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Close to Home, One at a Time, Not in My Backyard: Individualism and the Mantras of Depoliticization in US Reform Discourses

Olga Thierbach-McLean

1 The US boasts a rich and continuous history of political activism. From the Abolitionist and Civil Rights struggle to the Women's Rights Movement, the Environmental, Anti-War, Gay Rights and LGBTQ Movements, America has been the home of epoch-making reform campaigns that resonated far beyond its borders and developed into major political shaping powers of the twentieth century. One of the main sources for this vitality is the country's strong individualistic tradition. With its celebration of individual dignity and personal conscience, it encourages critical views of the status quo and provides the language for disenfranchised groups to challenge oppressive structures.

2 And yet, despite this impressive historical track record, traditionally conceived notions of personal autonomy and self-responsibility seem to be increasingly at odds with the dynamics of a modern mass democracy. Here, it often appears as if individualistic recipes for social reform, the basic principles of which have remained almost unchanged in US public discourse since the nineteenth century, are often clashing with the conditions in a complexly interconnected globalized world. The discrepancy between culturally promoted strategy and social reality can be observed in prominent slogans of US reform campaigns, such as "close to home," "one at a time," "not in my backyard," or "a thousand points of light." Running as a common thread through various modes and fields of activism from the fight against poverty to environmental protection to gun control, all of them reveal the widely shared collective assumption that meaningful social change can ultimately only occur through the transformation of one's immediate environment and engagement in one-on-one interaction.

1. Close to Home: A Case of Cultural Scotoma

3 Thus, when in her study *Avoiding Politics* Nina Eliasoph explored the motivations and strategies of American activists, she was struck by how often the phrase "close to home" emerged at the center of the discussion (Eliasoph 1-3). For instance, one interviewee who was actively involved in an anti-drug group expressed strong concern regarding the nuclear battleships stationed near her home. Her worries were clearly justified given the fact that repeated leaks of radioactivity had already occurred at that site. Another member of the same group lived close to a chemical plant that had been the subject of a major environmental scandal only a few weeks earlier. When asked whether they could also see themselves campaigning against the nuclear ships or the chemical plant, both women answered in the negative independently of each other by arguing that the respective problem was not "close to home" – and therefore beyond the range of their personal responsibility. Both seemed to be entirely unaware of the incongruity of this rationale, given the palpable threat to their personal health and quality of life (Ibid.).

4 This episode illustrates a typical cultural bias. Because US social discourse is pervaded by individualist tenets that celebrate the boundless possibilities of the self and prescribe personal initiative and character strength as the silver bullet to solving collective issues, a disconnect seems to occur when a problem exceeds the capacities of individual effort. "[E]vents that escape the control of individual choice and will cannot coherently be encompassed in a moral calculation," as Robert N. Bellah sums up this characteristically American dilemma (Bellah et al. 204). In other words, a circumstance that has a direct impact on one's private world but cannot be made sense of without taking into account the broader political context has to be labelled "not close to home" in order to keep the individualist myth intact.

5 The collective reflex to block out inconvenient realities rather than readjust internalized convictions regarding absolute personal sovereignty is a powerful indicator of the ongoing dominance of individualist values in the American mind. The reluctance to replace the concept of the "Imperial Self"[1] with a more balanced – and one may say, more realistic – view of the relationship between individual and society is deeply rooted in the country's intellectual history in which radical individualism has traditionally been understood as synonymous with democracy itself. While in other Western nations the political structures of public exchange, negotiation and compromise are usually held up as the mainstays of democratic society, US citizens are likely to take the contrary view; in a cultural ambiance that entices people to assume that "what is shared is oppressive" (Eliasoph 128), it is the option to remain separate from the body politic that is priced as the main democratic privilege.

6 This attitude is reflected in the oft-quoted fact that US voter turnouts consistently lie below those of other Western democracies[2] – despite the fact that Americans are famously proud of their country's democratic tradition and more likely to cite it as a source of patriotism than members of other Western nations (cf. Huntington 37). This goes to show that Americans' democratic zeal is stirred less by the trust in the workings of concrete political institutions than by the abstract national myth of America as the "Land of the Free."

7 But while critics have been lamenting this "political evaporation" (Eliasoph passim), "flight from public life" (Dionne 10) and "ideology of hostile privatism" (McKenzie 19),

there is also a contrasting side to US society, namely that American citizens are more active in private charity organizations than any other nation in the world. A survey by the *US Department of Labor* of February 2014 determined that 25.4 percent of US citizens have volunteered at least once in the regarded time period from September 2012 to September 2013, most of them within the framework of an organization. An earlier poll conducted in 1990 as part of the *World Values Survey* found that at that point 82 percent of all Americans were members of at least one volunteer organization or "other group." As many as 60 percent of the interviewed individuals stated that they had volunteered without pay at least once in their lives. According to other official statistics, the number of Americans participating as volunteers in various areas of public life has been steadily within the range of 60 to 65 million for the last 12 years (cf. Corporation for National and Community Service 2010). Thus, when it comes to private social commitment, Americans are well ahead of all other countries (cf. Lipset 278–79).[3]

8 To an observer of American culture, these facts will hardly come as a surprise. The vast number of volunteer agencies and the omnipresent appeals to take volunteer opportunities attest to just how much informal social involvement has become an integral part of the societal routine. Millions of Americans put in their time and energy in child and elderly care, psychological counselling, youth sports, hospices, soup kitchens, libraries, art galleries, and various other sectors. Given this large-scale participation, it would clearly be misguided to interpret America's individualistic mentality as blatant selfishness or general indifference to the common good. And yet, at first glance it is hard to reconcile this vibrant community spirit with the lack of political interest many Americans explicitly admit to. But what may seem contradictory at first can be traced to the very same ideological premise. After all, the active community involvement on the one hand and the aversion to formal political participation on the other are both consistent with a worldview that draws a sharp dividing line between private and public sphere. While everything that is interpreted as lying beyond one's personal domain tends to be dismissed as irrelevant, the individualistically-minded person feels all the more spurred when it comes to shaping reality "close to home." The fact that in the US public spirit commonly takes the form of voluntarism is mainly due to the fact that this mode of civic membership is widely taken to be the least political – and therefore the least morally offensive.

9 In fact, the generally negative connotation of the terms "government" and "politics" makes it harder to mobilize the US population for collective goals (cf. Bellah et al. 250). To some commentators, the persistent political cynicism even represents the greatest challenge faced by modern American democracy (cf. Goldfarb 1). Obviously, the United States is hardly the only country where the image of politics as a "dirty business" has become a well-established stereotype. Besides, a critical attitude towards state power is in itself not a degenerative symptom, but rather an indispensable feature of democratic culture. Having said that, in America the general mistrust towards politics – also manifesting itself in the proliferation of anti-government groups[4] and the US public's notorious obsession with conspiracy theories imputing the government with being the driving force behind various evils from the attacks on the World Trade Center to school shootings – has reached a level that renders constructive societal cooperation increasingly difficult.

10 This pronounced national aversion to the world of politics is stimulated by the pervasive cultural narrative according to which radical introspection, not interaction with the

social environment, is the source through which truth and morality can be found. In this interpretation, the state figures as the individual's malevolent, oppressive antagonist, or at the very best an "interfering father who won't recognize that his children have grown up and don't need him anymore" (Bellah et al. xxv). In keeping with this role distribution, the "American political myth differs from that of other Western industrial democracies by presuming that political practice will go forward in a 'bottom-up' mode rather than a 'top-down' mode" (Brion 34). Or as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the "teacher of the American tribe" (Kazin 3), once proclaimed: "And of the strength and wisdom of the private heart shall go forth at another era the regeneration of society" (Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2:186). Emerson, whose individualistic philosophy deeply shaped American discourses on identity and social reform, believed that "no forms, neither constitutions, nor laws, nor covenants, nor churches, nor bibles, are of any use in themselves. The Devil nestles comfortably into them all" (Emerson, *Complete Works* 11:243). Consequently, he postulated that "the remedying is not a work for society, but for me to do" (Emerson *Journals,* 9:85). In fact, he even formulated his own version of "close to home" in the following famous passage of his seminal 1841 essay "Self-Reliance":

> If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.' (Emerson, *Collected Works* 2:30).

11 To the Bard of Concord, a generalized perspective on social ills as adopted by the "angry bigot" clearly smacks of hypocrisy. He suspects that focusing on elusive events happening elsewhere is just a convenient way of deflecting attention away from what could be done here and now to build a better community. Based on his viewpoint, what may at first appear like ardent dedication to the common weal quickly turns out to be nothing more than the lazy abdication of personal accountability. And with radical individualist ideals still thriving in the cultural climate of the United States, most Americans would probably still agree with Emerson that "society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him" (Emerson, *Collected Works* 3:154). For that reason, a person does not have either the competence or the moral right to direct their energies at making over superordinate administrative structures before having "put their own house in order." Consequently, the individual's duty to society is seen as lying first and foremost in the reformation of personal circumstances.

12 Set against this cultural backdrop, politically-minded discussion is implicitly perceived as a violation of social decorum. While in other countries public venues such as cafés, tea houses and bars have traditionally been classic forums of political exchange and debate between ordinary citizens, the motto of "No politics" has won through in many public spaces in the United States. Signs heralding this etiquette rule are ubiquitous in American bars and restaurants. But what is most surprising is that this rule even seems to apply within the realm of political activism itself. As Eliasoph has pointed out, it is particularly in exposed public settings such as press conferences or municipal assemblies that American activists are prone to adopt the stance of "mandatory public Momism" (Eliasoph 246). That is, instead of presenting themselves as critical citizens thinking within the larger social nexus, they are wont to voice their concerns in the language of self-interest, slipping into the stereotypical roles of worried parents or homeowners standing up to protect their own family and possessions. This is all the more astounding

as Eliasoph has documented that the very same individuals did in fact express their ideas on broader political approaches to societal questions – but that only ever happened "backstage" in private conversations (Ibid.).

13 This seemingly paradoxical reversal makes perfect sense when viewed within the individualist paradigm: Because political aspirations quickly look morally suspect in the cultural climate of the US, the catchphrase "close to home" operates as a justification code. It signals that the targeted issue has directly perceivable contact points with one's own private habitat, and therefore properly falls within one's 'jurisdiction'. This in turn means that, by way of exception, stepping out into the world of politics is morally warranted. As such, the depoliticization of the political represents a collective acceptance tactic for vindicating the breach of implicitly accepted individualist guidelines.

14 Remarkably, this kind of "unpolitical" input has been habitually advocated and incited by political decision makers, with voluntarism being typically depicted as *the* defining attribute of the ideal citizen. As a prominent example, in 1981 Ronald Reagan initiated the *President's Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives* to boost non-government solutions to social challenges, also creating *The President's Volunteer Service Award* as an accolade for outstanding accomplishments by volunteers. Along the same lines, President George H. W. Bush envisioned "community organizations that are spread like stars, throughout the Nation, doing good" (Bush 1989) when he launched the *Points of Light Foundation* in 1990. The underlying imagery is clearly inspired by the classic individualistic concept of a societal network materializing from the bottom up, with an army of volunteers creating a gapless social canopy as each citizen takes care of their own manageable "territory" instead of draining their energies into the hubristic undertaking of trying to change the entire world.

15 Bush's domestic agenda clearly struck a chord with the American public, even inspiring a hit song that featured the line "If you see what's wrong and you try to make it right, you will be a point of light."[5] Albeit, there were also critical voices that expressed strong doubts about the adequacy of this approach, which was famously redubbed "a thousand points of blight" by *The New York Times* (DeParle). The active sponsoring of volunteer work has at times even been interpreted as a calculated scheme to coax citizens away from political activism into private charity so as to render the population more governable, and to mask structural deficits and financial shortages. This suspicion may not be entirely unfounded. After all, US society relies heavily on volunteers to gratuitously take over countless tasks in key sectors such as health care and education which elsewhere are financed exclusively by the state. And yet, if one wishes to take a less cynical view of politics and politicians, one could also assume that embracing collectively-spirited reform tactics is as counterintuitive to US officials as it is to their fellow citizens. For they too are influenced by a cultural mantra which prescribes that "not only should our circles of moral obligation never become so large that they lose their coherence, but morality should also be modest in its ambitions and quiet in its proclamations, not seeking to transform the entire world but to make a difference where it can." (Wolfe 290) Within this mindset, the depoliticization of reform discourses by shrinking them down to problems "close to home" is not at all seen as an intellectual withdrawal from the complexities of modern mass society, but rather as a positive good.

2. One at a Time: When Everybody is an Island

16 It is in accordance with the very same sentiment that the dictum "one at a time" has become a universal rallying cry of US social activism. "Making a difference one step at a time" is a staple slogan displayed in many volunteer organizations. Whether it be recidivist programs designed to stop crime "one criminal at a time," or rehabilitation clinics vouching to come to grips with the problem of substance abuse "one addict at a time" – the case-by-case approach has become the patent formula in response to various social grievances. For instance, in the award-winning CNN campaign *CNN Heroes,* which was launched in 2007 to honor "everyday people doing extraordinary things to change the world" by making outstanding contributions in humanitarian aid in their communities, one constantly comes across phrases such as "one household at a time," "one person at a time," or "one teenager at a time" (CNN Heroes). Similarly, in the widely publicized aid program *Loads of Hope* sponsored by US laundry detergent manufacturer *Tide*, which includes sending mobile wash centers into crisis regions so that people can wash their clothing for free, the declared goal is to provide help "one wash cycle at a time." To members of other cultures**,** this may appear like a fundamentally inefficient approach and discouraging Sisyphean task. But to Americans it is an inspiring notion because it affirms the power of the individual to achieve social amelioration without having to contemplate things that are considered political. Sometimes it even appears as if many US citizens simply lack the abstract conceptions to be able to reflect on local developments on a synoptic level, and to detect the causal relationship between the overall political framework and their private lives.

17 When, for example, working parents living in areas with inadequate infrastructure see no other choice but to drop off their children on the school grounds long before the start of classes, where they sometimes have to wait for hours in the dark without supervision, this tends to be perceived as a private problem that appropriately calls for a private solution (cf. Eliasoph 24). Likewise, a national scenario in which a large number of citizens has to work multiple jobs just to secure a humble standard of living is widely seen as a discretely personal challenge. The idea to trace such conditions to structural failings and to demand systematic adjustments of the mass transit network, childcare offers, or the labor market is far less obvious to Americans than it is to Western Europeans.

18 A symptomatic example of such a depoliticization of American reform discourses is the case of the Detroiter James Robertson whose story made international headlines in early 2015. For ten years, the then 59-year-old factory worker had to walk 21 miles of his 23-mile work commute. Despite holding a full-time job that paid 10.55 dollars an hour – and thus significantly more than the Michigan minimum wage of 8.15 dollars – Robertson could not afford his own car. And since there was no public transport service from his home to his workplace, he walked to work five days a week in any weather, with his route also leading through dangerous areas of notoriously crime-ridden Detroit. After his plight became known, Robertson was celebrated as an admirable example of a stoic work ethic that defies even the most adverse of circumstances. In the outpouring of public sympathy that followed, he received a car as well as hundreds of thousands of dollars in private donations.

19 As a success tale of personal initiative meeting private charity, this story resonated deeply with the American audience and was followed by the press for several weeks. But,

rather bafflingly to European political sensibilities, the desolate state of the local public transport and the disastrous labor market figured only as a narrative background in most of the press coverage. David Graham of *The Atlantic* was a rare exception when tentatively pointing out that "this isn't a feel-good story—it's a story about policy failures, structural economic obstacles, and about what it takes to keep working despite those challenges. Robertson is no doubt deserving, but it'll take larger changes to help other people who face similar struggles." This goes to show that, although Americans are certainly not oblivious to the import of systemic shortcomings on personal fortunes, the individualistic reflex remains the most powerful. The very fact that a leading left-of-center magazine feels the need to spell out the self-evident point that Robertson's difficulties cannot be understood apart from the larger societal context illustrates that a collective approach to social issues is far from being natural to the American psyche.

20 Astoundingly, even the global reach of the Internet and the surge of social media has done little to modify this deliberately fragmented, depoliticized discourse. Quite the opposite, one may argue that contemporary online activism shows an even stronger disposition to abandon the political angle. In this context, it has become somewhat of a commonplace to hold the nature of digital communication itself responsible for the rise of superficial "slacktivism" or the tendency of many a cyber-protester to get preoccupied with insular and often short-lived pet projects. As a matter of fact, the easy accessibility of e-campaigns as well as the sheer multitude of single-issue niches they cover makes engaging as easy as disengaging. A medium inviting the perception that signing an online petition on change.org constitutes effective dissent, or that a *Like* equals participation in democratic opinion-forming processes, makes it all too easy to feel active with barely any effort. And so "raising awareness" for one hashtagged cause after another has all too often become a substitute for thorough reflection, enduring commitment and concerted action. But contrary to a commonly raised point of criticism, this token-based style is not an entirely novel symptom of the digital age, but rather the digitally amplified version of the old American preference for the private gesture over systemic restructuring, for bottom-up versus top-down lines of action. Here, the central aspect common to both online and offline activism is the ambition to change personal attitudes "one at a time" by relying on the inspirational power of purely symbolic gestures, which often have no direct pragmatic connection to the targeted cause. This applies to pre-Internet campaigns like Just Say No, which typically included activities such as running obstacle courses (cf. Eliasoph 55), as it does to web-based activism prompting people to add profile pic frames as a way of boosting the latest social crusade, or to grow a mustache in "Movember" in support of the fight against cancer.

21 A notable recent example of this apolitical style of Internet activism is *Help-Portrait,* a movement that was started by American photographer Jeremy Cowart in 2008 with the mission "to empower photographers, hairstylists and makeup artists to use their skills, tools and expertise to give back to their local community" (Help-Portrait) by giving people in need the possibility to have their portraits taken. "Find someone in Need. Take their Picture. Print their Picture. Deliver their Picture," is the four-step instruction given on the project's website for how to "help people see the beauty of who they are." But while it is certainly true that man does not live by bread alone – and that especially for people living on the fringes of society enjoying a little luxury may do a lot to restore their sense of personal dignity – providing the extra only makes sense if it is on top of the basic, if it is embedded in a wider discussion of how to secure the indispensable. Granted,

the *Help-Portrait* promo video does suggest to participants that "[m]aybe, along the way, you could give: meals, blankets, conversation, books." But this is offered almost as a second thought, as an incidental prop in a scenario that is centered on the abstract idea of the photographer as a modern Prometheus bringing light and hope with just a click of the camera.

22 The core problem with campaigns such as *Help-Portrait* is not that they choose to take a symbolic and estheticized approach to a social problem, but rather in their tendency to do so by fading out the political. In this way, they keep perpetuating the cultural narrative that sporadic face-to-face interaction is enough to make up for systemic gaps. Here, the aspirations of the participants to use their abilities to the benefit of others in a direct and unbureaucratic manner falls short of its full potential because it fails to make a connection to the institutionalized ways in which society fails its weakest members. For, as touching and thought-provoking it may be to see the metamorphosis of a street person into a photo model, the sad truth is that, without lasting structural reform, the potential seeds of such positive transformation fall on barren ground as the cameras are turned off and the star of the photo shoot is sent back into their usual dysfunctional environment.

23 This is in no way to deny that symbolic gestures are a powerful means of reinforcing political claims, and much less to dismiss the admirable work of local activists as pointless and naïve dabbling, or, in Emerson's famous words, as mere "stirring in the philanthropic mud" (Emerson, *Journals* 5:479). On the contrary, individual involvement and participation constitutes the very fabric of a healthy, inclusive democratic society. But the most powerful potential for social renewal is generated by combining personal and administrative channels, emblematic signal effects and practical measures, local and global understanding. With the American inclination to divorce individually experienced challenges from the larger social milieu and to rely on individual inspiration as the better alternative to collective restructuring, too often half the feasible capacity is left lying dormant. Here, a focus set too narrowly on "one at a time" not only fails to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the social experience, but also hampers the emergence of a broader dialogue regarding societal structures and practices.

3. NIMBYs and the Civic Duty of Selfishness

Such splintering of collective debates into a myriad of seemingly disconnected private cases and causes has also taken the form of NIMBYism, a term derived from the acronym for "Not In My Backyard." NIMBYs or LULUs (Locally Unwanted Land Use) are groups of local residents organized in opposition to undesirable developments in their community. News about NIMBY controversies surrounding planned public or private-sector projects reaches the American public on an almost daily basis. Needless to say, the resistance against facilities that are perceived to be unsightly or have a negative impact on one's personal interests or quality of life – whether they be landfills, industrial parks, military bases, jails, drug rehabilitation centers, or concert venues – is neither a new nor an exclusively American phenomenon. Even so, there is a marked qualitative difference. In other Western democracies, comparable disputes are more likely to include questions regarding the fundamental legitimacy of the respective institution. The less individualistically charged cultural atmosphere of Western European countries demands that the common good be inserted into the equation, even as one may safely assume that vested interests play no lesser a role for European than they do for US citizens. For

instance, whenever the construction of a new prison is proposed, Europeans are more likely to back up their objections with a lack of trust in the legally stipulated security standards. Similarly, civic crusades against incinerators would typically be accompanied by the call for a collective shift in favor of more eco-friendly methods of waste management and recycling. By contrast, the names NIMBY und LULU themselves underline that the activists explicitly come together under the banner of self-interest. Remarkably, the fundamental necessity of inconvenient collective establishments is not necessarily questioned in the process. NIMBYs are not out to change the world; correctional facilities, chemical factories, and waste incineration plants are largely accepted as unavoidable parts of the system – they just shouldn't pop up "close to home," least of all "in my backyard."

By thus detaching themselves from the concerns of public interest, NIMBYs not only reduce the radius of potentially important discussions, but also cultivate a style of argument that is less and less about societal obligations, democratic processes and the rights of others, and more and more about personal tastes and attitudes. "In Seattle, the neighbors don't want apartments for formerly homeless seniors nearby. In Los Angeles, they don't want more high-rises. In San Jose, Calif., they don't want tiny homes. In Phoenix, they don't want design that's not midcentury modern," as Emily Badger of *The New York Times* impressionistically describes the kaleidoscope of NIMBY claims, adding that "increasingly it also means the senior affordable housing, the high-rises and the tiny homes — also arguably vital to the larger community — are never built." With their intransigence, NIMBYs often neuter rather than engender the transformative potential for a better collective future. In some cases, they even cause innovative green projects to be stalled:

> Take Vermont, where New England NIMBYs sought to block an electric transmission project that would bring zero-carbon hydropower to the region from Canada. The plan [...] is to build a 1,000-megawatt line under Lake Champlain to Ludlow, Vt., where it would patch into the grid near the decommissioned Vermont Yankee nuclear plant (closed in 2014 due to pressure by activists who – you guessed it – didn't want a reactor operating in their backyard). (Helman)

24 NIMBYism has also been identified as a key factor in the affordable housing crisis many urban areas of the U.S are currently struggling with. With incumbent homeowners often opposing new developments, and especially low-income housing projects, many middle- and lower-class Americans are unable to find accommodation that is within their financial reach. This does not only result in a progressing segregation into rich and poor neighborhoods, but also has detrimental effects on the national labor market. As privately initiated housing constrains make it unfeasible for workers to move to booming cities such as New York, San Francisco or San Jose, they are effectively cut off from the access to the most productive labor markets in the US. According to a paper released by the National Bureau of Economic Research, protectionist housing policies have thus led to increased wage inequality and held back US GDP growth by no less than 13.5 percent in the regarded time period between 1964 and 2009 (cf. Chang-Tai Hsieh and Enrico Moretti).

25 It is in view of such corollaries that NIMBY has now become a pejorative term mostly used to describe retrogressive selfishness. But even though American NIMBYs have been facing increasing criticism from within their own country, they are very much a fruit of the home-grown individualistic ideology that promotes the aggressive defense of personal

interests against state and fellow citizens as the lifeblood of liberal society. As Denis J. Brion points out with regard to the NIMBY phenomenon:

> Our public choice processes are not meant to impose an agenda of political choices determined by a political and technocratic elite. [...] A concept of political society that adopts a strong system of individual liberties and accords strong protection to individual rights also properly incorporates a strong element of individual responsibility into the conception of the politically autonomous person. (Brion 34)

26 Seen from this angle, NIMBY-style activism may be interpreted as the most authentic way of fulfilling one's obligation to the collective, namely by rigorously taking care of one's designated ambit. This is very much consistent with Emerson's famous call to "[b]uild, therefore, your own world" (Emerson, *Collected Works* 1:45) as the best way to create a thriving society. In the context of an intellectual tradition thus buttressing that private happiness is the precondition for a healthy society, not the other way around, a hardnosed me-first approach seems to be the most auspicious form of social cooperation. Given this cultural substrate, NIMBY activists may be driven not so much by unabashed egotism but by the century-old American idea that egotism and altruism are ultimately the same thing.

27 As a matter of fact, they have good reason to think so. After all, grassroots activism has been an important collective driving force in the history of social reform. Notably, it has played a major role in the formation of the ecology movement, often resulting in positive changes far beyond the particular disputed siting and profoundly reshaping the ways we as a global community think about our environment. In that sense, resident protests have been a positive example of the American political myth in action as they demonstrated how problematic collective practices can be successfully checked by private consciousness and the resolute protection of local domains. It would therefore not only be unrealistic, but even harmful to censure the motivation of self-interest as such. It has an important place in the public debate as a direct expression of the core democratic right of private citizens to challenge government decisions and protect their personal sphere from the reach of arbitrary state power. But to effectively do so, social activism must be conscious of the correlation between personally experienced realities and the collective context. By contrast, the problematic side effects of the NIMBY movement expose the dangers and limitations of a cultural narrative that fosters a dichotomous view of private interests and political practice.

4. Gun Control: Waiting for a Change of Heart

28 On a related note, the strong cultural predilection for pushing reform from a bottom-up direction also plays a key role in the protracted national struggle with the escalating gun violence. For although the strong opposition to stricter gun control laws is typically attributed to conservative anti-government sentiments, it is also buoyed by the "one at a time" spirit that is held across lines of political orientation. The deep-seated conflict between the desire for a profound change on the one hand and the wariness of legal measures on the other is revealed in a 2018 Gallup poll on Americans' attitudes towards guns (Gallup). Still under the fresh impression of a series of mass shootings, an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they personally worry about the availability of guns a "great deal" (51%) or a "fair amount" (19%), with 67% thinking that laws covering the sale of firearms should be more strict. Even so, many believe that new

gun control laws would reduce mass shootings "not at all" (42%), "a little" (16%), or only a "moderate amount" (20%).

29 This pessimism is especially remarkable given the ample evidence to the contrary. One need only think of the European situation, where, as a result of stricter gun legislation, gun violence does not constitute a mass problem. Maybe most compellingly, Australia with its cultural similarity to the US provides persuasive evidence of how tighter control of private access to firearms can effectively curb gun-related violence. While the Australian federal government had little involvement in firearms legislation until 1996, a series of mass shootings between 1984 and 2002 prompted the enactment of the National Firearms Agreement (1996), the National Firearm Trafficking Policy Agreement (2002), and the National Handgun Control Agreement (2002) for regulating the ownership and use of firearms by state law. As a result, shooting deaths dropped dramatically, with a 47 percent decrease in firearm-related deaths in Australia between 1991 and 2001 (cf. Mouzos and Rushforth).

30 Despite such precursors, Americans – notoriously reluctant to accept the experience of other countries as a possible model for approaching domestic issues – mostly prefer on-the-ground measures to systemic legislative changes. Asked which approaches they favor when it comes to preventing mass shootings at schools, most advocated "increased training for police officers and first responders on how to respond to active shootings" (95%), only then followed by "requiring background checks for all gun sales" (92%), and then by other decentralized strategies such as "installing more security checkpoints and security systems for allowing people into schools" (87%) and "instituting new programs to identify, assess and manage certain students who may pose a threat" (86%). Concurrently, scoring highest on the list of perceived reasons for mass shootings is "the failure of the mental health system to identify individuals who are a danger to others," with 48% thinking it is to blame a "great deal," while the "easy access to guns" is blamed "a great deal" by only 40%, followed by drug use with 37%, and violence in movies, video, games and music lyrics with 32%.

31 Although the results are at times contradictory, the overall tendency is towards empowering or controlling certain individuals over developing new political structures. Indeed, within the context of a culture that has traditionally upheld moral suasion as the most promising path to lasting social reform, it is not at all unreasonable to argue that immediate legal force should be foregone in favor of individual-level transformation and the future promise of voluntary self-improvement. Significantly, this attitude is not only held by many ordinary Americans, but also by experts within the medical community. As a case in point, in a widely quoted article published in *The Annual Review of Public Health*, Butts et al. advocate an approach to counteracting gun violence that "seeks to create individual-level and community-level change in communities where it is a norm for young people to carry a gun" (Butts et al.. 40). Programmatically named Cure Violence (CV), the proposed model attempts to

> stop the transmission of violence in a manner similar to that of public health interventions designed to curtail epidemics or to reduce the impact of harmful behavior such as smoking and overeating. The CV model identifies the individuals most at risk of spreading gun violence, and it intervenes to change their behavior and attitudes. (Ibid.)

32 Envisioned as the principal agents of this societal metamorphosis are individuals who "demonstrate in their own lives and personal conduct that it is possible to be both law-

abiding and respected in the neighborhood" (Butts et al 41). Once again, the recommended means for conveying the message of non-violence are mostly symbolic "activities, including media campaigns, signs and billboards, and public events such as antiviolence marches and postshooting vigils" (Butts et al 42). And while the authors make a point of stating that their method is "not inherently incompatible with law enforcement strategies and the larger justice system" (Butts et al. 51), their expressed goal is to minimize the role of the formal justice system by "relying on the normative power of the social environment rather than on the coercive power of law enforcement and prosecution" (Butts et al. 48-9). True enough, hardline strategies based primarily on aggressive law enforcement and harsh punishment have largely proven inadequate when it comes to sustainably containing violent behavior. But the authors' proclivity for winning over the "private heart" as a substitute for legal action betrays what seems to be a typically American prejudice: The law is viewed mainly as the executer of punishment, not as an effective platform for shaping social norms from the top down.

33 The same blind spot is present in the argument put forward by David Hemenway, Professor of Health Policy and Director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, in a contribution to *JAMA Internal Medicine Journal* entitled "Preventing Gun Violence by Changing Social Norms." Therein, he promotes "peer-to-peer education and leadership development" in lieu of legal measures. Here again, it is not the pragmatic revision of the legislative framework for obtaining firearms, but rather the transmutation of personal feelings and circumstances that is presented as the best hope for extinguishing gun violence:

> Guns are frequently used in inner-city disputes between youths as a symbol of power and masculinity. Too often, when a young man is "dissed," the norm requires that he respond violently, sometimes with a gun. A better norm would be that only "wusses" use guns and that hand-to-hand combat or nonviolent resolutions are more manly responses. The current norm is reminiscent of the old dueling norm among high-status whites. Although illegal, for centuries dueling was a common way to resolve disputes. If a man was disrespected and did not duel, he could lose face. Fortunately, the norm has changed—dueling is now considered silly.

34 The reference to dueling is interesting here. For, while it is true that the practice continued long after having been outlawed and faded only following a shift in public opinion, it seems curious that Hemenway choses to draw on this historically remote example embedded in rather different societal circumstances while at the same time eclipsing relevant data from contemporary Western societies, eminently the previously mentioned Australian example. Never acknowledging such recent successes attained by means of legal action, Hemenway instead offers "asking" as a key strategy. More specifically, he points to the ASK (Asking Saves Kids) campaign developed by the Center to Prevent Youth Violence in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics, which is based on parents asking other parents about the accessibility of firearms in their home. As Hemenway argues, "[a]sking can help keep one's own children and their friends safe and also help to promote the social norm of safe gun storage in the community." He also encourages "reporters (and the general public) to ask, whenever there is a street shooting, 'Where did the gun come from?'." In the same vein, he prompts potentially traumatized "families of victims killed by the guns of intimate partners [to] make their presence known when judges are considering gun removal when issuing restraining orders," thus shifting the task of changing social norms and practices wholly to the

affected parties. This even goes so far as to charge individuals with the responsibility for preventing gun suicides in their social environment:

> Like "friends don't let friends drive drunk," it should also be the social norm to help a friend going through a rough patch – his wife just divorced him, he's drinking and talking crazy – by getting the guns out of the house for a while. Had Adam Lanza's mother received this advice, the 2012 mass shooting by her son of school children and educators in Newtown, Connecticut, might have been prevented.

35 It is highly questionable whether it is realistic or, for that matter, ethical to expect ordinary people to routinely take on such heavy burdens, especially where they have no professional psychological training and are very likely grappling with their own day-to-day problems. The fact that such a strictly individual-based strategy is sponsored by a prominent member of the medical community in response to an acute national crisis is just another tell-tale example of the cultural instinct to eschew formal political and legal pathways at almost any cost. Concomitantly, as if to compensate for the vacuum created by the relinquishment of administrative tools, the capacities and obligations of the individual are inflated to unrealistic proportions.

36 The seemingly visceral aversion to depart from paradigms like "one at a time," "close to home" and "not in my backyard" is all the more perplexing as even proponents of such strictly individual-based approaches often concede that the evidence in their support "to date is mixed at best" (Butts et al. 47). But within the context of a powerful cultural imperative that conditions people to see an unbridgeable dichotomy between the political and the private, there appears to be no middle ground between the 'cold hand of bureaucracy' and the isolated efforts of individuals. So, when faced with the choice, Americans tend to opt for the latter as a way of asserting democratic values. Ironically, it is exactly this either/or mentality that stifles productive public discourse because it disregards the ubiquitous connections between the privately experienced realities and the world of formal politics.

37 All this is not to say that publicly-oriented activism does not exist in the United States, but rather to emphasize the Janus-faced nature of American individualism: While its sensibilities have often provided the fuel for civic protest by encouraging disobedience against authorities, they have simultaneously acted as "a brake on the democratic political imagination" (Marr 10) by obscuring how collective mechanisms can be used as levers to bring about wider social change. And it seems to become ever more obvious that decontextualized models of collective and personal advancement do little to shed light on the complex dynamics in an interconnected global community. Incidentally, it is not hard to see how, on an international level, "close to home," "one at a time" and "not in my backyard" translate into a stance that puts "America First" at the negation of political, economic and cultural global ties. But even though the country's intellectual mood keeps stimulating isolationist readings of what it means to be a productive member of (global) society, America does not have to look further than its own history to find more perceptive discourses on public reform and personal responsibility. For, as globally successful movements like the Civil Rights or Women's Rights agitation have shown, American individualism was at its best when it embraced a social dimension, combining the pursuit of personal freedom with a broader analysis and critique of collective structures.

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NOTES

1. This expression is borrowed from Quentin Anderson's influential study *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History*.

2. However, it is important to note that there are also structural and procedural reasons for this lack of democratic participation. This includes the fact that in the United States the burden of voter registration is placed on the individual and that, unlike for example in European countries, election days are not automatically scheduled on a weekend. And yet, considering that being a democratic society represents *the* core feature of America's national self-image, one could expect that a larger number of Americans would be willing to overcome these organizational obstacles in order to be able to exercise their civil rights.

3. By way of comparison, 65% of Canadians, 53% of Brits and 39% of the French stated that they have been members of a voluntary organization. Japan, which is often identified as the industrial nation with the least individualistic culture, made last place together with Italy with respectively 36%. This seems telling insofar as other studies have found that Italians are the least individualistically-minded European nation, which also suggests a connection between individualistic values and volunteer activity.

4. A 2016 study published by the Southern Poverty Law Center identifies as many as 623 active anti-government groups in the United States. And this number does not even include the explosively growing *Freemen on the Land* phenomenon, which has become such a serious domestic threat that the FBI classifies it as a terrorist organization. The adherents of this movement, who call themselves sovereign citizens, natural persons or freemen, insist on their fundamental personal independence from the state, arguing that citizenship can only come into effect by explicit consent of the individual. Consequently, they reject the use of identification documents as invalid and refuse to pay taxes or rent, instead proclaiming their own mini states or "embassies."

5. The song "Point of Light" by Randy Travis, which was released in May 1991, reached #3 on the *Billboard* Hot Country Singles & Tracks.

ABSTRACTS

The U.S. has a vibrant history of civic activism fueled by a strong individualistic tradition. But while stimulating critical views of the status quo, the individualist mindset has simultaneously acted as a brake on the democratic imagination by promoting the cultural narrative according to which meaningful social change can ultimately only occur by transforming one's own private environment. This tendency finds expression in popular reform slogans, also including modern cyber-activism which – despite its global reach – shows a disposition to get absorbed in insular pet projects. It also plays a vital, jet largely unacknowledged role in America's struggle with gun violence.

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Keywords: US social activism, reform movements, cyber activism, individualism, gun control, depoliticization, political cynicism, volunteerism.

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