Sephardic Heritage Update

A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information
Impacting our community and our culture
A Publication of the Center for Sephardic Heritage

"Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it." -Marian Wright Edelman

Contents **Yuval Levin**

Introduction: Yuval Levin and the Brave New World of Trumpist Neo-Conservatism

Yuval Levin has become arguably the most important intellectual of the contemporary Neo-Conservative movement. In his prominent role at the influential American Enterprise Institute he has inspired fellow travelers like David Brooks, who cites him repeatedly in his columns and articles.

Levin has recently published an important book *A Time to Build* that deals with American institutions, knowing the brutal job of destruction that Trumpworld has done to them in its march to Tyranny and Authoritarianism through planned institutional incompetence based on blind loyalty to the leader cult.

Levin did a book event at Politics and Prose in Washington, D.C. that was broadcast on C-Span's Book TV. In my remarks on the event I made note of the irony of a Reaganite trying to argue **for** American institutions, as Reagan famously sought to **undermine** government and our Social Safety Net; diligently working to roll back the New Deal and Great Society infrastructure through Trickle-Down Economics. Give to the rich and take from the poor, just as we are seeing today. To hell with public safety – just give all power to the corporate class.

Indeed, it is quite possible to see the current Trumpian mishandling of the Coronavirus epidemic in light of Reagan's lack of human concern and scientific realism with

the AIDS crisis. And Trump's gutting of the NIH and CDC follows Reagan's evisceration of government agencies under the rubric of privatization and a primal disdain for public welfare institutions.

With the exception of my note, you will not find the name Ronald Reagan in any of the other articles in this special newsletter.

We naturally begin the proceedings with our dear friend David Brooks who, like his idol Levin, is trying to figure out what our political system is at this dark period in our history. While Levin is more overtly anti-Trump in the Politics and Prose event, Brooks continues to remain ambivalent; probably because the Orange Pig has co-opted many of Reagan's Right Wing policies, with his penchant for appointing radical judges to our federal courts and for breaking the mechanisms of government from the inside, and of course all that privatization.

It is fascinating to see Brooks grapple with the political issues, as he struggles to apply Levin's nuanced thesis to his ongoing socio-political confusion.

Mona Charen's review of the Levin book in National Review begins to expand our understanding of the current institutional problem in Neo-Con circles. NR has had its own internal problems with Trump, as it began with Never-Trumpism, but has now very comfortably settled in, much like Republican stalwarts Lindsay Graham, Mitch McConnell, and Ted Cruz, with the decrepit new order of things. Corruption is a very catchy thing, and once it starts it is very hard to stop.

The bulk of this special newsletter is devoted to a symposium on *A Time to Build* that was just published by the radical Right Wing religious-political journal Law and Liberty.

The three articles do an excellent job of exposing the various fault-lines inside the Right Wing punditocracy and the way in which it is trying to deal with Trumpian Nihilism and the complete undermining of the Rule of Law, while still remaining nostalgic for a lost America which Trump has used as bait to rope in his base of support.

In other words, these Neo-Con radicals are trying to bring Reagan and Trump together in a way that Levin has tried to put into question. While Levin is also loath to attack the Gipper in any direct or overt way, his arguments do try to confront the post-Reagan malaise in an indirect manner.

I have continued to ponder whether Levin's salutary promotion of our normative institutions might act as a bridge to heal the Left-Right Never-Trump divide, but I remain uncertain. It is unclear whether Levin has as wide an audience as Brooks, or whether his analysis and policy prescriptions will be affirmed by what has become a very Trumpist Right Wing world.

But I do believe that understanding this Right Wing world is critical if we are to figure out a way to get beyond the current Authoritarianism and creeping Fascism. The Neo-Con Levin shares with Liberals the love of American institutions and our democratic heritage. And though there are serious differences that will continue to divide us, it is important that we seek out common ground and try to better understand the issues that are currently dividing the Neo-Cons in Trumpworld.

David Shasha

Reaganite Neo-Con Yuval Levin Promotes American Institutions on C-Span's Book TV

Yuval Levin is a mainstay of the American Enterprise Institute, the Reaganite Neo-Con thinktank in DC:

https://www.aei.org/profile/yuval-levin/

In many ways, Levin has replaced Francis Fukuyama as the Neo-Con Intellectual of choice:

https://www.aei.org/multimedia/will-immigration-change-the-american-way-with-francis-fukuyama-1994-think-tank-with-ben-wattenberg/

Unlike Fukuyama, who essentially admitted fault when it came to his Hegelian "End of History" thesis, which argued that Liberalism and Capitalism in its American iteration was the final stage in human socio-political development, Levin is not much on self-reflection:

https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2019/08/07/why-history-didnt-end

C-Span just broadcast a Levin book event dealing with American institutions, *A Time to Build*:

https://www.c-span.org/video/?468342-1/a-time-build

If you know nothing about Levin and his past, the presentation makes a good deal of sense and is highly articulate and thoughtful.

But he represents the very thing that he is now bemoaning.

It is a matter of the arsonist trying to figure out what to do with the house he has burned down.

As you watch the program, which I strongly advise you to do, try screaming out the name “Ronald Reagan” at sporadic intervals. It provides an interesting contrast to the reasonable points Levin makes and reminds us how we got to this point. It is all about Reagan’s promise to kill off our government and destroy public institutions like schools, labor unions, and grass-roots community activism in favor of privatism:

https://reason.org/commentary/ronald-reagan-and-the-privatiz/

We have discussed David Brooks in great detail, and it is important to note that Brooks has elevated Levin to the status of a Neo-Con saint:

https://twitter.com/nytdavidbrooks/status/1154551236009443328

Last November he praised Levin’s new book:

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/14/opinion/taylor-kent-impeachment-hearings.html

Though Levin is much smarter and more culturally savvy than Brooks, the two men share the benighted Reagan imprimatur. And this is vitally important because Levin’s argument in the presentation is rooted in a forceful critique of Reagan’s corporatism, untethered Capitalism, rampant privatization, and destruction of a healthy public sector, without ever naming the Gipper and admitting his role in the process.

While Levin rightly seeks to promote institutional wellbeing, Trumpworld, still following the Reagan model, wants to “burn it down,” as we see in the following article on the Banana Republic DOJ from Townhall:

https://townhall.com/columnists/kurtschlichter/2020/02/17/burn-down-the-doj-and-start-over-n2561386?utm_source=thdaily&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=nl&newsletterad=02/17/2020&bcid=3efa01f25ddb8ed896d125c526cb5194&recip=20074831

So, while Levin seeks to rebuild our broken institutions, he refuses to acknowledge his role in their destruction.

David Shasha

The Future of American Politics

By: David Brooks

Men and women are primarily motivated by self-interest. No other partial truth has done as much damage as this one.

If you base your political and social systems on the idea that the autonomous self-interested individual is the basic unit of society, then you will wind up with an individualistic culture that widens the maneuvering room between people but shreds the relationships and community between people.

You will wind up with a capitalism in which superstar performers get concentrated in superstar cities and everybody else gets left behind. In a system based purely on competitive individual self-interest, those who are advantaged get to race out further ahead year by year. The sense of common community and equal dignity is annihilated.

This is the flaw of unrestrained liberalism, what the radicals call “neoliberalism” or “late capitalism.” And they are not entirely wrong.

Populists on the right and the left look at this current reality and they come to a swift conclusion: The game is rigged! Liberalism is a con! Then they come to a different conclusion. The essential logic of society is not actually individuals seeking their self-interest. It’s groups struggling for power. Society is an arena where certain groups crush other groups.

On the Trumpian right it’s the coastal cultural elite trying to crush and delegitimize the white Christian patriots of the heartland. On the cultural left it’s the whole Michel Foucault legacy. Language is a tool the oppressor class uses to permanently marginalize the oppressed. On the economic left it’s the Bernie Sanders class war. The greedy capitalist class rigs the system and immiserates the working class.

The populist narratives differ but all have the same underlying structure. We’re locked in a life-or-death struggle of oppressor vs. oppressed groups. It’s Us versus Them — the good people here and the bad people there. The problems in society didn’t just happen; they were consciously engineered by The Evil Other, who must be broken. Our very existence is at stake!

If the anthropology of unrestrained liberalism is the autonomous individual making his own way, the anthropology of populism is warrior ants in a ruthless tribal war. These are very different views of human nature, but they have something in common: Both narratives make us miserable!

In one, life is isolation, inequality and the feeling of being invisible. In the other, it’s malice, fear and constant war. And that’s because both of these political tendencies are wrong about human nature. They create societies that pulverize who we are and are made to be.

Human beings didn’t evolve into the world’s dominant species because we are more autonomous. We didn’t do it because we’re more vicious in tooth and claw. We thrived as a species because we are better at cooperation.

We evolved complex social networks in our brains to make us better at bonding, teaching and collaborating. We don’t cooperate only to get things we want individually. Often, we collaborate to build shared environments we can enjoy

together. Often, we pick a challenge just so we can have the joy of collaborating. Relationships are ends to themselves.

Thus, the best future for American politics is not based on individual competition or group war. It's based on this narrative: We are an incredibly diverse society that got good at collaboration because we had to. The best future politics puts collaborative pluralism, weaving, at the center. That means, first, electing leaders who are masters at cooperation. No offense, but if you're supporting Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders this year, collaboration skills are not high on your list of priorities.

Second, it means infusing cooperative weaver values into all of our organizations. There's a fantastic community organization in Baltimore called Thread that has a few core competencies that shape its culture. We'd be in much better shape if every organization in America lived out these values:

Show all the way up. Be fully present, honest and vulnerable in all interactions. Recognize your own value. Push through discomfort to connect deeply with others.

Learn from all voices. Most of our challenges are complex. It takes every perspective to see an issue whole. Assume people have the best of intentions, and actively focus on the value they bring. Be intentional about being with those different from you.

Treat relationships as wealth. Human bonds are the chief resource of your organization. Recognize the inherent value of each person and meet each person where she or he is.

Fail forward. Life is iterative. Your vision is not always the answer, but rather a step in a creative learning process. Set up feedback mechanisms that support change and personal growth. Dogma won't get you to the solution. Openness and adjustment will.

The third task of weaver politics is reforming institutions so they encourage collaboration. Some of our institutions, like Congress, have been completely subsumed by tribal warfare. Other institutions, as Yuval Levin writes in his book "A Time to Build," are no longer formative places where we learn and serve; they have become platforms individuals use to broadcast their supreme selves.

Still other institutions have become dehumanized. Our schools, hospitals, prisons and welfare systems don't embed people in thick relationships. They treat them as units to be processed and shoved out the door. Still other institutions cease to exist. Why do we still not have a national service program?

America has an enormous task of institutional reform ahead of it, just as it did in the Progressive era.

The fourth and final task of this kind of politics is transformative policies that directly address our most serious divides. For example, reparations are a way to acknowledge the wrongs inflicted on African-Americans and to begin to heal that breach. Congressman Ro Khanna has a proposal that would show rural America that everyone has a place in the new economy. He would fund research and technology hubs throughout the country — a land grant college system for the 21st century.

The politics of weaving grows out of the acknowledgment that there is no dominant majority in America. There is no moderate center. Your group will never pulverize and eliminate your opposing group. There's no choice but to set up better collaborative systems across difference. This is not a problem, it's an adventure.

Yes, human beings are partly selfish and self-interested. But we are also supremely social and collaborative. This is the part we have to work on now.

From The New York Times, January 30, 2020

Book Review: A Time to Build

By: Mona Charen

Yuval Levin, A Time to Build,From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream
Basic Books, 2020

Yuval Levin's new book explains that the story of Congress's decline is also found in other institutions of American life -- the family, universities, and churches.

In July of 2018, *Commentary* published an article by Yuval Levin that caused everyone who thinks about the balance of power among the branches in Washington, D.C., to say, "Of course! That's it exactly!" It had long been observed that Congress had, over the course of several decades, relinquished its powers to the executive and the courts. That wasn't news. Others had remarked that geographic sorting and gerrymandering had increased the ideological polarization of the two parties. This spurs members of Congress to side with presidents of their own party more than with their fellow legislators.

Levin's insight went further. The piece was titled "Congress Is Weak Because Its Members Want It to Be Weak." During Obama's presidency, Democratic members of Congress called upon the president to change immigration law by executive decree. The Republicans had majorities in both bodies in 2018 and a president who was willing to sign nearly anything, yet the Congress passed only tax reform and then elected to sit idle "waiting to see what the president will say next." Even worse, despite unified control, the Congress came close to a government shutdown, and neither body even considered a budget resolution — the key legislative responsibility. "Congress," Levin wrote, "is broken."

How was that possible? Aren't politicians as ambitious as the Founders expected? They are, Levin argued, but their ambitions have been poured into different vessels. The story of Congress's decline is also found in other institutions of American life — the family, universities, churches, and more, as Levin elaborates in a new book *A Time to Build*.

In the case of Congress, he argues, the weakness arises from members' choosing to treat the institution not as a durable form for collective action but rather as a platform from which to burnish one's own celebrity. Thus do we find members of Congress eschewing their fundamental duties as legislators to grandstand on cable TV or social media. When members are mere performers, the Congress becomes only a proscenium, and this in turn robs the institution of legitimacy and respect. Elected members frequently seek followers by heaping scorn on the institution they represent, with demoralizing effects. Whereas 42 percent of Americans had confidence in Congress in the 1970s, only 11 percent said as much in 2018.

A Time to Build diagnoses the decline of institutions as the source of many social ills, including loneliness and despair, that have been attributed to other causes. Levin is unconvinced that economic stagnation explains the anomie that characterizes our time. The financial crisis was traumatic, and doubtless had far-reaching effects, but the expansion that followed has now been underway for twelve years. Unemployment and interest rates are low. Wages are rising, especially for the unskilled. Yet the economic good times have not been accompanied by any diminution in malaise and division.

Institutions, Levin acknowledges, can be oppressive. Any good can be abused. But at their best, institutions serve as molds of character. They help to give life meaning by assigning us roles to play. In order to accomplish their worthy goals — educating the young, settling disputes, disseminating the news, and so forth — they must teach self-control and enforce standards. By their nature, their purposes are larger than the individuals who comprise them. Those aims are undermined when members neglect loyalty to the institution and its standards in favor of personal display. "The discipline and reticence so essential to leadership, professionalism, responsibility, decency, and maturity," Levin writes, "are forcefully discouraged by the incentives of the online world." Ours is a selfie culture of "personalized micro-celebrity, in which we each act as our own paparazzi, relentlessly trading in our own privacy for attention and affirmation and turning every moment into a show."

Institutions channel our ambitions in more productive ways. Though many American institutions remain strong, Levin finds it significant that the one institution that has not seen a decline in trust over the past several decades is the military. Perhaps that's because the military is the most unapologetic "molder" of character in American life. "If you hear that someone attended Harvard," Levin offered at an American Enterprise Institute forum, "you may conclude that he or she is smart. But if you hear that they attended the Naval Academy, you'll probably conclude that this is a serious person."

Other institutions, from media companies to churches, could benefit from greater discipline about their core responsibilities and greater loyalty from their members. More of us should ask: "What should I do here, given my role or position?" Tom Wolfe labeled the 1970s the "Me Decade." Yuval Levin is arguing for an "anti-me" future. If more of us put a cork in our narcissism, pour ourselves into institutions, and uphold their standards, our national discontent might be much diminished.

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From National Review, January 22, 2020

Confessions of an Institutional Dropout

By: Rachel Lu

In 1956, William H. Whyte published a book that would transform the American conversation about management and corporate culture. A classic of post-War America, *The Organization Man* argued that sprawling institutions were smothering creativity and stifling entrepreneurship. People need freedom, Whyte claimed, to develop their personal potential, setting the stage for a thriving economy and culture. When managers become habituated and insular, they will also be complacent and risk-averse. Institutions must be constrained to enable individuals to flourish.

More than sixty years later, Yuval Levin has written a book calling for more organization men. It's an unusual take, but as with most of Levin's work, the volume gives readers plenty to think about, offering an insightful critique of American politics and culture. Already the book has inspired much worthwhile discussion about institutions, and their potential to help repair America's fraying social fabric. Coming to the final page, though, it still feels as though the ghost of William Whyte may be lingering on the premises somewhere, itching to offer a rebuttal. Stronger institutions would be beneficial in many ways, but conformity still has serious costs. If we are planning to embark on a new era of building, we need to do it with our eyes open.

Purposeful Institutions

Levin's book offers an excellent explanation of why institutions matter. There is, indeed, a certain genius to the way he turns populist memes on their heads, showing how the medicine Americans most fear, may in fact be the cure we need. For the past several years, he observes, populist movements left and right have called for the dismantling of many of our key institutions: Wall Street, Congress, the universities, our health care system, major media outlets. We've persuaded ourselves that we want our organizations to be more democratic, transparent, and responsive to popular demand. What we actually need, Levin argues, is the reverse: stronger, more purposeful institutions that can channel their members' energies towards the fulfillment of shared goals.

When institutions are obsessed with transparency and responsiveness, they lose the ability to maintain an institutional culture. Inevitably, institutions then lose focus

and fragment. Instead of working together to fill a core social function, individuals start treating the institution itself as a platform, which they may freely use to advance personal goals. Journalists stop fact-checking and focus their energies on promoting preferred political candidates. Scholars shelve the classics of their discipline, and race to join the social justice parade. Congressmen neglect the hard work of hammering out effective legislation, instead treating Capitol Hill as a stage for a histrionic performative politics.

As institutions continue to erode, we find ourselves with a wealthy elite that has all the entitlement and privilege of a landed aristocracy, with no corresponding sense of noblesse oblige. Understandably, ordinary people become angry and rage against a system that feels rigged. In fact though, Levin argues, we don't need to dismantle the institutions that have elevated our entitled technocrats to their lofty perches. Rather, we need to strengthen them, enabling them to channel and constrain the activities of their contributing members. It's good to help talented people find their way to appropriate work, but those opportunities need to be paired both with institutional duties, and with that, a sense of professional obligation.

This is an impressive argument, with a great deal of explanatory power. Even better, Levin's theory points us in the direction of some real solutions. To move forward from our present political funk, we must embrace this moment in history as "a time to build". The future will belong to the party, movement, or group that can pull themselves together and *create* something (or many somethings), instead of raging endlessly against political failures that no one is willing to own. At present, both the populist left and the populist right prefer to cast themselves as political outsiders, seeking to dismantle a broken system. Levin hopes to inspire fellow conservatives to lay bitterness aside, instead putting their energies into the vital work of building a future. If he can persuade at least a share of them to do this, his book will be a triumph indeed.

Strong Platforms and Weak Molds

It will not be easy. Institution-building presents certain challenges in our time, some of which seem underexplored in this book. Levin has admirably sketched the characteristic *strengths* of institutions. What about those weaknesses that led Whyte and others to reject institutional culture in favor of ingenuity, creativity, and personal integrity? *A Time To Build* does discuss at some length the regrettable tendency of institutions to preserve and perpetuate real injustice. That is indeed one potential problem, but institutions have other drawbacks too.

Throughout the book, Levin repeatedly contrasts the "mold" of a healthy institution with the "platform" of an unhealthy one, arguing that human beings can only thrive with the help of organizations that habituate virtuous tendencies, and constrain vicious ones. There is an obvious Aristotelian logic to this, and no reasonable person could really be opposed to the sort of institution that inspires its members to work earnestly and responsibly towards salutary goals. If we presume, though, that our present culture is fractured, demoralized, and steeped in vice, it's unclear whether institutions can really be an effective remedy.

To this reviewer's mind, it seems that the proliferation of "platforms" is actually one of the most encouraging signs of vitality in contemporary American culture. A corresponding revival of healthy institutions would be welcome indeed, but if such a thing is possible, I suspect it will involve the forging of a productively symbiotic relationship between the institutional "mold" and these more adaptable "platforms" that have enabled individuals or small groups to foster some of the creativity, ingenuity, and optimism that Whyte celebrated in his classic book. Levin's contrast of "molds" and "platforms" is evocative, but this paradigm also has obvious limitations. Even if we leave aside concerns about corruption and abuses of power, no reasonable person supposes that our run-of-the-mill institutions can be so benevolent, judicious, and well-governed as to balance employee needs and institutional mission with perfect exactitude. In a deeply fractured and unmoored society, institutions will struggle to "keep their balance" just as individuals do, and we can't assume that the former will always be the more successful. Instead of viewing "platforms" as competitors to healthy institutions, it would be better to find ways to employ each as a salutary counterbalance to the other.

Life on the Outside

After reading *A Time To Build,* I started reflecting on my own personal history with institutions, and I noticed to my bemusement that I'm really something of an institutional drop-out. This isn't entirely true, insofar as I am a wife and mother (to five sons), and a faithfully practicing Catholic of nearly fifteen years. Having said that, I've walked away from many of the most important and defining institutions of my life, and even my commitments to home, family, and Church have been solidified in significant ways by my involvement in "platforms": the relationships I've formed through social media, and the opportunities I've found as a freelance writer in an ever-shifting gig economy.

At present, I feel deep gratitude for one institution that has contributed richly to the life of my family: my children's classically-oriented parochial school. When my boys grumble about school policies, I steadfastly support the school. Outside that context though, I've noticed that my parental instincts favor the more self-reliant virtues. I do want my kids to be pious, courteous, and public-spirited, but I seem to put more energy into instilling curiosity, creativity, courage, and resourcefulness. I suspect this reflects my own mixed history with institutions, and my general perception that modern life simply doesn't (and perhaps can't) supply the sorts of "molds" that can form us as prudent, conscientious, purposeful human beings. At the risk of navel-gazing, it may be worth elaborating on this point.

I was raised in what is arguably one of America's most robust and healthy institutions: the Mormon church. Growing up, my spiritual and social world was overwhelmingly Mormon, which was a blessing in myriad ways. Mormons build wonderful, family-oriented communities. I never doubted that the expected lifestyle choices (avoiding tobacco and alcohol, respecting traditional sexual norms) were a small price to pay for the good of maintaining standing in that community. There was one obstacle, though, that eventually became overwhelming. I found it hard to accept the LDS Church's account of its own history and theology. In rejecting that, it seemed I necessarily rejected its authority too, which made my Mormon life feel like a lie. I walked away from the LDS faith with clear conscience, but also with considerable regret.

Eventually I found in Roman Catholicism what Mormonism could not supply: a faith I could genuinely affirm. I am grateful for this, but on the level of community, leaving Mormonism for Catholicism seemed a poor trade. The institutional (Catholic) Church is deeply troubled on many levels, so it took considerable time and initiative to find my way to a Catholic community where I actually wanted to live.

What About Liberty?

There is, it seems to me, a broader point to be found here. Insofar as institutions do have thick content, and a robust defining culture, there will inevitably be people who have strong and conscientious reasons to walk away. Constraints can be salutary, but they can also be personally compromising, and communities that are admirable in certain senses may still impinge on our personal integrity in unacceptable ways. A more strongly institution-oriented society probably won't restrict itself to threatening *trivial* personal freedoms. It may trespass on more significant and defining personal commitments too. In some respects, Silicon Valley corporate culture or Middlebury College campus life may represent comparatively successful efforts at building a strong institutional subculture. This isn't the sort of institution-building Levin hopes to see, of course, but why assume it wouldn't be representative? Can a society as divided as ours reasonably hope to have strong institutions that are genuinely unifying?

My life as a mother has underscored a similar point. For most my early adulthood, I was deeply involved in another kind of institution: the Academy. As an undergraduate at Notre Dame this was a very positive experience; as a doctoral student at Cornell it was a bit more fraught. Cornell's philosophy department wasn't entirely comfortable for a conservatively-inclined Catholic neophyte. Still, I found that community invigorating on the whole. It was only after I married and started working as an adjunct professor in my husband's Catholic institution, that I experienced the soul-crushing side of the Academy. Within a few weeks of my arrival there, I unwittingly tripped into controversy by trying to join an informal reading group. Not everyone thought it appropriate for adjuncts to fraternize with regular faculty in that way. That eye-opening experience was just the first of many, which made clear to me that the university wanted me to contribute to its mission even while clearly understanding and acknowledging that I was not, and could not realistically expect to be, a bona fide member of that intellectual community.

Quite obviously, this was not the sort of institutional involvement that would channel my energies in a fulfilling way. At the same time, my family's needs limited my options rather severely. I could not move, travel extensively, or keep a regular work schedule. My day-to-day activities mostly revolved around the relentless needs of young children. For a time, I made a sustained effort to re-center my energies around that life, making motherhood itself my primary identity and vocation. The idea made sense to a former Mormon, and much more could be said about the reasons it didn't work out as I envisioned. In short though, I came to understand that motherhood would be miserable for me unless I could find a way of filling the role that was compatible with the temperament, talents, and personal interests that I actually have. Molds have their place, but it's simply foolish to spend your life trying to cram a square peg into a round hole. We need to give ourselves to our children, instead of trying to pass off a shoddy simulacrum of the person we feel we ought to have been.

Institutions for the Culture We Actually Have

Eventually, I was able to piece together a new kind of intellectual life, outside the Academy, while still wiping ten sticky hands as needed. I'd like to say that this would somehow have happened even without Facebook, Twitter, or the army of online platforms, always in need of content. Realistically though, it doesn't seem likely. Institutions, as I learned, are fairly inflexible about the terms on which members involve themselves. The constraints they impose can be salutary, but very often they are not. They may squelch good ideas, exclude people for arbitrary reasons, or prevent healthy communities from forming simply because the would-be members are too diverse (in their ages, locations, or life states) to come together naturally in an institutional setting. One of the most delightful things about online fora (blogs, websites, or social media) is their potential to spark friendships among people with superficial differences, but also some deeper commonalities in terms of their interests or beliefs. Certainly, there are benefits to supporting intellectual life through institutions. But platforms have unique advantages too, which can seem very precious to people who for one reason or another are unable to find an appropriate institutional home. Perhaps we need to think more about the best ways to use those strengths, so that platforms can be supportive of healthy institutions, and not parasitic.

A healthy society will always have need of some good, conscientious organization men. Right now we need more of them, and *A Time To Build* makes a strong case for this. Levin is at his best when explaining why elites in particular need institutional constraints, both to solidify their legitimacy, and to prevent abuses of power. This is a truth populists need to take to heart: corrupt, unconstrained outsiders cannot solve our crisis of legitimacy. Our technocratic upper class is actually extremely good at many things, but they need to re-commit themselves to acting within set boundaries. We as a people can help them by rewarding elites who demonstrate that willingness to be constrained, instead of flocking to figures who give free rein to personal ambition and ideological zeal.

Having said that, we should also be aware of the limitations of institutions. It's pleasant to imagine a world in which "there is an institution for everyone, and everyone in his institution". Perhaps that just isn't realistic under modern conditions, though. We may need to train our children to be discerning, about their institutional involvement as well as their lives more broadly. They should understand that institutions can be good for them (either despite, *or because of,* the constraints they impose), but they should also understand how to adapt institutional roles or walk away from them with dignity, if that's what personal integrity demands.

This is, as Levin says, a time to build. But institutions aren't the only things in the world worth building.

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Failures in Moderation

By: Titus Techera

In our immoderate times, one of the most wonderful things about the moderation we so badly need is that it can be easily summarized in one piece of advice: Mind your own business. Our best moderate, Yuval Levin has written a book, *A Time to Build*, dedicated to explaining the blessings that follow from that advice and especially the catastrophes that follow from neglecting it. Levin is a dedicated student of Socratic philosophy who speaks of himself as parsing Aristotle, but I think we all prefer a personal, dramatic view of things, not a technical treatise. Thankfully Levin's work lends itself to a more Platonic than Aristotelian reading.

We could understand our elites better if we studied Plato's dialogue on moderation, *Charmides*. There is evidence that Plato's problems and ours are connected: Socrates' companions in that dialogue are a crazy partisan of Athenian democracy and two future tyrants. Set right after Athens starts the war against Sparta which will eventually ruin it, political crisis remains in the future in this dialogue. In the dialogue, a young man of astonishing beauty is causing everyone, from children to the aged, and not excluding Socrates, to love him. So also Levin says what we all know to be true, that the root of our political immoderation today is the erotic immoderation of the 1960s.

The strongest criticism Levin makes—that people now routinely abuse institutions for personal reasons, putting celebrity over duty—suggests a profound conflict. This struggle pits an older order formed by institutions against a newer order defined by troublesome and individualistic leaders. This phenomenon has never been better described than in Plato's dialogues as the revolutionary arrival of full democracy, which is dedicated to liberating *eros*.

In between Plato and our postmodern world stands Tocqueville, who thought deeply about the character of political moderation in the modern regimes of freedom and equality. He said that in America, the men go home to wife and children, such that the enjoyment of tranquility offers consolation for life's hardships while also reminding them to fear how much they would lose were they to engage in radical politics. They are inclined, that is, to mind their own affairs. In France, where adultery was then, and still remains, a sport, the humiliations and mistrust of the home lead men into political clubs where they propose to undertake or provoke crazy changes.

Well, almost a majority of American adults aren't married anymore, and children are also missing from our lives, so it would be wise to fear the consequences of this unhappiness. Levin seems to believe this poses real dangers. Hence the great need to build institutions that will foster moderation—we are too tempted now to take our private issues and turn them into political issues, going from a personal form of craziness to a public one. Since our lives are immoderate, let's make our politics immoderate, too—what could possibly go wrong from simply being honest?

A Loss of Order

As a student of Aristotle, Levin admits we need elites to run America, but they need to be of a certain kind that's good for us. His core criticism of elites is that they don't mind their business, which is to serve the institutions that have made them wealthy and respected. Instead, they abuse them for their own ends. This leads us to suspect that our elites do not believe in those institutions—the purposes they serve and the people they lead. But of course, our elites are today at least hypothetically the product of a meritocracy—that is, they are supposed to be our best. So in one sense, they are like us, only more so—they are, as Lincoln said, of the people, by the people, for the people, yet they are elevated to high positions which require justification. This often results in two implied claims to rule us in the name of moderation: both their bodies and their minds are better than ours. I think that if we look at these claims to rule we will see why our elites continuously usurp institutions and legitimacy.

Our elites mind their own business at least so far as the body is concerned. They aren't fat, because they exercise, diet, and avoid fast food. Nor are they lazy, because they have busy work and leisure schedules. They are overachievers for whom health is proof of the mind's scientific control of the body. The food they eat is scientifically proven to be better, as is the way they eat it. They drink scientific coffee and sleep according to scientific recommendations. They try to solve the problem of aging and death scientifically, to live the longest, most active lives imaginable, free of pain and boredom. They seem to leave nothing to chance, but rather control as much of life as possible technologically, and so they love gadgets. Expertise rules their every thought.

They apply the same principle, the mind's rule over body, to the body politic, of course. Just like the desire for sugar, steak, or fried fat has to be denied in the name of health, the various desires of the people have to be denied in the name of good policy. Our elites are great nay-sayers and would seem to need the rest of us if for no other reason than to have someone to say no to. Moderation emerges as a motherly, not to say schoolmarmish, refusal to give spoiled brats what they want. Politics is reducible to a simple relationship: We the people are immoderate and they, our elites, will moderate us. As Tocqueville said, they want to save us the pain of living and the trouble of thinking, and since this is a matter of piety to them, they are unlikely to take no for an answer.

This is because they have a comprehensive science in accordance with which all aspects of life will be regulated. You might have a job you're good at, which our elites cannot do better than you, as do I and many others, but what we all lack is a form of knowledge superior to all our own forms of knowledge which puts them all together. I mind my own private business, as must we all, but who then will mind the public business? Our elites will. Busybodying is their job and their job is all they ever do. They must regulate our lives and administer our affairs—telling other people how to live is how they live. They are in this sense completely different from the rest of us and cannot be expected to obey the same rules. Only by proving they are different, by compelling us to do what they tell us, can they be sure that they are successful. These golden gods atop the American pyramid are tyrants.

The Poverty of Science

Plato set *Charmides* in the midst of immoderate men and desires in order to reveal the tyrannical character of politicized science and its distinction from philosophy—that is, its profound distance from moderation. He wanted to show how the idea of a science of science, a master science, goes together with a lack of self-knowledge, an inability to judge characters. This self-ignorance leads to the dangers we are now facing with our elites. Their ideals of scientific rule are based on a belief they cannot examine. They are neither competent nor eager to ask themselves how much knowledge they really have about people and about the world. Instead of undertaking that examination of their own arguments, they prove their competence by pointing to the fruit of their own lives. But if the rest of us keep disappointing them, they have to tyrannize over us in order to prove they are right—science, after all, cannot fail. Since they cannot judge characters and events, they cannot truly persuade themselves—or anyone else for that matter. They must, therefore, absolutely control us, lest we disagree with them, refuse to vote for them, laugh at them, or worse.

The politicization of science is a necessity for our elites. It is their title to rule, the source of their supposedly superior mind, and the purpose of their lives. It allows them to rule the rest of us, at whatever level they can, and thus it is their only path to understanding themselves. Our elites know who they are because of what they do to us—and especially because of those things we wouldn't do unless compelled by them. Only those things distinguish them from us. That is to say, our elites are ultimately moderate in the sense that they moderate us. They must take our freedom in order that they feel free—the science of public affairs requires it.

Merit and Elitism

Moderation requires a connection to knowledge—understanding what you're doing is necessary to find a mean between extremes. And so you can say of pretty much any activity that there's an ordinary way of doing it and there is a way of doing it well. There's your average Joe and there's the expert. Meritocracy justifies tyranny by replacing how we ordinarily do things with how those things *should* be done. You and I might hesitate to tell someone else how to raise a child, but a doctor or a teacher is likely to assert the authority to dictate, within the limits of their expertise. The all-encompassing expertise of our elites justifies their telling us how to live. They know us better than we know ourselves, because they are better at being human than we are.

From every point of view, the abuse we suffer from our elites is a necessity—from every point of view, that is, except ones centered on freedom or the Socratic insistence on finding out the truth. Since most of us aren't Socrates, we insist on our freedom, but find that our elites won't leave us be, not even when they keep failing at policy, elections, foreign affairs, technological innovation, and theoretical science. No amount of failure can stop them because we have no Socrates to prove to them that they are ignorant and arrogant. They will just ignore the lessons they might have learned from catastrophic wars, terrorist attacks, economic crises, and social unrest and try something else. If we prove recalcitrant, they will use force. Only when we are sure that we are right can we force them to stop trying to tyrannize over us, and only if we act for ourselves politically, publicly, and loudly. But this would mean nothing less than denying the authority of people who claim scientific expertise to rule our lives. Otherwise,

they treat every catastrophe as an accident they will fix, another chance to become more perfect and rule us better. Socrates reveals a lot of bad news in this dialogue on moderation and it would take a long study to show how the arrival of science and philosophy tempts people to tyranny. I want to conclude instead by reiterating the most obvious things we now don't dare utter and reflect on. Shame and fear, as I suggested at the beginning, are what we can rely on to keep people moderate. Our elites, however, have technology, which serves to overcome fears and demolish any sense of shame. When you can play with trillions of dollars and fantasize about new technologies that will control how people live and die, it's almost impossible to accept your limits or face up to your own ignorance. It's possible that we need to learn from Socratic political philosophy how to confront this politicized science, for the sake of political freedom, or else moderation is doomed and we must expect our political crisis to lead to catastrophe.

The character of the people and our capacity for action is now being tested. We will find out whether we are the kind of people who allow ourselves to be pushed around and humiliated. Levin has done us a great service in asking us to see clearly how our institutions are abused by elites and how we must dedicate ourselves to these institutions, at every level from family to Congress—he even uses the word devotion, suggesting we need a kind of civic piety. I hope to add to his important tract this extrapolation: that our elites are deluded by their scientific fantasy of control over body and mind. We need new elites who don't share that delusion, but know how ignorant we truly are about ourselves—elites unafraid to notice how many things we have arrogantly destroyed. Levin offers a better education for such new elites than most people in our public life.

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A Time to Repeal and Replace

By: Scott Yenor

Few public intellectuals are more committed to healing our nation's wounds than Yuval Levin. A patriot with a deep sense of public responsibility and humility, he seeks a knife-edged path that might lead us out of our earthquake partisan conditions. His *A Time to Build* is an attempt to find common ground between America's Left and Right. Perhaps, he hopes, no matter what the differences, partisans can rally around the idea that we need institutions to better our common life and politics.

In a sense, Levin's book is "deeply conservative," because it is based on the assumption that nature poses challenges more than it provides answers: man is not naturally good or perfectible. Man's ineradicable factiousness or sinfulness cannot be cured, but effective institutions can ameliorate the latent causes of faction. Levin has nothing to do with liberation theories that presume human perfectibility. The Left has been compromising the old institutions of American life, from our families to our constitutional bodies to our universities based, apparently, on assumptions of human perfection. Our populist right, in Levin's retelling, is hell-bent on willy-nilly destroying everything that the Left has built without replacing them with anything. It seems Levin strikes a statesmanlike pose, akin to Solon, when he seeks to convince each side in our partisan disputes that it is time to build new institutions.

Levin describes the importance of institutions clearly and succinctly. Stable, healthy or "worthwhile" institutions give us a sense of our roles; they answer the question, in Levin's words, "how shall I act here, given my position?" They connect people to long term projects. They "embody our ideas, allowing us to meaningfully devote ourselves to them." They structure thinking and "give us something to love." They "shape our minds as they shape our character." Within institutions, people practice "the virtues of loyalty, solidarity, and fidelity," and institutions help us in "managing egos, settling disputes, prioritizing different people's preferences and points of view, and paving paths to forgiveness."

Yet ambiguities cloud Levin's analysis. Do we, in the wake of the changes of the last sixty years, have *weak* institutions or *bad* institutions? When our institutions are "flagging and degraded" they "fail to form us, or they deform us." Which is it?

The old Congress of Sam Rayburn or Joe Cannon is gone, but has it been replaced with a non-institution or a strong institution with different ways? The old presidency of U.S Grant and Dwight Eisenhower is gone, but has it been replaced with non-institutional platform or with an institutionalized "rhetorical" presidency where the incumbent spends most of his time going public? The old university of Robert Maynard Hutchins, friendly to genuine liberal learning, is gone, but has it been replaced with a non-institution without a formative project or with an even stronger institution with different emphases? The old family and sexual regime of Ozzie and Harriet is gone, but has it been replaced with different set of practices or no set practices? The old newspaper is gone, but is the social media that replaces it formative or not? Is the medium the message or just a medium? The old apolitical WASP churches-as-social-clubs are gone, but have they been replaced with churches that do not know what they are doing or with churches that have a different idea of what they are doing?

Levin's book shows, against the main thrust of his argument that we have *weak* institutions, that our new institutions do indeed shape us. Sometimes, like Congress and the presidency, they have become platform institutions, encouraging, to use former Speaker Rayburn's distinction, "show horses" instead of "work horses." Sometimes, like on

the university, they have become very different institutions, but much more uniform in their norms, policies, ways of thinking, political aspirations, and curricula. The family is another example of a very different institution or, rather, two very different institutions now exist among a majority of the population—one where marriage is a simulacrum of what it once was, and one where enduring marriages fail to form and where people design their lives and expectations accordingly.

The question, it seems, is not "do we have institutions that form us?" We do. The more needful question is: do the new institutions that are forming us secure liberty to ourselves and our posterity, or are they compromising self-government and liberal character? Since Levin merely sees our institutions as weak, he does not address the more controversial challenge involved in distinguishing between good and bad institutions.

Levin says it is "a time to build." What should we build? We should build institutions, of course. But what kind of institutions? For what ends? Levin knows that not just any institution would do: yet he refrains from explicitly describing the institutions that it is now time to build. To what kinds of institutions should Americans recommit themselves in order to revive the American Dream? What new forms must we create to weather our conditions? Levin grasps the pitfalls of purely formal and social science analysis.

It is easy to fall into talking about institutions in terms of organizational categories and pure structural analyses. But often what matters most about them is what that sort of thinking leaves out: their mission, their ethic, their ends, their ideals. They are more than organizations. They embody our aspirations.

A thousand times true! The reader then can be excused for expecting an analysis of mission, ethics, ends, and ideals of good institutions from Levin. Regrettably, such an analysis is a casualty of Levin's argument that our institutions are *weak* instead of *bad* or *corrupt*. This omission follows from the fact that Levin frames *A Time to Build* inside the universe of social science, instead of statesmanship.

His modest solution is for citizens "to act through institutions a bit more" after thinking long and hard about "how to use our time and energy, how to pursue our goals, how to judge success and failure, how to identify ourselves when people ask us who we are, how to measure our responsibilities." This repeats the same formalism with which Levin diagnoses our problems on the level of remedy. Little beyond "building," on his account, defines our goals, measures our responsibilities, or judges our successes.

This leaves one more ambiguity. Who is to build institutions? Presumably we all should be building them. I want to say, "sign me up." Will members of today's Left participate in building new institutions, flush as they are in building their own? Will they join in moving the universities away from imperial identity politics? Will they advocate for stronger marriages and more power to parents or churches that have robust protections? Would they revitalize our political institutions through moving power away from the bureaucracy? Levin's laudable goal—his statesmanlike goal—is to establish a better society with social peace through these new institutions. Yet he seems preternaturally unable to see that the Left may not want such a peace or is not a fit peace partner. If it is not, then it cannot be a time to simply build—some more radical renovation is also in order.

Let me illustrate with a somewhat unfair jibe. A Bernie Sanders campaign worker was recently caught on camera defending the idea that gulags should be introduced into America for political conservatives. While Levin would no doubt find this proposal troubling, one has to admire the Sandernista—he knows that it is "a time to build."

People on the Left listen to Levin, to his great credit. Perhaps the social bonds in America are so frayed that only such a formal proposal as this could gain a hearing, especially on the Left. Thus Levin's statesmanship.

Is it enough? The Left has been building for sixty years. No stable common ground has been found as they march through our institutions creating new, ever more radical and unhealthy ones. Perhaps the string has run out on continuing to seek such common ground. Perhaps it is a time for statesmen to repeal and replace.

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Symposium on Yuval Levin's A Time to Build, Law and Liberty, February 21, 2020

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