

THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE TO BIG GOVERNMENT



In 2012 the campaign to reelect Barack Obama posted a web ad called “The Life of Julia.” Divided into slides depicting various stages of life, the ad followed Julia’s progress from the beginning of her formal education at age three until retirement at sixty-seven. Each slide showed how Julia would benefit from Democratic policies and suffer from Republican ones.

BY SAMUEL GOLDMAN

Conservatives immediately attacked “The Life of Julia.” The most serious criticism was that the ad presented Julia’s relationship with government as the most important and enduring in her life. As the columnist Ross Douthat observed, Julia seems to have “no friends or siblings or extended family, no husband . . . a son who disappears once school starts and parents who only matter because Obamacare grants her the privilege of staying on their health care plan.”

By portraying a representative American as an unattached individual more deeply involved with government than with other people, the designers of “The Life of Julia” revealed their basic assumptions. Rather than just promoting generous benefits, the ad reflected a vision of society in which programs replace relationships outside the state. Julia does not need a family because she has Head Start; she does not need a husband because she has subsidized birth control; she does not need children because she has Social Security. And the only community in “The Life of Julia” is the “community garden” to which she devotes her retirement.

Although it plays an important role in contemporary American politics, the rejection of community reflected in “The Life of Julia” is older than Barack Obama or the Democratic Party. In fact, the project of reconstructing society as a relationship between the individual and the state developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the sociologist Robert Nisbet documented in his classic work *The Quest for Community* (1953), this political vision inspired the



French Revolution. It also inspired a reaction: conservatism, which arose to defend community against the state.

Americans today should remember this history and reclaim the idea of community as an alternative to overreaching government. It is easy to condemn the progressive mind-set that spawned “The Life of Julia.” But even those who oppose big government often fall into the trap of seeing individual autonomy as

the sole alternative to state control. One of Nisbet’s great insights was that unfettered individualism erodes “the various groups that form the true building blocks of the social order”—the family, the neighborhood, the church, civic associations, and so forth. These groups and institutions mediate between the individual and state, allowing individuals to work together to achieve their goals without relying on vast bureaucracies or the threat of violent coercion. As these associations weaken, the human impulse

toward community leads people to turn even more to government as the source of order and comfort.

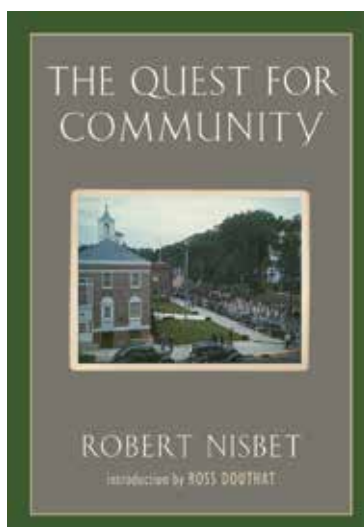
If Americans care about limiting government power, they cannot champion individualism alone.

The Modern Critique of Community

The debate about community began in the sixteenth century. The period is remembered as an age of despotism. Yet the decisive fact of early modern Europe was the decentralization of power. The monarchs of England, Spain, and France did not enjoy absolute control but had to contend with the independent authority of the church, nobles, guilds, and autonomous cities.

The political byword of this world was *liberty*. But this liberty was not the freedom of individuals to do as they pleased. Instead, liberty meant the right of parishes, estates, and so on, to govern themselves according to their ancient, often unwritten customs.

But these essentially medieval arrangements were inefficient and prone to conflict between rival



authorities. Such clashes became more frequent and intense in the Reformation. When theology became a battle cry, traditional rivalries between altar and throne, laity and hierarchy, degenerated into war.

After 1500, political philosophers aimed to resolve these problems. They held that peace and prosperity could be secured only if the patchwork of authorities that had defined the medieval world were replaced by the *sovereignty* of a centralized state. This idea achieved theoretical perfection in the *Leviathan* of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679).

Hobbes denies the possibility of unplanned order. He holds that man's condition in the absence of positive law is a "state of nature." In this condition, each individual has the right to do whatever he judges necessary to his survival. Since this may include lying, cheating, stealing, and killing, the "state of nature" turns out to be a "state of war." According to Hobbes, the only way individuals can escape the state of war is to subject themselves to the will of a single "sovereign."

Hobbes's motive is not totalitarian. Rather than eliminating freedom, he wishes to replace the dangerous anarchy of the state of nature with the limited, but orderly, freedom to pursue private satisfaction under positive law. To accomplish this, Hobbes rejects any authority outside the state. To his mind, the medieval understanding of liberty as communal autonomy undermines sovereignty—and thus threatens to revive the state of war.

The *Leviathan* is the most rigorous defense of the modern elevation of sovereignty over community. But it receives two important revisions from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).

First, Rousseau argues that the logic of sovereignty is inherently democratic. Whereas Hobbes holds that individuals should agree to obey one man, Rousseau says that individuals should bind themselves to the "general will" constituted by the agreement of all citizens. As a result, Hobbes's monarchical sovereign

is transformed into a legislature in which all citizens participate.

Second, Rousseau suggests that the sovereign state is national as well as rational. Participants in the general will must be bound together by common loyalties. These loyalties cannot come from religion or local associations, which historically pitted citizens against one another. They have to be derived from broad commonalties of language and culture.

TO SEE SOCIETY STRICTLY AS A BATTLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL AGAINST THE STATE IS TO OVERLOOK AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT.

In Rousseau, local community is replaced by the modern nation-state.

Rousseau's revisions of Hobbes played an important role in the French Revolution. For the ideologists of the Revolution, freedom meant that citizens owed absolute loyalties to the laws of the national state but none whatsoever to the families, local associations, churches, or other groups that mediated between individuals while remaining outside official control. Conservatism emerged as a response to this new understanding of freedom and society.

Burke's Theory of Community

The classic conservative defense of community is the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by the British statesman Edmund Burke (1729–1797). Presented as a letter to a French nobleman, the *Reflections* develop a thorough critique of the modern theory of sovereignty.

Against the statist understanding of civil society as a contract among rational agents with no more obligations than they voluntarily

accept, Burke depicts a rich landscape of groups within which individuals are contingently embedded. For Burke, we do not have the right to *choose* the objects of our loyalty or rules under which we live. Rather, "our liberty becomes a noble freedom" when we embrace hierarchy and customs that define the groups into which we are born. Our primary attachment is to particular places and specific persons—not to a flag or written law.

Burke sees society as composed not of isolated individuals but of interwoven, cooperative groups. The purpose of government, then, is not to eliminate intermediary groups and relationships but to defend those connections, which distinguish a flourishing people from the dangerous mob that threatened France.

That is the meaning of Burke's famous assertion that "to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections." In this military metaphor, authority is filtered and divided through an elaborate series of ranks and units rather than imposed directly on them.

Such was the vision Burke opposed to the French Revolution. His insight was taken up by the first generation



of thinkers to call themselves conservatives, including the Frenchman Louis de Bonald (1754–1840) and the German Friedrich von Gentz (1764–1832). But could the conservative vision offer anything to Americans, who had rejected Europe’s medieval inheritance? Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) argued that it could, fusing individual liberty and community in a usable conservatism for America today.

Tocqueville on Community and Conservatism in America

Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* has been called the best book about democracy, and the best about America. It is also the best book ever written about conservatism. A student of Burke’s European disciples, Tocqueville showed how their conservative understanding of community could be used to defend liberty in modern democracy.

Tocqueville takes seriously Americans’ belief that they are free and equal, and form government to protect their liberty. But he points out that this does not make them subjects of a unitary sovereign, as theorists such as Hobbes and Rousseau proposed. The reason, Tocqueville argues, is that authority in America has been elaborately divided. Divisions between the national government and the states, and the state and local authorities, are established by the Constitution and positive law. But Americans do not rely on government to meet all their needs. Instead, they join together in voluntary associations to achieve these ends.

Tocqueville acknowledges the parallel between the American division of powers and medieval decentralization. But he is more interested in *voluntary* associations, which are something new. Voluntary associations are based on individual freedom rather than inherited status: everyone has the right to join any association he pleases, and to leave when he likes. Yet they exercise the same functions as feudal communities: organizing practical projects, allocating resources, resolving disputes, and so on.

They do this, Tocqueville marvels,

without the coercive powers that distinguished, for example, the medieval church. Rather than issuing commands, they appeal to members’ self-interest “well understood.” Voluntary associations, then, are a *democratic* form of community that connects individuals and buffers them from the state. They are platoons without lieutenants to give orders or sergeants to enforce them.



The French Revolution attacked local authority and intermediate associations as despotic impositions on man’s natural freedom. Tocqueville counters that the tyranny of lords and priests is a thing of the past. According to Tocqueville, the most serious threat to liberty in a democratic age is the condition of “soft despotism.”

“Soft despotism” develops when citizens face the government simply as individuals rather than as members of families and intermediate associations. Lacking the voluntary support of others, they come to rely on the state to supply all their wants. This reliance does not necessarily reduce their ability to make decisions about the course of their *own* lives. But it undermines the liberty to pursue goals in partnership with others under rules of their own devising—the democratic

counterpart to the collective liberties of the medieval world.

Tocqueville’s defense of voluntary association offers important lessons to contemporary Americans. It shows that the communities of a new, distinctly American kind are crucial protectors of liberty. We cannot provide everything we need to live decent lives ourselves, so we have no choice but to rely on others. The great question is whether we will

rely on family, friends, and fellow parishioners—or on Leviathan.

Think again of “The Life of Julia.” The problem is not that Julia is a “taker.” It is that she has nowhere to turn for help but the state.

The alternative to dependence is not (or not simply) self-reliance. Rather, it is participation in communities and associations that fulfill important social functions without the state’s coercive power or vast extent. The ancient philosopher Epicurus taught that the best life involved cultivating one’s own garden: that is, minding one’s own business and pursuing private happiness. But conservative thinkers

such as Burke, Tocqueville, and Nisbet remind us that this solipsistic goal actually justifies the sovereign state and empowers big government.

To see society strictly as a battle of the individual against the state is to overlook this essential element of conservative thought—and the way we actually live our lives: as part of families, local communities, and other social groups. Even as we stand against the relentless growth of government power, we must protect, reinforce, and nurture the civil society that mediates between the individual and the state.

Otherwise, like Julia, we may find no alternative to government power.

Samuel Goldman is an assistant professor of political science at George Washington University and a senior contributor to the American Conservative.