admit, for example, that we might be wrong about some of the central issues that we are defending? If abortion or homosexuality were no longer a matter of dispute, then our community would presumably be much less divided; and, if our squabbles over the war or over the role of religion in public life were resolved, then we could presumably turn to rebuilding community. On these issues, as on all others, we are, of course, fallible; and we might recognize at some later point that we were wrong. We could no doubt make such concessions in favor of reconciliation as a Lincolnian higher good – but should we do this? Two things seem to hold us back. The first is that, since our opponents are at least as fallible as we are, they could yield instead. The second restraint is that these beliefs are not just "beliefs"; in part they constitute who we are. We are a group with deeply felt positions on abortion and homosexuality and war and the role of religion in public life. These values have a particular and powerful meaning, and are not something to be compromised away. Their abandonment would be tragic.

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6   I have considered this theme of social fusion in a pair of earlier essays: "George Herbert Mead on Social Fusion and the Social Critic" (1992b) and "Community without Fusion: Dewey, Mead, Tufts" (1995).

Niebuhr, of course, has a tragic sense of human existence. He "knows" that the glass can never be more than half-full; and he accuses those who expect more – "liberals" in religion and politics and education – of failing to recognize "the known facts of history"[7]. Niebuhr sees a kindred soul in Lincoln, who similarly has no delusions about a better future. He continues that Lincoln embraces the "paradox" that attempts to encompass, on the one hand, "the affirmation of a meaningful history" and, on the other, "the religious reservation about the partiality and bias which the human actors and agents betray in the definition of meaning". Because of his skepticism, Niebuhr continues, Lincoln's stance is superior to "the pure moral idealism of the abolitionists, the Horace Greeleys, William Lloyd Garrisons, and Wendell Phillipses", because Lincoln understood "the meaning of the drama of history, and ... the taint of self-interest in the definitions of meaning, by which human agents corrupt the meaning in which they are involved". The idealists, on the other hand, failed to understand the South, especially the way that "good men may inherit social attitudes and become the bearers of social evil, although their own consciences are not perverse, but merely conventional" (1964, 77, 84, 86). Niebuhr suggests that in Lincoln's day the Abolitionists demonized the slaveholders and created the Southern reaction that led to the Civil War. In much the same way, the argument might continue that our own idealists on contemporary issues have created their opponents. It would be better, on all sides, if we would "judge not".

As I indicated earlier, for me there is too much religion in Lincoln's approach to communal reconciliation, and in Niebuhr's defense of it. But perhaps there is something to use in Lincoln's underlying stance of skepticism – or better, fallibilism – as a tool for movement toward reconciliation. One means of reconciliation, then, would be to adjust our idealistic moral claims about social policies. Niebuhr warns us against the inherent problem of moral idealism: "The idealists were, like most if not all idealists, self-righteous and consequently vindictive" (86). And he reminds us that at least some of those idealists are we. The way to deal with opponents' claims that are increasingly absolutistic and oversimplified and partisan and chauvinistic might be to shift to claims that are tentative and nuanced and open-minded. It will surely be tough to compromise with those whose values are so different from ours; moreover, it is difficult to imagine them ready to compromise. (This is the point at which, as Randall said, any weakness on our part would amount to surrender.) Difficult or not, however, it may be possible; and we recognize that advancing cooperation is ultimately our goal.

Still, in the short run, it may be that communal reconciliation is simply not possible under our current circumstances. Perhaps the process of cooperative interaction to rebuild a larger community is not the higher good now. Perhaps preserving the values of our own smaller community is. Perhaps our job is to hold them off until they destruct in an eventual fireball of self-righteousness. This stance assumes, of course, that we will be able to survive that catastrophe and then take

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[7]   Cf., for example, Niebuhr (1932).

up the difficult task of reconstructing our fragmented society with the help of many of our fellow citizens who, by then, will have returned from their current phase of partisanship. I am willing to make that assumption. I began with the comforting belief that we will somehow right our community; but I must conclude with the reluctant admission that I do not see this happening soon.

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