

*Studies in Critical Social Sciences*

*Jerome Braun*

# To Break Our Chains

*Social Cohesiveness and Modern Democracy*



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*By*

Jerome Braun



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*On the cover:* T-shirt vending stall in Moscow, Russia, 2010. Photograph by Thomas Anderson.

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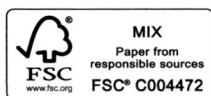
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**To Break Our Chains**

# Studies in Critical Social Sciences

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## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
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### PART I

#### VALUES AND CHARACTER: ON HOW TO MAKE TRAGEDY UNNECESSARY

Chapter 1. Values from a Pragmatic Perspective .....	13
Chapter 2. Alienation: The Short Version .....	31
Chapter 3. Prospects for Democracy: Individualism/Collectivism as Sources of Association/Community .....	43
Chapter 4. Character and Civil Society .....	61
Chapter 5. Ethics for an Impersonal Age .....	81
Chapter 6. The Place of Optimism in American Life .....	99
Chapter 7. The Rationality of Psychological Fulfillment in Adolescents' Lives: The Production of Personal Relationships and Self-Identity .....	113
Chapter 8. Nihilism: East and West .....	149
Chapter 9. Making Friends in the Non-Western World .....	161
Chapter 10. Aspects of Hysteria in America, Brazil, Germany, and Africa .....	171

### PART II

#### PRACTICAL ISSUES

Chapter 11. Figurehead Politicians and Democracy .....	193
Chapter 12. Social Engineering and Public Relations Stunts .....	201
Chapter 13. Liberalism at the Crossroads .....	213
Chapter 14. What Does the Working Class Really Want? .....	225
Chapter 15. Foolish Ritualism and Democracy .....	231
Chapter 16. The Place of Law in a Democracy .....	247
Chapter 17. The "Star" System in America .....	263
Chapter 18. What is Happiness? The Loss of Human Nature in Psychiatry .....	273
Chapter 19. The Lowering of Professional Standards in America .....	283

PART III  
THE GOALS OF SOCIETY: JUSTICE AND FREEDOM

Chapter 20. Liberal and Authoritarian Versions of Democracy ..... 295  
Chapter 21. Culture and Civil Society ..... 313  
Chapter 22. Democracy and Civil Society ..... 317  
Chapter 23. The Ecological Society..... 323  
Chapter 24. Plutocracy and the Labor Movement..... 329  
Chapter 25. Industrial Democracy for the 21st Century ..... 341  
Chapter 26. The Great Weakness of American Government ..... 349

PART IV  
CONCLUSION

Chapter 27. Modern and Postmodern Views of Democracy ..... 359  
Chapter 28. Nation-Building and Social Solidarity ..... 369  
Chapter 29. Reason and Morality in Community: Some  
Conclusions ..... 379  
  
Bibliography ..... 387  
Index ..... 393

## INTRODUCTION

Part of the mystique of American life has always been that we practice the golden mean of Aristotelian ethics, by having middle-class values that are considered the ideal, even if not always practiced, by all people including the rich and the poor. Even though we put on a pedestal the knowledge characteristic of the modern world because of our infatuation with science, there is also a certain sentimental appreciation for the past when people were closer to each other and there was less bureaucracy. In other words, we recognize the advantages of a bureaucratized society for economic growth and its costs in terms of a loss in chances for close personal, or even just neighborly, relationships.

In fact America is in many ways less of a bureaucratic society, more concerned with protecting the diversity of local cultures against the social engineering schemes of central government, than is traditionally found in, for example, Europe. Though the following description was probably more true 200 years ago, the force of cultural momentum still has weight, so in many ways Arab, and to a large extent Islamic, societies are pre-feudal, Europe is feudal or better yet described as having the remnants of feudalism, and American society is post-feudal.

Such distinctions are important because of what is gained and lost from modernization. In particular, while we in the modern world now live in a cornucopia of material goods, our personal relationships have been weakening. In fact increasingly people relate "rationally" to the vast majority of people they meet as if they are mere instrumentalities for achieving more and more material goods. The effect is usually one of great confusion, and many of the social philosophies of our time reflect this confusion between means and ends, and between the sacred and the profane. Traditionally societies use rituals, both well as well as badly, as psychological reminders and psychological sustainers of social relationships, that enforce boundaries of an ontological sort (existential feelings of personal existence that are psychologically felt, and thus are of prime importance for the stability of the personality). That is why so commonly traditional societies, but modern societies also, distinguish between the sacred (that which is most powerful and can be used with care as a building block of the human experience) and the profane (that which interferes with the human experience,



often a kind of waste product as it were, which is why excrement is almost always profane, while sex as a building block of self-esteem if handled well is part of the sacred).

Long ago such issues were known and dealt with, though not exactly in the same way or to the same degree. Something that I will discuss later in this book, but that bears repeating, is that in the classic commentaries on 18th century English law, *Blackstone's Commentaries* (1765) as described for the modern reader in *The Mysterious Science of the Law: An Essay on Blackstone's Commentaries* (Boorstin 1996) it is clear that in the 18th century positive law was assumed to be built upon a base of natural law that reflected what was considered to be God-given human nature. They assumed one could learn from the simpler laws of the past, laws admittedly superseded by the artificial laws made necessary by the complexities of division of labor and of a modern economy, just because these simple laws showed the natural order of human nature unadorned.

As Sociology in the 19th century developed out of these ideas of their 18th century forebears, for example in Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society* (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*) (Tonnies 1993), it was clear many scholars such as Tonnies assumed that communities more easily served the motives governing human nature than bureaucratic associations even though economic advance required the latter, and even though it was no longer assumed that the "natural" goals of human emotions driving "natural" collectivities would be ultimately enforced. It was also no longer taken for granted that society would be able to do this enforcement with a little divine prodding and inspiration. Though we in the present time no longer romanticize the past as much as was common during the 18th and 19th centuries, the general critique that the effects of modernization have costs as well as benefits still holds. A quite good introduction on the present-day interpretation of the effects of social evolution with emphasis on the nature of traditional societies that were in the direct line of precedence to modern societies is *Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World* (Crone 2003).

By the time we reach the modern world it is assumed for the most part that our ability to return the institutions serving our human nature to their roots is quite limited. There are many scholars who believe this is the case. The postmodernists especially assume that since they never see "natural" human nature or just emotionality of the sort once more obviously seen in simpler societies, that it doesn't exist, or at least

we can act as if it doesn't. Many of them assume that almost all aspects of human nature are equally artificial and socially constructed, and being the creations of politics can be changed easily by politics. Meanwhile religious fundamentalists hunger to serve natural law, often under the guise of religious law, though they themselves have so often forgotten the wisdom and the conditions of their ancestors that they no longer remember the past that they are trying to reclaim.

To the extent that social science can be used to extend the reach of our rationality, it requires users of social science who believe in the value of such rationality, and who also have a practical sense of what is useful and what isn't. The latter cannot be taken for granted. Creating a way of life that avoids the necessity for extreme measures for emotional relief, a way of life that ensures the avoidance of extremes of emotional impulsiveness (somewhat more common in traditional societies) and emotional repression (somewhat more common in modern societies) should be the goal for modern morality and modern religion, it should be considered the avoidance of idolatry (making sacred what is not sacred) in our time.

Part I of this book, called *Values and Character: On How to Make Tragedy Unnecessary*, includes many practical insights, but the main emphasis is an overview on how values, in both a social and moral sense, influence the development of personal character in a psychological sense. They certainly impinge on prospects for Democracy in producing a social and cultural environment, which is why there is a chapter called "Prospects for Democracy: Individualism/Collectivism as Sources of Association/Community" and a rather practical illustration of these phenomena in "The Place of Optimism in American Life." The other chapters in Part I speak for themselves as they deal with the alienation of the individual, or its overcoming in the development of individual rationality, or both as in "The Rationality of Psychological Fulfillment in Adolescents' Lives: The Production of Personal Relationships and Self-Identity." The last few chapters in Part I on "Nihilism: East and West," "Making Friends in the Non-Western World," and "Aspects of Hysteria in America, Brazil, Germany, and Africa," deal with issues of values and relationships between people in a way that is comparative across history and across cultures.

One reason the most up-to-date societies are often described as being "postmodern" is because there is decreasing faith that increasing technology is an unmixed blessing, and that social change will result in social progress. As shown in my later chapter on "What Does the

Working Class Really Want?” found in Part II on Practical Issues, there are strong tendencies in present-day society for authoritarianism on the job, controlled by the rules of bureaucracy rather than by the mutual accommodations of personal relationships. Meanwhile we use the productive powers of technology to increase our own personal narcissism off the job, which is one reason for the creation and selling of youth culture that so often encourages narcissism (which is often created by adults for youth to manipulative them, usually just to make money off of them, given that they don't have the responsibilities of adulthood).

One purpose of Part II on Practical Issues is to illustrate such social tendencies, not by an overly rigid and dogmatic schema, but by showing the links between phenomena that reflect the impingement of social environments on people, but also freedom of action and individual agency as well. Admittedly these essays have a stand-alone quality to them, because I am trying to develop pragmatic critical theory that describe classes of phenomena that are not merely elaborations on a common theme. Nevertheless these essays build upon the more broadly-based, somewhat theoretical, ideas from Part I before. In fact if one would wish to describe critical theory in a broad perspective not limited to the work of the Frankfurt School of Sociology and their intellectual descendants, it could be used to describe any general social science theory that is relatively complex and sophisticated, that aims toward moral exhortations, and is concerned with holistic analyses of society. This is what the chapters in this book aim for, including these rather practical essays that do not assume that all working-class people are powerless and that all elites are powerful in all places at all times. They do assume however that conditions often do favor elites over the masses at many places at many times as an inherent condition of societies characterized by extreme differences in power and in wealth.

“Figurehead Politicians and Democracy” and “Social Engineering and Public Relations Stunts” emphasize more American political culture and the obstacles to true democracy as the expression of the will of the people as it is expressed in the American political context, though hopefully readers will be able to draw their own conclusions about the applicability of American conditions to other societies through these essays. Other chapters on “Liberalism at the Crossroads,” “The ‘Star’ System in America,” and “What is Happiness? The Loss of Human Nature in Psychiatry” all point at social phenomena for which increasing tendencies toward individual narcissism are a direct result

of political and social evolution being manipulated by powerful interests. They do this usually for their own benefit rather than as a result of concern for the common good, that *res publica* that was once considered the definitive characteristic of government that served the will of the people, from which the term “republic” is derived.

Part II on Practical Issues illustrates the more theoretical arguments of Part I on values and character that precedes it, while Part III on justice and freedom deals again with rather practical goals but now within a broad, holistic context. Part IV which is the conclusion shows how to discover the common good given modern societies that have far fewer cultural and even moral commonalities, at least in terms of rituals and customs, than their predecessors. “Liberal and Authoritarian Versions of Democracy” emphasizes how different societies may emphasize individualism and personal liberty or collectivism and social order (the latter hopefully for the purpose of social justice), but in reality the ideal of most societies is a golden mean that avoids both extremes. Admittedly particular societies have their cultural assumptions which inform their prejudices and they approach this ideal from different directions. I illustrate the practical results of such cultural prejudices in such chapters as “The Ecological Society” and in two chapters that directly discuss American social history regarding labor problems, and implicitly alienation and lack of self-fulfillment in the life of the American worker, in “Plutocracy and the Labor Movement” and “Industrial Democracy for the 21st Century.”

I conclude Part III with “The Great Weakness of American Government” which is a meditation on American politics in cross-cultural perspective and on how America is known for its short-term political solutions, for good and for ill. As the ideal of American democracy, government by the people, weakens, because of sheer size and anonymity in the society, and because of the controlling nature of modern bureaucracies in general, this tends to result in government for the people instead, though this seems to be an even bigger problem in some other societies. As to how much longer we in the US will be able to muddle through to success by providing lots and lots of patches for our problems, and lots and lots of jobs, only time will tell.

To give you a taste for many of the points made in “The Great Weakness of American Government,” though America has certain ideals (our middle-class traditions essentially) on how to combine traditional values regarding personal relationships with the bureaucratic requirements of a modern economy and society, we in some ways seem

to be forgetting the details of these traditions. These details are beginning to fade away as they cease to be living traditions passed on from generation to generation, and the entertainment propensities of the mass media certainly encourage this tendency. Other societies of course often have a rather different mix of traditions. Part of the difference is their aristocratic traditions are often stronger than ours, and also often their peasant traditions, or even tribal traditions, are stronger than anything that we have that are comparable.

One effect is that in many societies, particularly modernizing traditional societies, often have a rather weak middle class. This is mainly because they typically don't have the historical opportunities for economic independence nor do they have the moral self-righteousness which is the American heritage from the Reformation for this class. Instead they don't stand for much other than their own economic interests, and certainly don't seek to be the leaders of society, unlike in American society. The end result is that their middle class tend to ally themselves above all with the leaders of the rich, and occasionally, often under revolutionary circumstances, with the leaders of the poor.

In America the middle-class ideal is to combine the best of the upper and lower class ways of life, rather than the worst, the standards and idealism of the rich and the earthy realism of the poor rather than the arrogance of the rich and the escapist fearfulness of the poor. In Europe on the other hand, particularly Continental Europe, in many ways intellectuals are the third class that come up with compromises between the rich and the poor, and the middle class, those who are middling in influence and wealth, are just another interest group and not a particularly influential one. In fact in all modern societies nowadays both the religious and those who believe that people can exist only tied to their exertions and nothing else, face the same problems, the decline of an environment, both physical and social, at a human scale that people can feel at home in.

*Conflict in Africa* (Bozeman 1976) describes some of the results of modernization on traditional societies. These are societies that were, and to a large extent still are, integrated in their communities based on oral culture (there is a great deal of illiteracy), on the psychology of living in a perpetual present, and are greatly motivated by a feeling of psychological presence that comes from interpersonal interactions, not abstract thought. There is no doubt room for mythological thought, as witnessed in traditional tribal religions, but even this reflects psychological needs more than abstract speculations. The good effect of

all of this is that people tend to avoid the influence of ideas that have been developed outside of real-life contexts and so that reflects empty intellectuality (mythological ideas are often used to explain what we would use science to explain, as well as the ultimate questions that science cannot explain). The bad effect is that ideas very much carry with them the results of interpersonal influences and the loyalties of personal relationships. Virtuous leaders thus influence the characters of the people in a virtuous direction, immoral leaders produce a psychological environment where followers adapt to an environment of immorality.

What individuals get out of the group is a supportive environment which is conducive to the full expression of feelings. When the group is virtuous and loving such emotional expressiveness is like being within the bosom of a loving family. When the group is no longer virtuous and loving then individuals go through life as if in an unrealistic, escapist dream, expressing emotional needs but getting no beneficial feedback from others or from the expression of group values. Then instead wishful thinking runs rampant, and culture (rituals, art, values) does not reinforce realistic attitudes, but rather wishful thinking.

In emotionally expressive cultures, there are often individual expressions of wishful thinking, or perhaps just angst, but the social environment corrects such errors (similarly, in a metaphorical sense, the body roots out cancers). In decadent, emotionally expressive societies often individual irrationality is encouraged by others and by the culture, or at the very least not discouraged, often because the "virtuous" people have so little influence on society.

The same issue arises in more modern, anonymous, bureaucratized societies except that social solidarity and communication is innately weaker, and the independent knowledge and initiatives of particular segments (often bureaucratic sectors) of society are more pronounced. Under certain circumstances the mass of middle-class individuals (which in some societies include the majority of people, in other societies not) are the ones who take initiative politically, and in the process develop plans through intellectual analysis, since social consensus and communal understandings are more poorly developed than in more traditional societies. Under other circumstances government bureaucrats, private business bureaucrats, the idle rich, intellectuals, university professors, religious bureaucrats, the military elite all may take initiative, with the rest of society communicating with them (in rational

or not-so-rational ways), or the rest of society may remaining mute and passive, which is often the case.

Traditional societies with their biases toward holistic knowledge may produce wisdom and virtue, or may not. "Wise" bureaucratized societies may produce a holistic approach to the problems of living, or may not. Obviously a golden mean is possible, though up to now rarely reached, and at the very least we can still learn from each other. Holistic societies are less easily corrupted in a moralistic sense, but when it occurs the effect is more total, a bureaucratized society is more easily corrupted because of the self-servingness of its bureaucratic fragments, but since it is not a particularly integrated society in a psychological sense it takes a while for such decadence to spread through society at large. This offers hope to modern society, though not forever. It is also true holistic societies and bureaucratized societies often do not exist in their pure forms. Bureaucratization does arise in previously simple tribal societies, as with the rise of kingdoms to deal with constant warfare and to produce the benefits of a society which has greater tools to work with than mere communal custom. Bureaucratized societies do have their "backward" traditional sectors, filled with poor and "superstitious" peasants, and may even regress in that direction. Life is complicated.

In summary regarding the useful psychological understandings that underlay this book, though traditional societies often fear the effects of being hyperemotional and thus impulsive, or sometimes give in to it, the modern version of this more likely results from attempts to compensate for emotional repression through use of artificial stimulants. They are used inappropriately, as if a whole way of life can be built out of such stimulation. That is the modern, perhaps even more so the postmodern, version of wishful thinking. What can be used temporarily and as a kind of medicine in small doses is often used as a substitute for real life. It is modern technology and modern mass media that enable this to happen. It is not that escapism and irrationality did not exist in earlier societies. It is that we have developed more effective means for acting on this irrationality and escapism. That is one effect of increasing narcissism in modern societies.

This introduction to the vagaries of community life, and the vagaries of social evolution, will hopefully prepare you for the discussion of how such issues play themselves out in modern societies, of which America is considered a model, though by some not a model to be emulated. I think America is a model to be emulated, but only also by

learning from its mistakes. Another book by me, *How America is Different, But Becoming Less So: Pragmatic Critical Theory and Social Change* is in some ways in the tradition of the work of Max Weber, and though it discusses among other things the return of an European-style class system to America with the ending of the (social and economic) frontier, like Weber's work it sets the theoretical groundwork for a pragmatic analysis of social and cultural, and even political change, but it doesn't really go into the practical details.

Hopefully, this book on the other hand is post-Weberian so that it really does go into more practical details. The emphasis is on the relationship between social cohesiveness and community, and how they both set the environment for a practical and effective democratic society, in both a political and a social sense. Of course any particular society doesn't necessarily have both; in fact political democracy may exist to correct the problems that come from social inequality, and social democracy in the sense of social equality may exist and because of this the society may stagnate and have a desire not to have much politics at all, which precludes the need for political democracy. But it is possible to have a certain amount of both. And in the circumstances of present-day America, and in much of the modern world as well, it is probably a good thing to have a certain amount of both social and political democracy. But how much, that depends on what the people of a society feel they need. This book doesn't provide a blueprint, just a guide, a companion if you will, on the journey. So I hope you enjoy the journey.



