Conserving the American Dream

Faith and Politics in the U.S. Heartland

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For Elias, Albin, and Oskar

Contents

Acknowledgements

Looking back on a project that has been almost eight years in the making is a rather dizzying experience. Among other things, I am struck by the extent to which the progress of my work has been dependent on the efforts and support of others. While I cannot possibly account for the myriad of debts incurred during the course of this project, I want to at least try to acknowledge the most significant ones.

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Introduction

It is the fifth day of the annual Allen County Fair of 2006 and the sun is beating down on the Lima Fair Grounds. The Allen County Republican Party booth, a moveable box of about one hundred and fifty square feet, sits in the middle of the dusty field amidst food stands, amusement rides, Bible tents, Army and National Guard recruiters, cattle displays, and assorted vendor booths. The Republican booth, though it is draped in the clear colors of candidate signs and party symbols, and boasts a large Stars and Stripes in the back, pales in comparison to most of its neighbors. A handful of Republican Party volunteers and Republican candidates running for local office in the upcoming 2006 midterm elections are pacing outside in the dusty heat, doing what they can to attract the attention of distracted fairgoers.[1]

While most people accept pamphlets and handshakes they do so with little comment or noticeable enthusiasm. The few who approach the booth to engage in political interaction, as opposed to just grabbing one or two of the giveaways stacked on a table inside—candy, combs with candidate names or the campaign cookbook written by Senator Mike DeWine's wife[2]—are already on the "right" side. A man in a Veterans t-shirt wants to know if "RINO"[3] Republican Senator DeWine deserves his vote in November, and comes away from the booth apparently convinced that while he does not, the

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[1] Midterm elections are general elections held two years after the quadrennial elections for the President of the United States, at the midpoint of the four-year presidential term. Federal offices up for election during the midterms include all of the 435 seats in the United States House of Representatives, and 33 or 34 of the 100 seats in the United States Senate.

[2] *Fran DeWine's Family Favorites* has been a main staple of Mike DeWine's campaign literature since 1980. The 2006 edition, the tenth in order, feature treats like the "All Ohio Corn Chowder" and "Mike's Favorite Apple Pie," and is richly illustrated with family photos and children's drawings.

[3] A "RINO," or "Republican In Name Only," is a well-established derogative for Republican officeholders and candidates perceived to have poor conservative credentials. (Less widely used, a "PORNO," in addition, is a "Pissed Off Republican in Name Only.") DeWine's long record of support for stricter gun control laws, his resistance to drilling for oil in the Alaskan Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWAR) and his membership in the bipartisan Senate group "Gang of 14," were among the things typically cited in connection with this accusation.

alternative would be significantly worse. Jane,[4] a bank clerk in her early forties who runs a pro-life ministry in her spare time, stops by with her laptop to show us an educational piece she is working on, a slideshow of pictures of aborted fetuses accompanied by a sentimental ballad. As she speaks of "the culture of death spreading through American society," she literally trembles with intensity. Keith, one of the Republican volunteers, pulls me to the side to assure me that while he agrees with her basic points, "all pro-lifers aren't that nutty."

Thus while most interaction with voters is conspicuously slow, the booth is not entirely devoid of either ideological zeal or subtle conflict. After lunch, inside the booth, an ideological row is stirring between two of the volunteers. The topic is "Reaganomics."[5] Enthusiastically arguing in support of Reagan's economic programs is John, an economics professor at the local junior college. Against, or at least less enthusiastically supportive, is Paul, a lawyer and former Republican State Representative from the Lima area, who argues that the massive budget deficits incurred by the Reagan administration undermined economic growth in the long run, and perhaps even forced later tax increases. John and Paul eventually agree to disagree, but tension lingers in the small booth throughout the afternoon.

Paul's presence at the Republican booth is noteworthy because it is atypical. Paul describes himself as belonging to "the old guard" of the Ohio Republican Party. According to him, the party he joined, and later represented in the Ohio House of Representatives between 1973 and 1986, was a "moderate" party. It emphasized balancing budgets, spending the taxpayer's money responsibly and keeping a cautious eye on the unintended social effects of reforms and legislation. "Differences between the parties were more in the nuances back then," Paul says. "It used to be that Republicans stood for a kind of level-headedness, while Democrats were visionaries and big-word types, who would be satisfied once a new bill had a name with a nice ring to it. Good intentions are good but not good enough. This is something that many liberals are in dire need to be reminded of."

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[4] A pseudonym. All personal names, with the exception of political candidates, campaign and party officials and other public figures, have been altered throughout the text.
[5] "Reaganomics," the economic policies promoted by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, were centrally comprised of "across-the-board tax cuts, […] reduction in the rate increase in federal spending, the balancing of the federal budget, vigorous deregulation, and a consistent and stringent monetary policy to deal with inflation" (Collins 2007: 67–68). Debating Reagan's economic performance "has long been a parlor game for the politically inclined, but one typically generating more heat than light, with prejudices often trumping facts" (Collins 2007: 67). The Reagan administration's massive budget deficit, construed by some critics as a deliberate attempt to bring the welfare state to its knees, has typically been at center of these debates. While the fact that the deficit indeed was destructive for GDP growth seems clear, it is more uncertain precisely how and to what extent (see Collins 2007: 87–91, for a useful summary).

By contrast, Paul feels increasingly alienated by the "vehement rhetoric" and "fierce partisanship" of much of contemporary Republican politics. Looking back over the last two decades or so, he sees a party undergoing profound cultural and political transformation. While people of lower incomes and poorer educational backgrounds have been drawn into the party, primarily through concern with what Paul refers to "the three Gs"—God, Gays and Guns—many of Paul's friends from his days as a Ohio House Representative—lawyers, physicians, or entrepreneurs—have turned their backs on active party politics. Driven by his frustration with the current state of affairs, Paul partook in what was widely perceived as a "mutiny attempt" in the Allen County Republican Party's central committee in early 2006, attempting, but eventually failing, to replace the "new local majority." He also considered, "against better judgment," running for State Senate against a popular candidate in the 2006 Republican primary. But when provisional polling confirmed his suspicion that he did not stand a chance, he decided against it, "out of loyalty with the party." Nonetheless, when an argument over Reaganomics emerges in the back of the Republican booth at the County Fair, it is obviously resonant with lingering resentment.

As Paul and John go at it over Reaganomics, Frank, the pastor of a small evangelical church and one of those identified by Paul as belonging to the new party majority, is listening in the background. "There is always something with that guy," he whispers, shaking his head. That conclusion, which later receives support from John, seems to have general appeal. Kim, one of the younger volunteers, implicitly sides with Frank against Paul and the old moderates: "I'm a *conservative* conservative, I mean really conservative. I'm like… psycho-conservative."

I. U.S. Conservatism in Transformation[6]

This study explores the force and internal dynamics of the conservative movement that reshaped the American political landscape in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first (e.g., Critchlow 2011; Himmelstein 1990; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2005). Based on fieldwork carried out among conservative voters, volunteers and candidates in a small city in northwestern Ohio during the midterm election year of 2006, it probes the appeal and energy of conservative politics, its modes of

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[6] "Conservatism" is an ambiguous term with a long, varied and rather confusing history, not least in the American context. I examine that history in some detail in Chapter 1. The term appears at this point simply because my informants refer to themselves and their politics as "conservative"—in keeping with a common U.S. usage that I contextualize in the historical section.

attachment and influence, and the organizational forms through which it circulates.

The Republican Party booth at Allen County Fair of 2006 is a useful point of departure for this endeavor. Apart from introducing some of the people—Paul, Jennifer, Keith and Frank—that the reader will come to know in the course of the study, the Republican booth provides inroads to central themes and key debates concerning the history, anatomy, proliferation, and immanent future of political conservatism in the United States. Starting with the small gallery of personalities and perspectives assembled in and around the booth—in some ways surprisingly varied, in others strikingly homogenous—one can begin to think about the internal dynamics of the contemporary Republican coalition: its conditions of possibility, its mode of existence, and its emergent tensions and fissures. While the study belongs empirically to the mid-2000s and the George W. Bush era, it has bearing, I think, beyond 2008, on the emergence of the Tea Party movement, the election cycles of 2008 and 2010, and into the present.

The snapshot from the Allen County Fair makes clear from the outset that we are not dealing here with some undifferentiated whole—cultural, social, or ideological—but rather with a bounded heterogeneity of elements. Following William Connolly (2007, 2008: 9–14), it might be useful to provisionally think of the contemporary conservative coalition in the United States as an "assemblage"—a contingent complex of people, resources, ideas, practices, institutions, or other coexisting entities drawn together at a particular point in time.[7] Broad coalitions of course occur naturally in a political two-party-system,[8] and I am not simply aiming for the conclusion of "complexity," often taken as central to ethnographically grounded inquiry (e.g., Atkinson, Delamont and Housley 2008). Nonetheless, one of the tasks that the snapshot from the fair confers on the study as a whole is to show how, more precisely, the components of the conservative coalition actually work together in a particular time and place: how diverse experiences and viewpoints attract and repel each other, in what ways they come to resonate together, and how they ultimately become geared toward a set of policies. I will consider the recent history of U.S. conservatism and the Republican Party in more detail below. At this point, for the purpose of stating more clearly the aims of the study, three interrelated characteristics of contemporary American conservatism need to be highlighted.

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[7] Connolly's (2007; 2008) use of the concept of assemblage draws on Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Anthropological approaches to assemblages include Collier and Ong (2005) and Rabinow (1999).

[8] In a strict sense, the United States is does not, in fact, have a two-party system. That is, there are no formal obstacles for more than two parties to enter into elections, and candidates from more than two parties are frequently represented in elections at all levels of government. Still, due to the dominant role played by the dynamic between Democrats and Republicans, the United States is typically understood to be a functional two-party system.

First, the conservative movement and the electoral resurgence of the Republican Party in the second half of the twentieth century partially unsettled traditional patterns of political identification and mobilization in the United States. Paul's frustration with his fellow Republicans at the Allen County Fair is suggestive on this point. As he indicated, traditionally strong correlations between socio-economic status and party identification—between working class status and voting Democrat, for instance—have been in decline (e.g., Ladd and Hadley 1975; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Edsall and Edsall 1991; Frank 2004). Meanwhile, other correlations have grown stronger—those between self-proclaimed ideological "conservatism," "religiosity," or "church attendance," and a preference for the Republican Party, for instance, and conversely between "liberalism," "secularity," and the Democratic Party (e.g., Abramowitz 2010; Fischer and Mattson 2009: 438–439). "In no other country," Micklethwait and Wooldridge note in this connection, "is the Right defined so much by values rather than class. The best indicator of whether a white American votes Republican is not his or her income but how often he or she goes to church" (2005: 12). While both the scope and the meaning of these and related changes continue to be subject of much scholarly debate—I return to this in Chapter 1—it is sufficient to note at this point that the U.S. conservative coalition of recent decades has been marked by a certain measure of what one might think of as "sociological indeterminacy," i.e. that "the markers of class, race, age, income level, education, religious creed, and gender, while pertinent, do not sufficiently demarcate" those who are attracted from those repelled by it (Connolly 2008: 42).

Second, the Republican coalition and conservative ideology more broadly has undergone substantive changes. These have been accompanied by new modes of coexistence but also, as exemplified by the argument over Reaganomics at the Republican booth, of tension and conflict. As already noted, a two-party system naturally gives rise to broad and internally diverse coalitions; the political history of the United States is largely the history of the rise and fall of such coalitions. One of the most striking features of recent decades of American political life has been the alliance between laissez-faire capitalism on the one hand and evangelical Christianity and social traditionalism on the other. Social scientists and political philosophers have been much preoccupied with the paradoxes of this union (e.g., Bellah 1983; Brown 2006; Connolly 2007, 2008). Wendy Brown, for instance, has characterized the present Republican coalition as one in which "a rationality that is expressly amoral at the level of both ends and means (neoliberalism) intersect with one that is expressly moral and regulatory (neoconservatism)" (2006: 692). Without downplaying the historical importance of broad coalitions, it seems safe to say that the internal ideological tensions or even self-contradictions of the current conservative coalition in the United States deserve special attention.

Third, these developments have apparently been marked by new intensity and convictional energy, following a period of relative ideological complacency and decline of partisanship. Frequently understood in terms of ongoing political "polarization," conservatives have seemed increasingly ideologically driven, less pragmatic, and less prone to compromise (e.g., Abramowitz 2010; Fischer and Mattson 2009). To some extent, rising ideological fervor might be understood as an epiphenomenon of changing patterns of mobilization. As Stonecash (2010) has pointed out, what political scientists registered as a declining importance of ideology and partisanship in 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and as rising importance in the 1990s and 2000s, may well have been in part an expression of changing correlations. Nonetheless, conviction as such seems to have been at stake in a distinctive way for conservative counterrevolutionaries of the last decades, as intimated by Kim's self-proclaimed "psycho-conservatism," mentioned above. Abramowitz (2010: 147) goes as far as suggesting that the rise of ideology, in conjunction with the decline of other factors, implies "the emergence of a new American party system—one in which party loyalties are based primarily on voters' ideological beliefs rather than their membership in social groups."

Contemporary U.S. conservatism thus comprises a set of diverse political attachments, strong in intensity but with unclear internal logic and with ambiguous grounding in conventional interests and identification. This, I suggest, calls for both ethnographic exploration and anthropological analysis. Most obviously, changing patterns of mobilization and attachment call for careful empirical work. Ethnography has an important role to play here.[9] As historian Lisa McGirr has noted, sociological and historical studies of American conservatism have largely focused on macro developments: "We still lack a deep understanding of the women and men who built the movement and of the communities from which they sprang" (McGirr 2001: 11). This is not, I think, just a matter of providing additional "data." Even more importantly, by paying attention to "the confusions, emotions, and uncertainties that, although inherent in all forms of political action, conventional political analysis tends to dismiss (or ignore) as either 'noise' or anecdotal evidence with no relevance for what 'really' matters" (Auyero, Mahler, and Joseph 2007: 3), political ethnography can facilitate a reconceptualization of its

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[9] By "ethnography" I mean data constructed through "research based on the close-up, on-the-ground observation of people in real time and place, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene, act think and feel the way they do" (Wacquant 2003: 5). As indicated above, I do not mean to suggest that the object of this study can be understood as an "ethnos." Notwithstanding some of the problems inherent in the concept of ethnography (e.g., Thomas 1991), the term conveniently evokes methodological discussions within anthropology that will be important for my argument.

object.[10] By attending to the qualities of political identities and attachments, ethnography can broaden and deepen our understanding of conservative politics in a way that quantitative research cannot.

Contemporary conservatism also calls, in a more specific sense, for anthropological analysis. Susan Harding, in her work on American fundamentalist Christians, notes that "[s]ocial scientists and professed unbelievers in general do not let themselves get close enough to 'belief' to understand it, or, for that matter, even see what it is" (2000: 36). I suggest this applies to conservatism more generally. It emerges from recent history as particularly inaccessible to outsider observers—as in some sense understandable only by conversion. Anthropological analysis, which has traditionally served so well for rendering the unknown, the inarticulate or seemingly absurd intelligible in new ways, seems particularly well-suited in light of that problem. With these general remarks and queries in mind, I now turn to briefly outline the fieldwork through which I try to address them.

II. Lima, Ohio

Driving into Lima, a small city of about 39 000 inhabitants located in the north-western corner of Ohio, halfway between Toledo to the north and Columbus to the southeast, one leaves behind a long stretch of flat farmland dotted with small, quiet villages. On the outskirts of town, the road leads past a large trailer park, a recently built suburban neighborhood of modeled homes, and numerous small churches with conspicuous roadside signs, one suggesting, for instance, that "it's ok to dress casually in church—Jesus did." Nearby, and some hundred yards off the main road, the Lima Lake, a popular beach facility, sits in the middle of a large green lawn. Built in and around an abandoned coal mine shack, it is particularly memorable for the artificial blueness of the tinted water and for the prerecorded message occasionally played over the speaker system: "Please refrain from excessive displays of affection at the Lima Lake grounds."

Further on, the tall signs of one of the main commercial districts, centered on the interstate exit, crowd the roadside. There is a Wal-Mart, a grocery store, a number of small shops, a couple of motels and an assortment of fast food restaurants. Most businesses and restaurants have their own driveway and are spread out along the main road. A rusted, abandoned plastics factory looms in the distance as one approaches the city's main residential areas, which are mainly made up of small houses built in the 1950s, 1960s and

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[10] In this sense, the contribution of this study should also be viewed in light of a more general shortage of ethnographies dealing with institutional politics (e.g., Auyero and Joseph 2007, Schatz 2009).

1970s. Porches overlook each other from the sides of the wide streets. When jobs and people started moving out in the mid-1970s, houses lost value, and many were left unattended. This has been especially true of the southern part of town where a large part of Lima's African American population now lives. Many of the houses and a few entire blocks are boarded up. Yards are overgrown and porches persist in variable stages of decay. At a main crossing a large Catholic church has met a similar fate, its steeple brown with rust and a couple of the windows broken and covered up with cardboard. Just across the street, there is a newly opened evangelical storefront church with a large welcome sign in the window.

Closer to the city center lies an older, more affluent neighborhood, dominated by large, early or mid-twentieth century houses, one of which, according to a yard sign, was voted "home of the year." Approaching the railroad tracks that cut through downtown Lima, one may have to stop and wait for one of the frequent and seemingly endless freight trains to pass by. Lima, once home of Lima Locomotive Works, a renowned locomotive manufacturer, was an important Midwestern railroad hub up until the 1970s, but the last passenger train stopped here in 1990. From the railroad crossing, one can discern a corner of the abandoned ramshackle train station some hundred yards down the tracks. The city center itself is dominated by the gloomy sight of a tall building that used to be the headquarters of the now bankrupted Lima Bank. Along Main Street, however, the occasional boarded door or window is outnumbered by open businesses, a couple of restaurants and bars, an art gallery, a furniture shop, a barber.

Just around the corner lies a small "European-style" café called the Meeting Place. Reminiscent of Lima's boom town days, when the city was known regionally for its art and entertainment scene, it sometimes offers art or music programs, and serves as a hangout for the small community of local musicians and artists. Outside, the Lima plaza boasts the Stars and Stripes and a POW/MIA flag.[11] By now, however, you will have passed so many such patriotic, or otherwise political, symbols and slogans that you might not take note of them: billboards, yard signs and bumper stickers exclaiming "God Bless America," "Support The Troops," "Life Is Short—Pray Hard," "Some Things Have To Be Believed To Be Seen," "Life Is Precious," and "Real Men Love Jesus."

Through the plaza and over to the other side of town, lies regionally renowned Kewpee Hamburgers, and further on the Lima Hope Hospital, cur-

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[11] The flag represents American military personnel taken as prisoners of war (POW) or listed as missing in action (MIA). Created in 1971 by the National League of Families, it was officially recognized by the United States Congress in 1990 "as the symbol of our Nation's concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, thus ending the uncertainty for their families and the Nation" (Public Law 101-355 36 USC Sec. 902).

rently Lima's largest employer. Continuing on through the city toward its eastern outer limits, one re-encounters many of the same elements again but in roughly reversed order—an affluent neighborhood, ramshackle houses and entire blocks, a commercial district resting in the shadow of an abandoned factory building, miniature suburbia, a trailer park and then finally back to flat farm land.

Fieldwork

The City of Lima and the activist network of the Allen County Republican Party (ACRP) provide this study with a strategic vantage point for exploring contemporary conservatism. In the most general sense, the aptness of Lima is written in the rusty smokestacks and abandoned buildings of its city landscape. Moving through Lima one is inevitably oriented toward a recent past that is at once particular for the area and exemplary for processes of larger scale. With its socio-economic, ethnic and denominational makeup closely resembling regional and national averages, the city is often framed by locals as a "quintessential Midwestern blue-collar town." The history of Lima, accordingly, represents the archetypical story of Midwestern Rustbelt decline, so much so that the 2004 PBS documentary *Lost In Middle America* —the acronym of the title spelling L.I.M.A.—reviewed the decline of the Midwestern industrial economy through the prism of local history.[12] The

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[12] Allen County was founded in 1820, in connection with the establishment of the Hog Creek Reservation and the relocation of the Shawnee from the area. In 1831 Lima was officially established as county seat, and at mid-century the area was quickly gaining importance as a regional industrial center. In 1885 local businessman Benjamin C. Fourot, drilling for natural gas for his paper mill, struck oil outside of Lima. The Fourot field, the largest in the country at the time, attracted John D. Rockerfeller and Standard Oil to the city. The early twentieth century saw further economic expansion with the success of the Lima A-1 locomotive built by Lima Locomotive Works Inc. and the establishment of Superior Coach Company, at one point the world's largest manufacturer of school buses. Politically, the young century brought considerable turmoil to the city with the election of a socialist Mayor in 1912, strong Ku Klux Klan presence throughout the 1920s, and substantial local governmental reform in the early 1930s. Industrial growth came to a halt with the Great Depression but the population of Allen County continued to grow relatively quickly throughout the 1930s. As World War II, and later the Korean War, brought back demand for labor-intensive industrial products, there came new jobs and the establishment of the Lima Army Tank Plant. At mid-century Lima was a relatively prosperous industrial town. In the mid-1970s, following the post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s, the labor-intensive factories of the area started moving south. Throughout the eighties and nineties, eight to ten thousand jobs were lost locally, mainly in the automotive industry, chemicals, aerospace, and industrial and agricultural equipment manufacturing. By the year 2000, the population was down to less than 42,000 from its peak of 52,000 in the mid-1970s. In 2006 the population was down further, to an estimated 38,219. On a more positive note, unemployment was down to around ten percent from a staggering high at twenty five in 1980, but the labor market had changed during the preceding decades. Today many of the unionized industry jobs that were lost have been replaced with low-paid work in the

Rustbelt narrative—epitomizing the decline of working class identity and the emergence of rural populism in opposition to metropolitan "cultural elites"—is in turn vital for understanding contemporary conservatism. Living through economic decline and depopulation, people in Lima and places like it seem destined to worry about "the decline of American greatness" with particular intensity.[13]

Lima and Allen County are also strategically located in terms of electoral politics. The State of Ohio, to begin with, belongs to that handful of competitive "bellwether states" in which national elections are in effect largely decided. The Ohio electorate, in short, is comparatively evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, making the twenty Ohioan electoral votes a viable pursuit for candidates of both parties. In the presidential election of 2004, for instance, George W. Bush carried Ohio with just a 2.1 percent margin; had he lost Ohio, John Kerry would have become president instead.[14] This injects Ohio politics with both resources and intensity lacking in most other states. In addition to that larger dynamic, both Allen County and Lima tend to acquire a disproportionally significant role within the state of Ohio. With its reliantly conservative electorate and its relatively high turn-out, the area has the potential to sway the state in favor of the Republicans. During the election cycle of 2004, presumably for that very reason, incumbent President George W. Bush visited this modest part of the state not once, but twice. In 2006 election campaign—the period during which I carried out fieldwork in Lima—Allen County was among four counties in north-western Ohio especially targeted as a "first tier counties" in national and state Republican Party campaign efforts.[15] Lima's disproportionate importance also means that the ACRP is funded well enough to maintain a regular office with two staff.

service and retail sector. Lima has thus become something of a sub-regional hub for judicial, commercial and medical services.

[13] I took this aspect into account when choosing Lima as my field site. Using census and election data I created a list of Republican-leaning Ohioan cities of about twenty to fifty thousand people indicating dynamics typical of declining Midwestern manufacturing economy: relatively high unemployment rates, low or dropping average incomes, and a changing local job market. I settled for some fifteen prospective locations, Lima in Allen County included, and contacted the local Republican Party offices, asking them about their operations and inquiring into the possibility of a visit.

[14] According to the official tally, Bush received 50.8 and Kerry 48.7 percent of the Ohio vote. But those numbers have repeatedly been confronted with charges of voter fraud (see, for instance, the 2005 House Judiciary Committee Democratic Staff report instigated by U.S. Representative John Conyers, Jr., *Preserving Democracy: What Went Wrong in Ohio*).

[15] This was according to one of the handful of activists flown into town by the Nation Republican Party to help out with door-to-door efforts in the last days before the election.

I arrived in Lima in February of 2006.[16] The primary election season had just ended, and the ACRP was rallying its supporters with fundraisers and a high profile visit by gubernatorial candidate Kenneth Blackwell. These events introduced me to a well-established network of activists and local candidates. I quickly gained status as an official guest of the local Republican Party. During an ACRP central committee meeting Chairman Keith Cheney invited me up on the podium to introduce myself to those present. He assured them, half jokingly, that he had "looked me up" to make sure I was not a spy and he encouraged everyone to seek me out to "share their views" with me. Through this brief introduction, I effectively gained access to most of what was going on within the local party, from parades and door-to-door walks to small strategy meetings and more informal gatherings. One particularly important upshot was an invitation to a Fourth of July party that Jen, the ACRP secretary, and her husband Frank were hosting for an informal core group of party volunteers and some of their friends. From this point on, Jen and Frank came to function as primary gatekeepers to some of the essential networks constituting the field.

Through Jen, who worked at the ACRP headquarters four days a week, I could stay updated on what was going on locally, and most of my participation in ACRP activities were in some way channeled though her. All in all, the local party and the local Republican campaigns, which function autonomously to a large extent, organized some twenty events and meetings during the late summer and the fall. These occasions—typically one or two per week, but more frequently as we approached Election Day—made up the basic structure of fieldwork. These organized activities fell into two broad categories. On the one hand there were public displays of various kinds. Among these were fundraisers for Republican candidates or for the party itself: door-to-door walks, phone bank polling or candidate promotion, debates, a surprising large number of parades, and the ACRP booth at the annual week-long Allen County fair. In addition, there was a series of internal meetings. Apart from the central committee meetings already mentioned,

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[16] I arrived in Lima by a combination—familiar to most anthropologists, I suspect—of strategic decision and chance. More specifically, I arrived by detour via old Swedish settler country in and around Henry County, in western Illinois. That experience casts additional light on the advantages of working in Ohio, Lima and the ACRP. Though the Illinois site had things in its favor, networking proved difficult there. In part, this was due to the area being very sparsely populated. I would often have to drive for than an hour or more for a single interview or meeting. More importantly, local party organizations were weak, with few volunteers and high average age. This is largely due to the dominance that Chicago, a traditional Democratic stronghold with more than 2.8 million inhabitants, holds over Illinois politics. For rural conservative voters resistance is futile, at least in presidential and statewide races. In addition, the Henry County area is divided between two heavily "gerrymandered" (see footnote 46 on the geo-political dynamics of gerrymandering) congressional districts—one Democratic and one Republican by design. Facing these practical difficulties I decided to relocate, and eventually ended up in Lima.

there were strategic meeting and less formal gatherings at the local party headquarters, dealings with party officials and campaign activists coming in from the outside, and a Campaign School organized by the Ohio Republican Party in Columbus.

Conveniently, Jen's husband Frank provided inroads to complementary networks and situations. Apart from being one of the most active local Republican activists, and the moderator of a conservative political blog, Frank was the pastor of Rousculp Church of Christ, a small evangelical church on the outskirts of Lima. Weekly attendance at Sunday service and Bible study there provided me with both firsthand experience of small-scale cultural production at the intersection of faith and politics, and important contacts outside the rather small circle of Republican activists. Largely by combining Frank's and Jen's connections I could start building a network of informants that came to constitute the basis of the interactive element of fieldwork.

Face-to-face interaction, ranging from participant observation to semi-structured interviews, primarily in and around the Allen County Republicans, Rousculp Church of Christ and Lima more generally provides the main part of the empirical material drawn upon in the following. All in all, I draw on interaction with some thirty individuals, half of whom I maintained close contact with throughout the fieldwork.[17] In addition, I also attend to various forms of media. Most importantly, I collected printed, visual and audio materials put out by the ACRP and the ongoing local and regional campaigns: leaflets, mail ads, radio spots, and TV commercials. I also followed news reporting—especially, of course, political news—both local and national. This involved reading the local daily newspaper *The Lima News*, and, a bit more sporadically, the most influential state and national newspapers, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The Columbus Dispatch* and *The Toledo Blade*. I also followed TV broadcasting—*FOX News* in particular, since most of my informants did so—and a couple of political blogs, Frank's *Conservative Culture* obviously being one. Last but not least I also, again like many of my informants, frequently tuned into the local AM talk radio station with its blend of Christian music, religious talk shows and conservative commentary from Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and others.

I will occasionally also draw on second-hand sources such as demographic data or political polls to contextualize things that my informants are saying, or to orient the reader in the political issues and debates of the day. Inevitably, I also spent much of my time doing things not directly connected to

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[17] Documenting speech, I typically relied on simultaneous note-taking, but the majority of formal interviews and a few casual conversations were also recorded and transcribed. When neither recording nor note-taking was possible I reconstructed the conversation from memory to the best of my ability. Since I do not, in general, engage analytically with the specifics of speech forms beyond the level of general intention, I regard the distinction between these forms of documentation to be negligible, and do not signal it in the text.

research, sometimes with the stated intention of broadening my perspective on local life and politics, sometimes not. For instance, I took part in several Allen County Democratic Party events and meetings with some of their volunteers, I interviewed the Mayor of Lima and a political science professor at the local college, went on a police "ride-along," and attended football games with informants.

A Note on Field Relations

At one point during the evening of a Republican fundraiser held in Lima, I found myself struggling to explain to a couple of the guests what I was doing there. They were unfamiliar with social anthropology, and I opted for the easy way out, telling them that it is not that different from sociology. "Let me tell you about sociology," one of them replied, proceeding to tell us a joke he had recently picked up:

> Two sociologists are walking down the street when they see a man lying in the ditch. He has been severely beaten and is bleeding heavily. One turns to the other and says 'quick, we've got to find the person who did this—he needs help!

This joke, told and laughed at in a spirit both friendly and spiteful, draws attention to the challenges facing an anthropology of contemporary conservatism. It puts to rest any illusions of establishing some neutral ground or outside position from which processes of conservative identity formation are simply observable or assessable, and it suggests that the forms of knowledge and ethic associated with social science are unavoidably implicated in them.

Many scholars of conservatism, or other rightist movements, in the United States and elsewhere, have struggled with this methodological condition. They have, for instance, faced difficulties in getting access to research sites, problems of "establishing rapport and empathy without implying sympathy" (e.g., Blee and Creasap 2010: 278; Banks and Gingrich 2006: 11–12) and challenges in making their readers and audiences see or appreciate the distinction between understanding and advocacy (e.g., Ginsburg 1989: 223). Some, moreover, have found it difficult to bring conventional categories or logic to bear on their subject (e.g. Harding 1991, 2000; Minkowitz 1998, Connolly 2008). Taken together, such methodological complications may, according to Blee and Creasap (2010), help explain the relative scarcity of in-depth empirical work on rightist movements.

I want to introduce two sets of interconnected questions at this point. First, what are the ethnographic implications of these apparent tensions? What are the implications for the fieldworker, the fieldwork and the ethnography generated by it? Second, in what analytical mode are we to address identities and discourses that, as the sociology joke suggested, exist precisely

in opposition to forms of knowledge typically produced by social science? While trying to work through these questions remains a constant concern throughout the study, a few of initial remarks about my relationship to my field and to my informants will be useful for framing my interactions with them in the coming pages. As a point of departure I would like to take what Rynkiewich and Spradley have referred to as the "perhaps […] most fundamental ethical question" anthropologists can ask in relation to their fields: "why do we chose to study what we study?" (1981:3). Expanding on that question Laura Nader (1981) suggests that being more explicit about this fundamental choice is not just a matter of ethics but also of analytics. More particularly, clarifying the "bottom lines" of specific interests is a productive way of relating individual projects to the general development of anthropology.

At bottom line, then, the intellectual interest that animates this study revolves, in one way or another, around "otherness." It is driven by a fascination with the idea of gaining insight into politics far removed from my own. This initial sense of remoteness or distance is not, I think, just a matter of cultural, political or personal discrepancy; it also has to do with the implicit politics of anthropology as discipline—something I will have reason to return to. It suffices to note at this point that my nationality (Swedish), my politics (leftist), and my academic training (social anthropology) all predispose me to view American politics, its conservative varieties in particular, with skepticism. What gave rise to this study was the realization that I was more interested in trying to understand U.S. conservatism than in denouncing it from the safe distance of an oceanic divide.

When I arrived in Ohio in 2006 I did so expecting to run into the kind of methodological problems I mentioned above, but also with a sense that trying to work through them would be analytically important in ways I could not yet fully articulate. Indeed, the fieldwork came to be shaped, in large part, by my otherness in relation to the field. Moving through conservative circles in Lima I was, most conspicuously perhaps, a foreigner and in this capacity often assumed unable to grasp or appreciate the exceptionality of the American experience, the ideals, traditions or attitudes that make America incomparable—the distinct logic of the New World, if you will. "This is America," my informants frequently informed me, by way of simultaneously explaining and mystifying some particular point or fact. Furthermore, I was not just a foreigner, not just a descendant of "Old Europe," but Swedish, and thus almost automatically read in particular ways, Sweden vaguely connoting an ideological jumble of pacifism, secularism, atheism, hedonism, and socialism to those with basic geo-political familiarity. For a precious few informants, such associations were grounded in rather sophisticated ac-

quaintance with the politics of the "middle way."[18] For others, such associations did not go deeper than having than having picked up an anecdote of questionable origin and validity on Fox News the other night.

As already suggested, some of the associations thus assembled would, at least to a degree, be well deserved. I do indeed think of my political abode as located left of center, even in a Swedish context, I do not attend church, and I do not pray. More generally speaking, I suspect myself of having all the basic distinctions of secular liberalism, between politics and religion, knowledge and faith, private and public, thoroughly inscribed in me, to the point of having become second nature. The extent and manner in which I communicated these things varied between the different contexts and phases of fieldwork. On my first visit to Frank's Bible Study at Rousculp Church of Christ, for instance, I was immediately confronted with the option between (unconvincingly) declaring my faith and "admitting" my unbelief. Subsequently, much of my interaction with the group was shaped by my status as a potential convert. At Republican Party events I could often take a more ambiguous position on different issues. One strategy that often presented itself as practical was that of "playing the devil's advocate"—to rephrase my own thoughts in terms of what an anonymous "someone" might think or argue. This mode of conversing, I gradually realized, could facilitate a kind of suspension of familiar polarities.

Thus, I was clearly an "other" but hardly a truly imposing or threatening one. In fact, while my foreignness and nationality mainly connoted negative qualities, they also seemed to lower the stakes of conversation and introduce in it an element of vagueness, locating me simultaneously inside and outside prevailing schemes of identification and difference. This often gave me room to "play dumb" in a rather productive way. By not immediately letting on, for instance, that I was aware abortion rights was a heated issue, I could elicit an argument rather than a slogan. My sense is that my foreignness in fact was helpful throughout the course of fieldwork, both in getting access to people and situations, and in conducting productive conversations and interviews. Faye Ginsburg, in her work on abortion activist in Fargo, North Dakota, similarly notes that her status as young, unmarried and Jewish unexpectedly worked to her advantage, for instance by casting her queries as expressive of "natural curiosity" (1989: 5).

When Keith Cheney introduced me to the central committee at the Civic Centre he had done so with an encouragement to seek me out to "tell him how we do things here." I was, as it were, someone who, on account of being non-American, perhaps had not yet seen the light and been in the position to

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[18] The Swedish welfare model has often been construed as a "third" or "middle way" between (American) capitalism and (Russian) communism (Arter 2008). The notion was first popularized in the United States with the publication of Marquis W. Childs's (1936) international bestseller *Sweden: The Middle Way*.

make a truly informed decision. Along such lines, it was occasionally implied to me that I was not responsible for my view of the world, since I had been "raised that way." The exclusionary explanation that "this is America" was thus also an acquittal of sorts. Invoking nationality, differences of opinion on almost any matter could effectively be smoothed over by the amending that truly American—read conservative—ideas would not necessarily "work over there," under different demographic and historical circumstances. What was altogether clear was that the opposite applied. As I discuss in Chapter 4 for instance, debates about "socialized health care" was sometimes framed in this way: Perhaps it is a good idea—over there. Here, in America, it would never work.

A sense of distance, estrangement, or alienation nonetheless pervaded my fieldwork experience, and gradually also shaped my sense of what I was and was not learning in the field. The overriding task of everyday fieldwork was to get people to talk, and to keep talking—about Lima, local candidates and issues, current events, or American society and politics in general. While I was caught up in conversations or interviews I often rationalized what I was doing in terms of a fairly straightforward logic of "collecting" opinions, arguments or values from my interlocutors. In terms of analytical potentiality, this implies a notion of cultural analysis or critique firmly in keeping with contemporary anthropological common sense—as aimed primarily at unveiling a system of beliefs, symbols or myths in its "constructedness"— recounting its content, describing its internal architecture, locating inconsistencies, points of repression and presupposition, and so on. This discursive constructivist approach implicitly shaped my sense of daily fieldwork activities to a large extent. In the sea of words flooding over me on a daily basis I would first and foremost be required to discern patterns and recurrent themes.

Yet, I felt uncomfortable with this seemingly straightforward notion of what it was that I was doing and why. To begin with, I had a nagging sense of uncertainty about the concrete value of ethnographic knowledge in relation to my specific field and object of study. While I was certainly learning a great deal about conservative identity, ideology and culture, somehow fieldwork seemed to produce too much and too little material at the same time. In fact, from the limited standpoint of "collecting" opinions or attitudes, ethnography appears as little more than an incredibly inefficient, time-consuming, and roundabout mode of operation. There is little, if anything, by way of ideological content—arguments, ambitions, metaphors and so on— that are not readily available to me at this very instant, and from the desk where I am now sitting, courtesy of the blogosphere and conservative journalists and commentators. To state the matter plainly: Why, then, the hassle of ethnography?

Moreover, there was often something all-too-familiar about these collectables, in the sense that they conformed so eagerly to prevailing preconcep-

tions. This is not a good thing if you are compelled to try to say something interesting about them. In a sense, everyone already knows that a Republican likes his God, his guns, and his troops; that he thinks abortion is murder, and prefers church-based voluntarism to government programs. In the darkest moments of fieldwork, I felt I was merely scratching an already constituted surface of perfectly renounceable platitudes, readily available to anyone with an internet connection. Ok, so this is in fact what they believe. End of story. Ethnography did not seem to be in a position to add anything to this finished picture.

No doubt, such worries stemmed in part from the fact that most of the political "platitudes" I encountered regularly seemed so far removed from my own. Political debate across cultural and political fault lines can be very tiresome. Making it the main element of your daily social existence can be positively exhausting. Most people I met and talked to were exceptionally friendly and hospitable, and for the most part I got along with them just fine. However, in a certain sense this fact only served to intensify the core trauma of political discussion—the realization that my arguments are just as harmless to them as theirs are to me. The defense strategy most readily available in ordinary life—writing off ones adversaries as ill-informed, stupid or in bad faith—is obviously not recommendable for an ethnographer of politics.

What I gradually came to realize was that my own uneasiness in the face of the all-too-familiar had its counterpart in the experiences of my informants. Conservative politics in Lima, as I will try to show in the following, was saturated with an assumption of already knowing, of being familiar with, even to a point beyond the empirical, the political other—the liberal—as an altogether different kind of being. Analogously, I often encountered "the conservative" as a familiar type productively taken up and performed in the face of this liberal opposition, real or imagined. The experience of the tiresome and alienating predictability and flatness of political others is thus very much part of the social dynamics I am trying to describe. It is what animates polarization and avoidance of political interaction across presumably known fault lines. I will speak of this dynamic, which is evident for instance in the political biographies of conservative activists, in terms of "performative polarization."

The fieldworker, however, is not just any other, but one compelled to stay, and to actively engage in rather than avoid discourse on potentially volatile subjects. Since this already represents a break with the basic logic of polarization, my subjective experience of the field also promises to hold insights or impulses of analytical or methodological import. What is likely to happen when you remain just a moment too long among any group of people, is that they surprise you. Faced with the worrying superabundance of platitudes, your attention tends to drift precisely toward the unexpected, the ambiguous, and the unpredictable or away from the typical or the representative. Once you are attuned to the unexpected, it is always there, in the details

of biographies and anecdotes, demeanors or argumentative strategies; in a peculiar choice of wording, or an unforeseen moment of reflexivity, ambiguity or omission. Such moments have the power to suddenly break through otherwise monotonous conversation, and sometimes to hint at commonalities across difference.

In passing, it is worth noting that such openness to the unpredictable often has been listed as one of the general strengths of the ethnographic method. Marilyn Strathern, for instance, has identified "[k]eeping open a space for the unpredictable or contingent […] as one of the exclusive achievements of anthropological-style ethnography" (2000: 287). Significantly, she identifies the intricacies and ambiguities of "interaction and dialogue between persons, imagined or not" as "a crucial source of social indeterminacy" (2000: 286). Along the same lines, the predictable could perhaps conversely be associated with precisely the breakdown or avoidance of interaction and dialogue. Expanding on what I spoke of above as a resonance between my personal anxieties about fieldwork and something at work in the field itself, we might say that the foreclosure of the possibility of the unexpected or the unpredictable is the death of both social, political interaction and of ethnography. This, I argue, legitimizes a mode of paying specific attention to the unexpected as particularly appropriate to this field of study.

Analysis as Reconstruction

Differently stated, what this kind of resonance between field and fieldwork suggests is that methodological priorities are always also analytical or theoretical in nature. As Laura Nader has recently noted, "[e]thnography, whatever it is, has never been *mere* description. It is also theoretical in its mode of description. Indeed, *ethnography is a theory of description* (Nader 2012: 211, emphasis in original). By paying specific attention to the unexpected I am also emphasizing a particular analytical problem. If being conservative consists, to the degree that I think my ethnography suggests, of aspiring to be non-liberal, and if social scientific discourse is always already implicated in this perpetual work of differentiation, then this leaves the anthropologist in something of an awkward analytical position. A central difficulty here seems to revolve around the implications of establishing what may be called "critical distance" to the object of study, be it through deployment of deconstructive "cultural critique"—a tempting option when dealing with something as foreign to anthropology as American conservatism—or more conventionally, through the detachment necessary for critical thought in general.

I have in mind here not some theoretical confrontation between social scientific ideals, as in the (false) choice between explanation and understanding or critique and empathy, but an empirical observation. The point is that a certain anticipation of critique is already inscribed in the conditions of possi-

bility of the specific object under study. The critical distance implied by analysis therefore threatens to become coextensive with something internal to its object. This is precisely what I suggest with the term "performative polarization"—that certain modes of identification and thought central to contemporary conservatism are predicated on a critical gaze from the outside.

Analysis, I argue, must be driven by an aspiration to say something that could not, or perhaps more realistically, does not primarily or exclusively partake in this perpetual game of polarity. Minimally, this means salvaging, in the course of analysis, a sense of the vagueness, indeterminism, aspiration, movement, or drive that precedes the moment of ideological reduction. During fieldwork, I gradually began to think of this in terms of political "energy." In the physical world we encounter energy as a property of objects and systems that makes them move and function in specific ways. Energy as such, however, is a general phenomenon never confined to a specific object or form. Expanding on this character of generality, we may understand as sources of "political energy" those experiences and impulses that animate political ideas or attitudes without standing in any necessary relationship to them. What I have in mind is thus a mode of inquiry that on the one hand is reconstructive rather than deconstructive and on the other is wary of taking the purported views of the conservative "native" too literally. My sense is that if such a "pre-ideological" focus facilitated my subjective drive to tease out potential points of partial identification and commonality during fieldwork, it might also serve as a starting point for productive analysis under conditions of polarization.

This hardly amounts to a methodology or an analytical program, but it hints at a hierarchy of ethnographic and analytical priorities, a mode of paying ethnographic and analytical attention, by offering a set of basic reference points: "availability," "familiarity," "the unexpected," "energy." If we understand "availability" and "familiarity" as inherent to the process of performative polarization, then paying attention to "the unexpected" promises to open a space of productive understanding and analysis beyond the platitudes and polarities of already established identities and positions. I make these concerns explicit at this point not in order to promote any particular method of definite transcendence, nor to enter into a polemic against some particular incarnation of anthropology, but merely because I will try to let it inform me in the following, so that it at least it will not be entirely absent from the picture I am painting.

These considerations shape the way I approach my ethnographic material in the coming pages. On the one hand, I provisionally emphasize "emics" and "the native's point of view" as a practically viable way of short-circuiting some of the methodological problems inherent in the project as a whole. I am thus concerned with letting my informants explain things from first principles, so that both I and the reader may be "taught" the basics of

contemporary American politics from their point of view. In doing so, I am also trying to develop a mode of "listening" to my informants that does not prematurely reduce, by way of "explanation," ambiguities or indeterminacies from their speech or actions. In this way, on the other hand, I hope to show that "the emic" can eventually be deployed to problematize itself. With this mind, I now turn to formulate, more explicitly, a number of questions that the study seeks to address.

III. Conservatism, Democracy, Anthropology

This study asks three interrelated sets of questions: first, concerning U.S. conservatism itself; second, concerning its relationship to liberal democracy; and third, regarding its status as an object of anthropological inquiry.

First, and most straightforwardly, the study inquires into the persuasiveness and convictional force of contemporary U.S. conservatism. It does so by trying to understand how specific people, through particular social circumstances, interests and cognitive efforts, become invested in conservative political ideas and practices. This orientation should be read in relation to the "sociological indeterminacy" of contemporary U.S. conservatism, identified above. That indeterminacy suggests an empirical lack which the study seeks to address. It also indexes disruption and reorganization of established patterns of identification and participation. In this sense it also offers an opportunity to gain more general insights into processes whereby political subjects are formed.

In the context of this first set of questions, the study seeks to understand the usefulness of conservative politics for specific people. It is not concerned with seeking explanation in statistical correlations—important work generally unsuited for ethnographers—but with recovering some of the problems, irritations and worries that animate political practices, attitudes, and ideas. With "problems," "irritations" or "worries" I intend something that is not reducible to any definite form such as "identity," "worldview," or "ideology," but that pre-dates specific conceptualization—something that demands attention, but could be construed and engaged with in various ways. This may include, for instance, pressure extended on hierarchical social relations, but also concerns of epistemological or existential nature.

Second, and less directly, this concern with motivation and attachment locates the study within the context of enduring debates about the nature, limits and internal contradictions of secular, liberal democracy. These debates were infused with new urgency by key social and political transformations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: the decline of the real-political option between capitalism and communism, the emergence or increased visibility of various cultural and religious "fundamentalisms" on the

global arena, the subsequent decline of the "secularization thesis," the social and political challenges associated with the multicultural state and the rise of "identity politics." In light of these and related developments the regulative idea of secular, liberal democracy—that politics ideally is a matter of harmonizing contradictory interests and perspectives within a democratic framework built on "overlapping consensus" (e.g., Rawls 1987)—lost some of its self-evidence.

One important question in this context concerns the relationship between democracy and tolerance on the one hand, and political conviction and attachment on the other. The present study confronts these debates with an ethnographic account of attachment and conviction, not as unproblematically existent, but perpetually in a process of becoming. It asks what conviction is and how it is related to tolerance and plurality in practice. Given that much of recent critical engagement with liberal democracy has been advanced from leftist positions and/or on behalf of underprivileged minorities, an ethnography of challenges coming from more or less precisely the opposite direction promises, I think, to triangulate the issue in a somewhat new way.

Third, and in connection to this last point, contemporary US conservatism, as a site where "convictions," "beliefs," and "ideology," suddenly reemerged with new fervor in the late twentieth century, provides a valuable opportunity for reconsidering some of the promises and problems of political anthropology. Conservatism, precisely because it is not easily absorbed into the default moral economy of anthropology—of identifying or "giving voice" to the powerless and disenfranchised for instance (e.g., Kulick 2006)—challenges anthropological modes of understanding. Taking contemporary American conservatism seriously as a form of politics, I will argue, is thus also a way of objectifying the limits confronting political anthropology more generally. What kind of anthropology, I ask in this context, can teach us something about conservative politics?

I take the deceptively simple question "what makes it stick?" as a kind of shorthand for this threefold problematization. "Stickiness" seems to me an appropriate metaphor for what I am after, suggesting, as it does, that ideological attachment, at least in some of its dimensions, remains perceivable from the outside, and independently of subjective preference. The analysis of political ideology, it might be argued, has a tendency to beg precisely the question of what attachment actually consists of. Wary of that problem, this study seeks to find ways of getting at attachment as such. Implicit in this approach is also a temporal emphasis on the present. To some extent regardless of the causal factors involved in the emergence, establishment or institutionalization of political ideas and initiatives, their energy and appeal in the fleeting moment remains to be explained. That is what this study seeks to do.

This line of inquiry, I think, generates important insights in relation to each of the third sets of questions outlined above. First, and most substantively, it enables me to identify a particular kind of certainty at work in con-

temporary conservative politics. Drawing on political autobiographies, ongoing political interaction, and observations of local campaign work, I argue that contemporary grassroots conservatism is best understood not primarily by the literal content of its positions, but by its reflexive, ongoing efforts to believe in something in the face of doubt and uncertainty. Second, the study locates this distinct mode of certainty and attachment in relation to liberal democracy. It suggests that conservatives do not simply oppose liberalism, but rather develop a specific way of handling a tension between conviction and tolerance that is at the heart of liberal democratic politics and projects. Third, the form of certainty at work in conservative politics, I suggest, renders conventional analytical stances, like methodological relativism or cultural critique, partially problematic. As an alternative, I try to develop what might be termed a "conversational" analytical strategy that actively seeks to address conservatism in its claim to truth. This involves listening to conservatives not just for "what they think" but also for what they can tell us about general problems facing political thought and practice in the present.

The Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 (Conservatism in America) provides a conceptual and historical overview of U.S. conservatism. It notes that historians and political scientists have construed conservatism as variously antithetical to, and as basically concordant with, American political culture, and it works through some of the conceptual disorder that this divergence implies. Based on this conceptual discussion the chapter then moves on to look more closely at the recent history of conservatism in the United States, identifying five themes or trajectories as particularly important.

Chapter 2 (Doing Democracy) deals with how "the political" becomes an object of experience for activists and voters in Lima through social interaction, campaign work, and media representations. Through these experiential forms politics comes to be understood as a process of managing a plurality of already established identities, accessible through polls, maps and other kinds of media. Political elections, in extension, become dramas about "shared values," understood as propositional entities, and about "character," understood as resistibility to external pressure. This "representational ethos," the chapter argues, needs to be understood as one way of dealing with the contradictory demands of commitment and compromise that confronts the subject of democratic governance.

Chapter 3 ("Liberals Hate It!") is centered on how conservatives in Lima perceive and make use of the liberal "enemy." Drawing on autobiographies, political speeches, campaign literature, church group discussions and talk political among activists, it shows that the (re)production of conservative identity is largely characterized by an oppositional or contrarian sensibility.

In political thought and speech, this contrarian logic undermines distinctions between the literal and the figurative, the argumentative and the hyperbolic, and the sincere and the strategic. This fact, the chapter argues, implies a shift of analytic focus, away from the literal content of opinions or values, toward the energies animating them.

Chapter 4 (Political Attachments) attempts to realize this analytical shift in relation to three empirically prominent themes—war, the market and God. It uncovers worries, irritations, or genuine problems—rather than beliefs, understandings or constructions—as movers of the literal content of ideological elaboration. In dramatizing their "hawkishness," for instance, the Lima conservatives are also expressing worries about the relationship between social reflexivity, democracy and action. Analogously, the dogmas of free market ideology reveal themselves to be incantations of success and of sociability, no less than they are expressions of egotism or false consciousness. The concluding section finds religious rebirth and biblical literalism to be characteristically contemporary forms for dealing with circularities of human desire and with the prejudicial character of human understanding. By moving beyond the manifest elements of ideology in this way we may better understand both their motivational force and their gravitation toward each other.

Chapter 5 (To Believe (in Something)), draws on the previous chapters to argue that part of the appeal and energy of contemporary conservative politics lies in its capacity "to believe in something"—to take something as axiomatically true. Conservatism, the chapter suggests, needs to be understood as a particular way of coping with decidedly contemporary forms of uncertainty and undecidability. In relation to this, the chapter raises the question of how the "axiomatic" dimension of politics relates to ongoing debates about liberal democracy and tolerance, and furthermore what challenges it poses for anthropological analysis.

1. Conservatism in America

"All politics," according to a familiar American catchphrase, "is local"—grounded, that is, in the concrete, everyday concerns of the constituency.[19] For an ethnographer of politics, that notion is comforting, as it endows ethnographic research with intuitive legitimacy. Nonetheless, one of the obvious challenges in trying to understand large scale political phenomena from their local manifestations has to do with bridging the distance between micro and macro. The danger, of course, is to miss or underestimate (if not "missunderestimate") the impact that forces transcendent of any specific time or place may have on local realities, mistaking examples for singularities. "Not *all* politics is local," after all, to quote William D. Angel Jr.'s fittingly titled account of Allen County Democratic politics in the 1980s (Angel 2002). By way of strengthening the connection between micro and macro, this chapter provides a conceptual and historical contextualization of contemporary conservative politics in the United States. It concludes by restating and refining the questions posed by the Introduction in relation to that larger context.

I. Between Oxymoron and Truism

The observation that U.S. political culture is "more conservative" than other comparable Western democracies today appears almost as a truism (e.g., Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2005). Yet interestingly, the concept of conservatism has a remarkably varied history in the United States. In the mid-twentieth century, for instance, many mainstream scholars of American political history understood conservatism as marginal or even antithetical to U.S society and political culture (e.g., Hartz 1955, Trilling 1950). Indeed, in the mid-1950s the very concept of an "American conservatism" could be suggested to be nothing less than a "contradiction in terms" (Crick 1955). In retrospect, such formulations read much like expressions of wishful thinking

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[19] The phrase was supposedly coined by the influential Democratic U.S Congressman Thomas Phillip "Tip" O'Neill, Speaker of the House between 1977 and 1987.

on the part of a largely liberal scholarship. This was, after all, at the peak of southern resistance towards repeal of the Jim Crow laws.[20] Nonetheless, Bernard Crick's formulation brings home an important point: that any account of "American conservatism" needs to be specified if it is to make historical sense. In the following, I try to undertake that task of specification by tracing the transformation of "American conservatism" from oxymoron to truism during the course of half a century. This shift comprises conceptual slippage, historical reinterpretation, and substantive historical change. Outlining these changes is helpful both as a historical contextualization of the ethnographic material drawn upon in subsequent chapters, and by way of conceptual clarification.

The Liberal Consensus and "Liberal Conservatism"

The so-called "consensus" or "liberal consensus" view of American political history and culture, which briefly dominated scholarly debates in the wake of World War II, provides a useful reference point in this context. The consensus position was perhaps formulated most forcefully by Louis Hartz in his (1955) classic *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Hartz argued that in the absence of feudal aristocracy on the one hand, and of a self-conscious working class on the other, the United States had developed into the liberal society par excellence. To a certain extent, his analysis was animated by an observation made by Alexis de Tocqueville: that American democracy—in which Tocqueville sought "an image of democracy itself" (de Tocqueville 2004 [1835]: 15)—was preconditioned on a conspicuous absence of landed aristocracy. In the New World, Tocqueville observed, the egalitarianism of the immigrants had conspired with geographical circumstances and emerging social and political conditions to produce a situation that was eminently hostile to the acquisition and maintenance of hereditary property. In extension to this, Louis Hartz and the consensus scholars argued that the social conditions for the emergence of any real opposition to liberal democracy simply did not exist in the United States. On this view the principal distinctions and conflicts of American political life were best seen as internal to liberalism—"not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition" of the United States in the mid-twentieth-century (Trilling 1950: ix).

The marginal place accorded to conservative traditions was largely carved out in opposition to the perspective of so-called "progressive historians" who had dominated the first half of the century and for whom conservatism had

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[20] The Jim Crow laws were local and state laws enacted in the South between 1875 and 1965, which mandated racial segregation of public facilities, like schools, public places and public transportation.

in fact occupied a central place.[21] In the progressive interpretative scheme, according to historian Alan Brinkley (1994), American history was seen as a struggle between popular democracy and anti-democratic interests. Their view of conservatism, accordingly, was an overly constricted one, "focused almost exclusively on economic elites and their efforts to preserve wealth and privilege (Brinkley 1994: 410). The consensus scholars, to the extent that they paid attention to conservatism, recognized the shortcoming of this constricted view. They acknowledged the existence of a popular, grassroots Right, but generally assumed, as Lionel Trilling, in an oft-quoted passage put it, that

> the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some iso-
> lated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only
> in action or in irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas.
> (Trilling 1950: ix)

The consensus scholarship thus largely replaced the constricted view of conservatism advanced by the progressive historians with a tendency "to explain much of American conservatism as if it were a kind of pathology—a 'paranoid style,' 'symbolic politics,' a product of 'status anxiety'—an irrational or semi-rational aberration from a firmly established mainstream" (Brinkley 1994: 412). Amplifying "tendencies of the popular press" influential scholars like Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset upheld the image of America as a fundamentally liberal society by casting "the Right as a marginal, embattled remnant fighting a losing battle against the forces of progress" (McGirr 2001: 7).

The consensus argument, not least in Hartz's rendition, is interesting because it confronts the contemporary reader with the sort of conceptual problem that I hinted at above. For as even a casual observer of contemporary U.S. politics can see, what presently counts as "conservatism" typically has little to do with hereditary estates or the privileges of European aristocracy. It is thus clear that "conservatism" might be, and has been, taken to mean very different things. Hartz and the liberal consensus scholars primarily worked with a definition reflecting the classic European conservative tradition stemming from Edmund Burke. Current popular usage reflects instead a semantic relationship between "conservatism" and "liberalism" that was stabilized during the New Deal, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt successfully appropriated the term "liberalism" for a political project which drastically expanded state power (Green 1987: 125).[22] To a certain extent,

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[21] Charles Beard, Vernon Parrington, and Frederick Jackson Turner were some of the most prominent scholars associated with the progressive school (see e.g., Hofstadter 1968).
[22] Roosevelt argued for instance that "[t]he true conservative seeks to protect the system of private property and free enterprise by correcting such injustices and inequalities as arise from it […] Liberalism becomes the protection for the far-sighted conservative […] I am that kind

the transformation of the idea of "American conservatism" from something of an oxymoron into something of a truism can therefore be understood in terms of a conceptual shift. What those who conceived of "America" and "conservatism" as mutually exclusive meant by "conservatism" is not what is commonly meant today.

The concept of conservatism, one should note in connection to this, has long caused considerable definitional confusion among political philosophers and scientists. The basic problem is evident in the term itself. On the one hand, we are dealing with an "-ism"—some sort of systematic whole of ideas, teachings or propositions. On the other hand, the term offers no specification but a reference to "conservation"—the activity of resisting or delaying a process of decay or decomposition. This ambiguity opens up two diverging definitional possibilities, reflected in much of the literature on conservatism: one that emphasizes a particular positive substance or ideational content, and a second that stresses the "positional" nature of conservatism or its preference for conservation. Taken to their logical extremes both these strategies lead to problems, the former because it is "too narrow," and the latter because it is "too broad" (Muller 1997: 23). In terms of positive content, there is little to go by but "original intent" and one ends up with references to European feudalism and natural hierarchy. As a consequence, very little outside that original setting can legitimately lay claim to the term "conservatism." Conversely, taken in the second sense of an attitude, "conservatism" becomes attachable to anything. It applies equally well to Marxists, fascists or theocrats, as long as they are arguing for a political system already in place. None of these options can do justice to the intuition that there is something distinctly "conservative" about diverse politics in different times and places.

Understanding this general conceptual problem helps makes sense of the consensus argument and of some of the conceptual confusion specifically surrounding the notion of American conservatism. First, it is clear that

> [w]hen conservatism is defined as the defense of a landed nobility, monarchy, and the established church, the absence of such institutions in the United States after 1776 (and indeed largely before that) makes the notion of American conservatism a contradiction in terms. (Muller 1997: 146)

In the second, positional sense, on the other hand, one could readily speak of an American tradition of "liberal conservatism," since in the United States "liberalism had no feudal history to combat but was itself the ethos to be conserved" (Steinfels 1979: 3). Louis Hartz himself noted something along these lines, writing that what American conservatives in fact were trying to

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of conservative because I am that kind of liberal (Franklin D. Roosevelt cited in Green, 1987: 125).

conserve was a rather liberal society, based on contract, the market and limited government (Hartz 1955: 57). Thus, the substantive disagreement between the consensus view and its critics is less marked than one might first assume. Alan Brinkley, one of those critics, concedes "at least some truth" to Hartz's argument, adding that one of the reasons

> for the inattention of historians [to conservatism] may be that much of American conservatism in the twentieth century has rested on a philosophical foundation not readily distinguishable from the liberal tradition, to which it is, in theory, opposed. (Brinkley 1994: 415)[23]

Nonetheless, as Brinkley goes on to note, "[t]here are other powerful currents running through conservative thought, currents […] that are not libertarian at all but intensely normative" (1994: 419), for instance, southern white supremacism, fundamentalism and other conservative strands of Christianity.

Conservatism as an Ongoing Pattern

It remains somewhat unclear from Brinkley's discussion, however, by what conceptual construct the convergence of these "other currents" and "liberal conservatism" might be understood. On this point, the work of Jerry Z. Muller (1997, 2000) seems to me particularly helpful. On the one hand, Muller argues, conservatism cannot be defined by the institutional arrangements conservatives in fact have defended, for they have varied greatly. The positional definition, on the other hand, underestimates the continuity of conservative thought. Instead, conservative social and political thought is in Muller's view best characterized as a "recurrent constellation of assumptions, predispositions, arguments, themes, and metaphors"—none of which are exclusive to conservatives or shared by all of them (1997: 8–9).

Among the key conservative "assumption and dispositions" highlighted by Muller, the perhaps most fundamental is an emphasis on human imperfection—biological, emotional and not least cognitive. Human fallibility means for the conservative that "liberation," at least taken in isolation, cannot be the overarching political goal; the authoritative institutions, customs, habits, and prejudices of particular times and places, rather than universal rights or contractual arrangements, constitute the basic preconditions of human co-existence (1997: 10–13). In light of this, conservatives have tended to be critical of "abstraction," "rationalism" and "theory" in political matters.

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[23] "Libertarian conservatism," Brinkley suggests in this connection, has appeared to a largely liberal community of scholars as "simply a rigid and unreflective form of assumptions that that liberals themselves share, not a fundamental or intellectually important challenge to the reigning political assumptions of American life" (Brinkley 1994: 417).

Existing institutions, conservatives have been inclined to argue, have "latent functions," likely to be overlooked by even the most perceptive mind, and likely to give rise to unintended negative consequences, if tampered with (1997: 7–8, 14–18). On this point, Muller quotes Hans Blumenberg to good effect: "What the term 'institution' conveys is, above all, a distribution of the burden of proof. Where an institution exists, the question of its rational foundation is not, of itself, urgent, and the burden of proof always lies on the person who objects to the arrangement the institution carries with it" (Blumenberg 1985: 166, quoted in Muller 1997: 7).

Two points of Muller's broader discussion deserves particular note in this context. First, Muller emphasizes a distinction—"often elided in conservative self-representations" (1997: 5)—between orthodoxy and conservatism. While the first defends institutions and practices simply because they are assumed to be metaphysically true, the latter does so because of their usefulness, which is typically assumed on the basis of their mere existence or historical persistence. This also means that Muller refuses the common characterization of conservatism as an enemy of the Enlightenment. Rather, conservatism is one movement within it. The conservative argument itself unfolds on "the enlightened grounds of the search for human happiness, based on the use of reason" (1997: 4).

As Muller notes, this broad conceptualization supports the insight that "conservatism has been an ongoing pattern in American political and social thought, going back at least to the founding of the republic" (1997: 146). If *The Declaration of Independence* and it author, Thomas Jefferson, is

> paradigmatic of the nonconservative elements of the founding […] [t]he more conservative elements of the founding are represented by the Constitution and by the authors of the Federalist Papers, John Jay, Alexander Hamilton and above all James Madison. (Muller 1997: 147)[24]

Key among Madison's, Hamilton's and Jay's concerns was the introduction of mechanisms insulating the federal government from the momentary passions of the people.[25] Most notably, the proposed and later ratified Constitution ensured that neither president, senators nor Supreme Court justices were to be elected directly by the citizens: the president was to be chosen by an Electoral College, the Senate by state legislators and the Supreme Court by

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[24] The Federalist Papers (or the The Federalist) were a series of eighty-five articles and essays written by Jay, Hamilton and Madison under the pseudonym of "Publius." They were published in 1787 and 1788 with the overarching goal to convince the citizens of New York to ratify the United States Constitution (e.g., Ball 2003).

[25] The debate over the Constitution was organized not around the term "democracy," but around the ideal of the "republic." Democracy, in the late eighteenth century was understood as a corrupt form of class rule. Republicanism connoted instead rule on behalf of the people. (Ball 2003: xix–xx)

the executive branch.[26] To relate this back to Muller's conceptual discussion, the defenders of these aspects of the U.S. Constitution were trying to ensure that the "imperfections" of human nature would not have too much sway over the political process. They did so by establishing strong institutions resistant to rapid change. Similar or related concerns have later been prominent, for instance, in the Whig Party (Muller 1997: 153–166), and in the neoconservative movement (to which I will return shortly). Conservatism appears, in Muller's account, not as marginal but central to American political life.

Hierarchy and "Democratic Feudalism"

More recently, political scientist Corey Robin has proposed an alternative conceptualization of the unity of conservatism that may usefully be compared with the positions detailed above. "Conservatism," Robin writes,

> is the theoretical voice of animus against the agency of the subordinate classes. It provides the most consistent and profound argument as to why the lower orders should not be allowed to exercise their independent will, why they should not be allowed to govern themselves or the polity. (Robin 2011a: 7)

In terms of substance, Robin sees conservatism as based on a dedication to the principle of hierarchy. Conservatives valorize hierarchy, most straightforwardly for the privileges it bestows on individuals and classes, but also for the "distinction that power brings to the world" (2011a: 16). More specifically, conservatism rises in defense against challenges to established forms of hierarchy and authority. This is what gives it its situational character; as subordinate uprising takes different forms in different times and places, so must the resistance. Conservatism must thus be understood as a "theme with variations." This, according to Robin, helps us better understand

> what brings together in postwar America that unlikely alliance of the libertarian, with his vision of the employer's untrammeled power in the workplace; the traditionalist, with his vision of the father's rule at home; and the statist, with his vision of a heroic leader pressing his hand upon the face of the earth. (2011a: 16)

What these unlikely associates share, then, is a dedication to hierarchy. An important question that immediately arises at this point is whether this understanding repeats the sort of conflation of conservatism with elite interests

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[26] The Electoral College system has subsequently gone through several mayor revisions. Popular election of U.S. Senators was standardized in 1913 with the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, while executive appointment of Supreme Court Justices remains in place.

which "constricted" the analysis of the progressive historian (see above). Several commentators have criticized the book on similar grounds (e.g., Berman 2011; Lilla 2012). On the other hand, Robin invests a great deal of effort into showing how "the masses"—those who do not stand to gain directly from the conservative project—become invested in it, not just through symbolic association with the ruling classes, but more importantly by being "provided real opportunities to become faux aristocrats themselves in the family, the factory, and the field" (2011a: 35), a phenomenon that Robin suggestively terms "democratic feudalism." This last point, it seems to me, is the central point of Robin's analysis.

Robin's argument again addresses the question of the very applicability of the concept of conservatism in the contemporary U.S. context. One of its polemical targets is what Robin elsewhere has called "the meme of conservatism-betrayed-by-conservatives" (2011b)—the idea that "real conservatism" is by definition respectable, cautious, calm, quiet, and partial to the familiar, and that the ideological zealotry and counterrevolutionary zeal of contemporary conservatives puts their use of the term into question.[27] But this is historically inaccurate, argues Robin; conservative resistance against rising demands for equality, from Edmund Burke onward, always had this counterrevolutionary zeal, modeled on the radicalism of its opposition. As the recent debate surrounding this argument demonstrates, the conceptual question remains very much an open one, with far-reaching consequences for how one reads the political present.

II. The New Right: Five Trajectories

Conceptual issues and ideological taxonomy aside, conservatism also simply grew more influential in U.S. politics over the course of the last seventy years or so.[28] By way of historical contextualization, I now turn to briefly consider some of the major components of that general development. I identify five partially overlapping themes or trajectories—presented below in roughly chronological order—as particularly important: a growing interest in conservative ideas among intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s; the unraveling of the Democratic coalition over race and social issues from the 1960s

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[27] See, for instance, Sullivan (2006) for a systematic formulation of that argument.

[28] While much of the scholarship on American conservatism is characterized by an emphasis on the latter half of the twentieth century, and while I am confined to such an emphasis by both ability and space, its limits should be acknowledged. Historian Leo Ribuffo, for instance, argues that "with rare exceptions, participants in the current scholarly rediscovery of conservatism begin the story roughly 160 years too late […] The history of American conservatism is just as *long* and just as *complicated* as the history of radicalism of liberalism" (2003: 166–167, italics in original).

onward; the ascendance of "the neocons" in the 1960s and 1970s; the rise of the New Christian Right in the 1970s and 1980s; and the debate over "working-class conservatism" spurred by George W. Bush's presidency in the early 2000s. While this historical detour is far from exhaustive, it offers the reader a map by which to make sense of the ethnographic materials presented in subsequent chapters.

Burke in America

Ironically, at the very peak of the liberal consensus in the mid-1950s a self-consciously conservative intellectual movement was emerging in the United States around figures like Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss and William F. Buckley Jr. (Sigmund 2001: 2629). Russell Kirk, in his widely read *The Conservative Mind* (1953)*,* proposed Edmund Burke, as opposed to John Locke, as the philosophical model for American society. The American Revolution, Kirk argued, had been essentially conservative in spirit—pessimistic about human nature and suspicious of the idea of unlimited progress. Much of the United States Constitution, with its system of "checks and balances," Kirk noted, was aimed at debilitating precisely the sort of political grandeur that he saw as characteristic of Roosevelt's New Deal and of post-war America. Following Burke, Kirk's vision for American society belonged to the classic conservative tradition that was deemed external to the American experience by the "consensus" scholars. Significantly, Kirk saw communism and capitalism as aspects of the same dynamic, arguing, for instance, that "Rockefeller and Marx were merely two agents of the same social force" (1953: 445). Traditional, small-scale sociality, based on divinely sanctioned social roles and distinctions, in Kirk's mind, stood in equal opposition to both. While this streak of nostalgia branded him as something of an eccentric—one critic, for instance, thought he sounded like "a man born one hundred and fifty years too late and in the wrong country" (quoted in Nash 1998: 183)—some of the ideas that Kirk developed became widely influential, albeit not seldom taken out of context "to promote agendas that would have been foreign to his thinking and nature" (McDonald 2004: ix). Crucially, Kirk provided American conservatives with an identity and a history that they had been lacking (Nash 1998: 67).

One of the most consequential figures to draw on Kirk was William F. Buckley Jr., founder and long-time editor of the *National Review*—arguably the most influential conservative magazine in the United States to this day. As reflected in its name, Buckley's magazine sought to fashion a national movement from existing conservatisms—in the mid-fifties still "a hubbub of regional doctrines" (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2005: 50). The ideological innovation involved in that project became known as "fusionism." "Fusionism," in Sara Diamond's (1995) words, "was the historical juncture at

which Right-wing activists and intellectuals focused, diversely, on the libertarian, moral–traditionalist, and emerging anticommunist strains of conservative ideology, recognized their common causes and philosophies and began to fuse their practical agendas" (p. 29). Departing from Kirk's more nostalgic approach, Buckley, together with co-editor Frank Meyer, employed capitalism in the conservative cause, arguing that the free market was a better promoter of traditional morality than government could ever be. Contrary to a common perception, Meyer (1964) wrote, traditionalists and libertarians are in implicit agreement with each other, differing only in their respective emphasis on "individualism and freedom" or "virtue and order." Individualism, according to this view, requires grounding in absolute values, just as virtue requires exercise of individual choice. Buckley and Meyer was thus able to draw on multiple sources of intellectual energy and discontent with the status quo, from the kind of traditionalism that Kirk represented to the neo-classical economic theory emerging from the Chicago School.

Especially in light of the abovementioned debate about the usefulness of the concept of conservatism in the American context, the remediation of the classical conservative tradition which occurs with Buckley and others stands out as a key moment—"a breakthrough ideological transformation" (Diamond 1995: 29)—in the American conservative movement's history.[29] Perhaps one could say that at that moment the question regarding "American conservatism" is finally put to rest by the emergence of a truly *American* conservatism, one that no doubt has elements of the liberal conservatism referred to above, but that also draws on more distinctly conservative themes. Trying to make sense of this hybrid form, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge measure it against an enumeration of six principles of classical Burkeian conservatism: "a deep suspicion of the powers of the state; a preference for liberty over equality; patriotism; a belief in established institutions and hierarchies; skepticism about the idea of progress; and elitism." The exceptionalism of modern American conservatism, Micklethwait and Wooldridge further suggest, "lies in its exaggeration of the first three and the contradiction of the last three" (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2005: 13–15).

While some of these distinctions seem excessively crude—as I try to show in the coming pages, for instance, "patriotism" or "optimism" cannot simply be taken at face value—they nonetheless provide us with some basic coordinates for considering what was set into motion on the American intel-

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[29] Though it may be worth to keep in mind, as Lisa McGirr (2001) notes in her survey of conservative grassroots activism in Orange County in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, that "[w]hile national right-wing intellectuals battled over the relative weight of 'individual freedom' versus 'order and authority,' Orange Countians […] forged a movement that meshed the moral impulses of the normative conservatives and their emphasis on religion and order with the free-market radicalism and the libertarians" (163).

lectual Right in the mid-fifties and early sixties. These ideas had yet to make a lasting impact on the intellectual climate, let alone on the larger political landscape, but intellectuals with different pedigrees and causes were increasingly drawing on different facets of classical conservatism, typically combining them with liberal ideas, to formulate positions outside the liberal consensus proposed by Louis Hartz and others.

The "Southern Strategy" and Beyond

Having just signed the Civil Rights Act into law in 1964, Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson supposedly turned to one of his aides with a bleak electoral prophecy: "I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come" (quoted in Kotz 2005: 154). The scene has often been taken to capture something essential about the electoral dynamics of racial politics in United States during this consequential period. During the course of just few years in the first half of the 1960s, the politics of race acquired party connotations it had not had previously.[30] Despite the fact that the Republican Party had provided bigger margins in Congress than the Democrats for both the Civil Rights Act and the subsequent Voting Rights Act (Edsall and Edsall 1991: 61), the lasting impression left on the American public by the controversies surrounding the legislation was that the responsibility for it was owned by the party of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. From an electoral perspective, this was a problem for President Johnson since white southerners, who were largely opposed to civil rights, represented one of the "three legs" of the Democratic coalition constructed during the New Deal (e.g., Abramowitz 2010).

Forces within the Republican Party concurrently worked to strengthen these emergent dynamics. A few years before the Civil Rights Act was passed, during Richard Nixon's presidential bid against John F. Kennedy in 1960, Republican campaign strategists had had begun setting the terms for the (in)famous Republican "southern strategy." The idea behind it was simple enough. By heightening tensions over race and other "social issues" within the Democratic coalition—especially in the South—Nixon and other Republican candidates would be able to construct a durable majority. Ironically, it was with Barry Goldwater's catastrophic presidential bid against Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 that the effects of the southern strategy were first evident. Goldwater, one of only eight Republican senators who had

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[30] When, for instance, in 1962, pollsters had asked the American people which party they thought was most likely to "help negroes get fair treatment in jobs," 22.7 percent said Democrats and 21.3 percent said Republicans, with the rest having no opinion. By late 1964, only two years later, those numbers had changed dramatically. Now, 66 percent of the voters thought the Democrats where most likely to do so, while only 7 percent picked the Republicans (Edsall and Edsall 1991: 36; see also Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2005: 52–54).

voted against the Civil Rights Act in 1964 (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2005: 54), made "states' rights" the central issue of his campaign. Significantly, that included the right of southern states to keep the Jim Crow laws intact. While an overwhelming majority of American voters found Goldwater's message disagreeable (Lyndon Johnson won the general election by a historic margin, carrying 61 percent of the popular vote and 44 of the 50 states), his defeat helped pave the way for future Republican victories by shifting the party's geographical base south- and westward—precisely in the direction in which Americans had been moving for decades. The South is still thoroughly Republican.[31]

It is worth noting, however, that the strong emphasis on the South which has characterized much of the scholarship on the civil rights movement and the white backlash may be partially misleading. As for instance Lassiter and Crespino (2010) argue, the backlash dynamic mobilized not only racial extremists in the South but also moderates across the country, largely through "proxy issues" like suburban rights, residential zoning and school busing. If, for instance, we bracket the distinction between de facto and de jure housing segregation it becomes apparent that many of the concerns that motivated white southerners also motivated people in suburban neighborhoods in the North, Midwest and West. By overlooking such similarities, historians and political scientists have been able to craft a historical narrative of racism as either overcome, or as sustained only by a racist minority.[32] Moving beyond the simple North/South juxtaposition Lassiter and Crespino suggest that the white backlash is better understood as a national rather than a regional phenomenon.

According to Joseph Lowndes (2008), the conventional backlash story is also flawed in a perhaps more fundamental way. The idea of backlash itself, Lowndes argues, is too dependent on a notion of political interests as given. "Politics," he writes, "is not merely the realm where preexisting interests, grievances and passions are given expression. Rather, it is through politics that interests, grievances, and passions are forged and new collective identities created" (2008: 4). To read the growth of modern American conservatism primarily as a series of reactions against excessive reform efforts—racial and otherwise—is to underestimate the extent to which those interests

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[31] It is worth noting, however, that Barack Obama carried North Carolina in 2008.

[32] Lassiter and Crespino (2010) usefully compare the canonized "Little Rock Crisis" of 1957 (following the enrollment of nine African-America students to the racially segregated Little Rock Central High School of Little Rock, Arkansas) to similar, but less well-known events in Levittown, Pennsylvania, in the same year (sparked by William and Daisy Myers' move into an all-white community). Why is it, Lassiter and Crespino ask, that Little Rock is remembered while Levittown is not? Part of the answer, they suggest, is that that Little Rock lends itself to a "morality play" of discrimination overcome through the enforcement of desegregation legislation, while Levittown belongs to a system of de facto segregation that remains very much in place.

and identities are products of a history of contingent political action and conflict—in short, that "it could have happened differently" (2008: 161). The backlash story, Lowndes interestingly notes, was first conceived of as a Republican political strategy—by Kevin Phillips (1969)—but eventually became a truism embraced by liberals and radicals too, thus circumventing the "politically possible."

Lowden's alternative historical narrative emphasizes the ways in which southern racial resentment, interacted with populism and other political themes and identities, and was propelled into the national arena. From the outset, it looked to the north and to the national stage for possible allies—opponents to the New Deal with different, but possibly overlapping or linkable concerns. Northern conservatives—Lowden points to the circle around William F. Buckley's *National Review* as a primary example—were increasingly oriented southward for similar reasons. Through their interactions, an "emergent associative chain" (2008: 159) linking populism, racial resentment and conservative economic policy began to form.

> [N]othing necessarily links the positions of states' rights, more punitive sentencing, opposition to welfare, neoliberal economics, and 'family values' into one political identity. Actors began articulating these themes into an associative chain in opposition to the New Deal order. (2008: 157)

Three Republican presidential campaigns and administrations became particularly important for how this came about—Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and Richard Nixon. Barry Goldwater was the first presidential candidate to draw on some of these emerging associations in 1960. The overtly racist campaigns of George Wallace in 1964 and 1968 began to construct a broader populist appeal for southern racial resentment by linking it to "the fears and desires experienced by many white southerners and northern working-class white ethnics threatened by neighborhood and job integration" (2008: 8). Finally, Richard Nixon's campaign and administration, which carefully avoided overt racism, could draw on these different strands of racial resentment, economic conservatism, and populism to envision a coherent identity capable of claiming majoritarian status. This became possible through the rhetorical construction of an abstract conflict between what Nixon famously called the "Silent Majority" or "Middle America"—"people under attack by an invasive federal government, threatened by crime and social disorder, discriminated against by affirmative action, and compromised by moral and cultural degradation," and the liberal state, encompassing "liberal elites, people of color, the urban poor and others claiming 'special rights'" (2008: 159). While Goldwater, Wallace and Nixon all failed in institutional terms their lasting legacy was the construction of this kind of opposition, which became the basis for later Republican victories, most notably perhaps that of Ronald Reagan.

The Neocons

The term "neoconservative," today frequently used as more or less synonymous with "the New Right" or "contemporary conservatism," originally referred to something rather more specific—a trend of reorientation, among former liberals, socialist and Trotskyites, toward certain aspects of conservatism. The term seems to have originated as a derogative for liberal defectors, initially resisted by them, but subsequently largely accepted and lived up to (Drolet 2011: 14). Like the developments associated with Kirk and Buckley during the fifties and sixties, what became known as "neoconservatism" was primarily a development among intellectuals, many of them prominent writers and social scientists of their day—Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, among others.

In the late 1960s, they became part of the reaction against what they perceived as the excesses of the radical counterculture. Interestingly, as Peter Steinfels (1979) has pointed out, both the counterculture and neoconservatism initially saw themselves as defenders of the liberal society. While sixties radicalism aimed at making a liberal society cease acting illiberally,

> the neoconservatives […] set out to defend liberalism from the radicals' attack. As they did so, however, they were faced with the question, why had a liberal society produced a wave of political criticism which they perceived […] as so illiberal and destructive? Having begun as defenders of liberalism they too ended, to some degree, as critics of it. (Steinfels 1979: 3–4)

Initially at least, many of the "neocons," resisted the characterization of themselves as moving away from liberal causes. "Correcting course in a storm is a way of staying the course," as Daniel Patrick Moynihan stated the matter (quoted in Steinfels 1979: 2). This, again, illustrates the conceptual discussion referred to above. The neoconservatives started, at least according to themselves, from liberal principles. But to realize those principles, they argued, social stability, in some measure, is a precondition. Stability is a prerequisite for justice, rather than the other way around (Steinfels 1979: 53–54). By that route neoconservatives came to revisit problems and themes with perhaps more classically conservative pedigrees, asking, for instance, how morality is possible without religion and whether affluence perhaps undermines virtue. Moreover, once "a neoconservative movement" was in becoming, its emergent alliances came to influence some of its position (Steinfels 1979: 12). An initially "positive stance toward the New Deal and a 'practical' attitude toward government intervention in the economy," for instance, was soon replaced by a more "pro-business" approach reminiscent of that of other critics of liberalism (1979: 10). In part, perhaps, through this process of streamlining, neoconservatism gained relatively quickly "a remarkably unified thrust in its arguments" (Steinfels 1979: 15).

According to Steinfels, five stances—three analytical and two strategic—characterized the early neoconservative agenda (1979: 53–69). First, the neoconservatives argued that the United States, like the West more generally, was living through a crisis of authority, and that confidence in leading elites was in decline to the peril of social stability. Second, they saw that crisis largely as a crisis of values. It was grounded not in socioeconomics but in the "adversary culture" of a "new class" of intellectuals and professionals active in the media, government and "knowledge industries." Third, they thought the government had attempted to do too much, indeed often promising or encouraging a demand for the impossible, thus undermining its own authority. Fourth, they argued that government power was to be used cautiously to relieve destabilizing social tension but, crucially, in ways that would shield the legitimacy of that power from the undermining effect of failure. Accordingly, "when nothing works [neither government nor market], the market has the advantage of not providing the citizen with anyone to blame" (Steinfels 1974: 64). Fifth, in terms of foreign policy, neoconservatism argued for renewed emphasis on the "Communist threat" and on the spread of American values, in opposition to what it perceived as a growing culture of appeasement within the United States after the Vietnam War.

These ideas were gradually absorbed into mainstream politics through magazines like *Public Interest* and *Commentary*, and through the rapidly growing sector of well-funded conservative think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation. Through these channels, and through numerous high-profile political appointments, notably in Ronald Reagan's and George W. Bush's administrations, neoconservative influence has remained remarkably stable through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, particularly in foreign policy debate (Drolet 2011).

It should be emphasized how far from their supposedly liberal roots the neoconservatives in fact travelled. Jean-François Drolet's (2011) analysis of the movement's history and ideology captures this particularly well. Against what he sees as a misguided tendency to take neoconservatives at their word, Drolet seeks to demonstrate that "American neoconservatism is not a conservative *variant* of liberalism but a *reaction* to liberal modernity and the cultural forces the latter generates" (Drolet 2011: 8, italics in original). Tracing the philosophical sources of neoconservatism via Leo Strauss, through Carl Schmitt and Thomas Hobbes, Drolet emphasizes the authoritarian dimension of neoconservative thought. Human life, in the neoconservative conception, gains its meaning through an unconditional existential commitment to a communal notion of the good. It falls upon an authoritative state to foster and uphold such commitments, particularly through its capacity to identify "an enemy foil" against which the communal good can "bring itself into relief" (Droplet 2011: 202). It is against this ideological backdrop, according to Drolet, that neoconservative influence on the George W. Bush

presidency and the "Bush doctrine" of preemptive war must be understood. Bush's "war on terror," for the neoconservatives, was not just an instrumental necessity, but an opportunity for the emergence of "a new myth of struggle and enmity that would save the republic from decadence" (Droplet 2011: 147). "Struggle" and "sacrifice," in this view, are not necessary evils but essential sources of national reinvigoration. As Drolet emphasizes, this militaristic political existentialism "constitutes a radical negation of liberal Enlightenment philosophy" (Drolet 2011: 202).

The New Christian Right

Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, has played and continues to play a significantly more central political role in the United States than in most other Western democratic countries, not least since the early twentieth century. Yet it is also true that its sustained influence has gone through phases of relative rise and decline (e.g., Fogel 2000, see also Chapter 4). One such wave of intensification and influence occurred in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, roughly since the 1960s or 1970s onward. Following what Susan Harding (2000) has called a "long desert walk," lasting roughly from the mid-1920s and throughout the middle half of the century, Christian evangelicals and Fundamentalists re-emerged with new-found energy, launching their concerns into public life, swaying elections and public opinion.

The "long desert walk" itself might be seen as an episode of an ongoing conflict between Christian traditionalists and atheists—or more recently secular modernists—that has characterized American political life from the founding of the Republic. Tensions entered into a particularly intense phase in the early twentieth century, and was brought to a dramatic symbolic culmination with the famous Scopes Trial—sometimes referred to as the "Monkey Trial"—in the summer of 1925. One of the key venues of the conflict was the educational system. Fundamentalist Christians had been working to ban evolutionary theory from schools, and in Tennessee, with the passing of Butler Act of 1925, they managed to do precisely that. The act, which prohibited teachers from denying the biblical account of human origins, was challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The union duly financed a test case in which John Scopes, a high school teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, intentionally violated the law and urged his own prosecution.

The trial, which drew intense national media coverage, pitted two high-profile lawyers—Clarence Seward Darrow, a leading member of the ACLU, for the defense, and William Jennings Bryan, three-time presidential nominee for the Democratic Party, for the prosecution—against each other in the showdown the nation had been waiting for. Both sides took the opportunity to present the issue at hand at its utmost level of generality, and in one of the

trial's most spectacular moments Darrow called Bryan, himself a self-professed Fundamentalist, to the stand to submerge him to a detailed and humiliating theological cross-examination, flaunting the arbitrariness and inconsistency his views. Despite Darrow's feat John Scopes was found guilty, but was almost immediately acquitted on a procedural technicality.

More importantly, however, the publicity war was an undeniable success for the ACLU and the secular Modernists. The national media showed little but scorn for Fundamentalism, or for the "rednecks" and "hillbillies" of Dayton, Tennessee, for that matter. They successfully constructed the trial as a confrontation between reason and superstition, progress and reaction, and future and past. In retrospect, the Scopes Trial appears as a key event in the American nation's constitution of itself as a modern, secular, rational and progressive state. In the long-staying battle over religion, secular modernism had walked away with the victory, leaving its opponent in ruins.

At least this is the way the story goes. But as Susan Harding has shown, what emerged in the aftermath of Scopes is better understood as an asymmetrical truce based on a "tacit contract" of non-confrontation. One of the effects of this truce was "the illusion, especially widespread among the nation's intelligentsia, that conservative, Bible-believing Protestantism—that is, Fundamentalism—was unchanging, homogenous, and gradually disappearing" (Harding 2000: 75). In fact, literalist Bible belief continued to flourish during the middle half of the century, "becoming more heterogeneous, urban, upwardly mobile, educated" (2000: 75). Moreover, evangelicals and Fundamentalists continued to engage in political matters, for instance in the anti-Communist crusades of the 1950s, on the part of southern segregation in the 1960s, and in controversies over school curriculum in the 1960s and 1970s (2000: 78).

What happened after Scopes, Harding suggests, was that Christian activism conformed itself to the basic premises of secular modernity. Christian activists, in the period after Scopes, tended to either police their own speech and activity, avoiding overtly mixing religion and politics, or when they did cross that line, they did so "in ways that actively sustained the story of secular modernity," embarking—often "willfully episodically"—on "crusades [that] unambiguously confirmed, from the modern point of view, the unfitness of all Protestant Bible-believers for modern life" (2000: 78). At no time did singular political interventions rise to challenge the tacit contract drawn up with secular modern American.

All that came to change in the 1970s and 1980s. In the cultural revolution and the rapid social change of the 1960s and 1970s, Bible-believers found ample reason to return from the desert. The dismal state of American culture and morality was epitomized, for many conservative Christians, by Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s that reduced religious influence in schoolrooms, limited the government's power to prosecute "obscenity" (McGirr 2001: 159) and, with the ground-breaking decision 1972 in *Roe v.*

Wade, legalized abortion (e.g., Ginsburg 1989: 41–42). The protests in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* became a template for Fundamentalist and evangelical political involvement in the coming decades. Throughout the 80s, 90s, and 00s, the secular bases of government and society were again under question on all fronts: the judicial system, social services and poverty relief, medicine and not least the educational system, most notably in recent years perhaps in the "Scopes trial sequel" in Dover, in 2006 (e.g., Larson 2006: 267–278). What because known as the New Christian Right combined grass-roots mobilization with innovative political entrepreneurship, and spawned a number of influential national organizations like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, and Pat Robertson's Focus on the Family. As a growing political force the New Christian Right's mobilization also became increasingly implicated with voter recruitment, with the Republican Party in particular, as "values voters" emerged as an electoral category of special importance, worthy of considerable campaign energy.[33]

Working-Class Conservatism

One specific set of electoral dynamics to receive particular attention in recent years is the changing political disposition of the American working class. In his bestseller *What's the Matter with Kansas*? (2004) political journalist Thomas Frank proposed the counter-intuitive notion of a "working-class conservatism" to capture the electoral dynamics of the George W. Bush era.[34] The Republican Party's achievements in recent elections, Frank argued, were in large part ascribable to its invention of a "new dominant coalition" between "business and blue-collar […] so improbable and so self-contradictory that liberal observers often have trouble believing it is actually happening" (2004: 8).

Driven by what Frank calls "backlash conservatism," the Republican coalition functions through systematic displacement of political economics by explosive social issues like abortion, gay marriage and school prayer. "Middle Americans," animated by a sort of class animus diverted from economic interests, in this way become complicit in their self-destruction:

> The leaders of the backlash may talk Christ, but they walk corporate […]
> [T]he illusion never wears off. Vote to stop abortion; receive a rollback in
> capital gains taxes […] Vote to strike a blow against elitism; receive a social

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[33] I discuss the professionalization of campaigning in Chapter 3 in particular. In Ohio, in 2006, for instance, the ORP employed a "values voter coordinator" (see page 104 ff) specifically to establish and uphold contact with people regional strategically placed within churches and religious communities throughout the state.

[34] Curiously, and rather tellingly perhaps of the state of trans-Atlantic relations during this period, it was renamed *What's the Matter with America?* in its adoption for the European and international market.

order in which wealth is more concentrated than ever before in our lifetimes" (2004: 6–7, italics in original).

While the backlash phenomenon may initially have stemmed from "genuine" "grassroots" concerns, today, Frank writes, it

> has been transformed into a stimulus-response melodrama […] with results as predictable—and as profitable—as Coca-Cola advertising. In one end you feed an item about, say, the menace of gay marriage, and at the other end you generate, almost mechanically, an uptick of middle-American indignation, angry letters to the editor, an electoral harvest of the most gratifying sort. (2004: 9)

Not just the Republicans but, crucially, the Democrats, have had a hand in this development, according to Frank. By downplaying political economics, and by supporting economic policies and reforms largely congruent with those advanced by the Republicans, Democratic politicians too contributed to the displacement of economic conflicts by cultural ones.

To be sure, the notion that the working class has been deflecting from the Democratic Party was not new with Frank's bestseller. Kevin Phillips had been on to something similar as far back as his influential book *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), as have several prominent political scientists and commentators since (e.g., Ladd and Hadley 1975; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Edsall and Edsall 1991). Ladd and Hadley, for instance, argued in 1975 that "transformations of conflict characteristic of post-industrialism" were increasingly driving "an inversion of the old class relationship in voting" (1975: 232, 240).[35]

It should be noted that the story of working class deflection from the Democratic Party has had its critics. In a critical review of Frank's book, for instance, Larry M. Bartels (2005) purports to falsify four of its basic conclusions: that the white working class has abandoned the Democratic Party, that it has become more conservative, that moral values have come to trump economics, and that religious voters have been distracted from economic issues. Drawing on National Election Studies data, Bartles find none of these conclusions supported. But Bartles's rebuttal of Frank has in turn been criticized (e.g., Teixeira and Abramowitz 2008). At center of the controversy are di-

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[35] To the variable extent that these accounts construe "working-class conservatism" as a novelty they might be in need of some historical qualification. Howard Kimeldorf (1999:7) argues that, prior to the 1960s in particular, "the thesis of proletarian conservatism […] at times operated as a virtual monopoly." In one classic formulation, for instance, "lack of class consciousness" was said to constitute "a permanent characteristic of American labor" (Pelling 1960: 221, quoted in Kimeldorf 1999:7). That understanding has largely been replaced, by the efforts of the "new labor historians," by an emphasis on structural restraints rather than inert conservatism (Pelling 1960: 9–10). Nonetheless, one might note in relation to the debate around Frank's work that "working-class conservatism" constitutes something of a permanent theme in American political life.

verging definitions of the working class. While Frank seems to have relied largely on education as a proxy for working class status (see e.g., Frank 2005), Bartles's (2005) definition is based on family income. Teixeira and Abramowitz (2008) suggest that none of these approaches are sufficient. Instead, they develop an approach based on a socioeconomic status index (SES) weighting together family income, education, occupational status, and subjective class identifications. Using the SES index they find "a dramatic decline in support for the Democratic Party among both lower and middle SES white voters while the party loyalties of upper white voters have changed very little […] Class differences in party identification have not disappeared but are considerably smaller than they were thirty or forty years ago" (Teixeira and Abramowitz 2008: 124–125).

Plausible as that sounds, it will probably not be the last word in the debate over the politics of the American working class. Beyond the substantive issue, however, we might take the debate itself as characteristic of a moment in U.S. politics when modes of identification are in some sense up in the air. Under such conditions of ambiguity I suggest that ethnographically grounded description might be particularly useful in anticipation of potentially forthcoming variables of measurement.

III. Concluding Remarks

Let me summarize the main points of the preceding discussion and point to their relevance for what is to follow. Most importantly, the historical background provided above substantiates and underscores the most significant characteristics, discussed in the Introduction, of contemporary American conservatism: its composite nature; the extent to which it has unsettled conventional patterns of identification; and the fact that it infused emergent patterns with novel intensity. Understanding the convictional force or the "stickiness" of this political assemblage constitutes the main objective of the study as a whole.

It is also clear from the preceding discussion that the concept of "conservatism" can be, and has been, taken to mean very different things, not least in the U.S. context. It might be understood as primarily an orientation toward the past (e.g., Huntington 1957), a dedication to certain variable assumptions and themes (e.g., Muller: 1997), or a commitment to hierarchical social relations (e.g., Robin 2011a). It has also become obvious that there are several reasons why one would want to withhold the term "conservative" from the political phenomena that this study is concerned with—that they are not unambiguously inscribed in a classical conservative canon, nor unambiguously opposed to a classical liberal one, or that they are not simply "system-

supportive" but dedicated to change, as Sarah Diamond has suggested (1995: 5–6).[36]

What this means in relation to an ethnography of people who think of themselves as "conservative" (or "psycho-conservative") and who engage with politics under that label, is less clear. By methodological circumstance I am in some sense confined to a kind of de facto nominalism which is at odds with definitional rigor; I speak of "conservatism" first because it would be impossible for me not to. "Conservatism" has acquired, appropriately or not, a specific sense in contemporary U.S. usage, and the very unity of my empirical object must be seen in part as an effect of that usage. This point may usefully be related back to William Connolly's framing of the contemporary conservative coalition in terms of an "assemblage" (see the Introduction, page 14). What "assemblage" implies is precisely that a definite unifying definition is impossible. We are not dealing with one object, or a simple whole, but with a set of entities and phenomena, themselves composite in nature, which are entangled in each other in a transitory way.

Nonetheless, the definitional discussion is helpful for identifying the diverse set of family resemblances, substantive and situational, extended in multiple directions, which the term "conservatism" may help capture. As we have seen, for instance, American conservatives have frequently drawn on conservative elements of liberalism, and they have frequently worked to "conserve" the American liberal tradition, sometimes by drawing on more classical conservative themes and ideas regarding religion, morality or authority. Being aware of the conceptual debate might thus be useful for cultivating different ways of paying attention to the ethnography. "Conservatism" is anthropologically useful, I would suggest, not as the name for an object unproblematically in existence, but for encircling a set of questions: How do conservatives aspire to the term? How are these and other apparent tensions mediated and lived with? And what can their politics tell us about the deeper affinities between political traditions often assumed separate?

Two sets of such questions, both of them vital for the question of "stickiness," stand out from the preceding discussion as particularly important. First, what is the temporal orientation of contemporary conservative politics? While conservatives have often been assumed to be oriented toward the past, the preceding discussion has suggested that is not necessarily the case. Ethnography might add empirical specificity to this discussion. Second, what is conservatism's relationship to its supposed others—liberalism, socialism,

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[36] It is also be worth noting that withholding the term "conservatism" from political adversaries, may be a way of denying them the "honorability" of a well-established tradition, to paraphrase Noam Chomsky speaking of William F. Buckley (whose talk show Chomsky famously visited in 1968) and his neoconservative successors. Video interview and transcript is available at
http://bigthink.com/ideas/1894 (accessed November 17, 2011).

secularism, etcetera? On this point, too, the conceptual and historical treatments of conservatism suggest complications that may fruitfully be addressed empirically in the present.

In addition to this, the conceptual and historical discussions detailed above illustrate the challenge that conservatism poses for analysis. Corey Robin's (2011a) recent work and the debate it has spurred is a recent case in point. Robin frames his project in opposition to what he identifies as a problematic tendency to dismiss conservatism as "as an enterprise devoid of ideas." "Nothing," he writes, "could be further from the truth" (2011a: 17). Indeed, Robin makes an important point by demonstrating that is not the case. We learn from his story that great minds have poured much subtle thought into working out the contingent details of reaction. Yet at the same time, Robins' critics (Berman 2011; Lilla 2012) identify in his work a problem similar to the one it addresses. Philosophical subtlety notwithstanding, the core energy of conservative politics remains inaccessible to understanding; it is simply the "voice of animus against the agency of the subordinate classes" (Robin 2011a: 7).

It is the permanence of this kind of dynamic that I have in mind when I speak of a particular analytical challenge wrought by conservatism. And while I do not presume to transcend it, my sense is that ethnographic specificity might be one way forward—that perhaps there is something to be gained from asking the question of what contemporary conservatism is and what animates it in less general terms. With that prospect in mind I turn to the empirical part of the study.

2. Doing Democracy

Adam is running late. I have just taken out my cell phone to call him as his beige Chevy turns onto the street and slows down in front of my apartment building in central Lima. "I had lost my wallet," he explains as I climb into the back seat, "but I found it." Adam's wife, Jennifer, who is in the passenger seat, rolls her eyes and shakes her head theatrically. "Well, not a good week for me," Adam continues, nodding toward his hand on the steering wheel, "I just lost my wedding ring, so now I'm wearing this cheap thing from Wal-Mart."

It is the first Saturday of August, 2006, and Adam is on the campaign trail. At twenty-six, he is already an experienced campaign worker, but this is the first time he is running for office himself. Come November, he will be on the ballot for the only County Commissioner seat not occupied by a fellow Republican. He is optimistic—"this is red country," he says—but well aware it is going to take a lot of hard work. The incumbent, Greg Sneary, is both well-known and well-liked locally. Not in Republican circles, however, at least according to Adam. During a previous campaign Sneary ran as a "Republican-leaning independent," much to the annoyance of local Republicans protective of their brand.

Adam grew up in Lima and has spent most of his life there. He is the son of small business owners and has a "strong background" in one of Lima's largest Baptist churches. Until recently, he attended seminary school in North Carolina and was on a path to becoming a youth minister. But 9/11 dramatically altered Adam's priorities: "It really got me thinking about service—how to best serve my country." When he could not join the army due to a health condition, Adam started to entertain the idea of seeking public office. "I was always interested in politics," he explains and, as if providing proof of this, pulls from his pocket a small-print edition of The Declaration of Independence and The United States Constitution. "I always carry one with me, sometimes two—one for giving away." Adam eventually quit seminary school and returned to Lima to take a job as a salesman for his father's old company, waiting for the right opportunity to run. "From heaven, into hell," he jokingly summarizes his recent reorientation.

We are on our way to the small village of Delphos, a twenty-five minute drive from Lima. With us in the car is Kim, Adam's friend and loyal campaigner, and his grandmother, who looks rather frail for spending the better part of the day outside in the already torching sun. Adam's twin brother and a few Allen County Republican Party volunteers are to meet up in the parking lot of Jim's Restaurant, a local fast food diner. While driving, Adam tells us about the day's excursion. What we are doing is a simple "literature drop" or, more economically, a "lit drop"—walking door-to-door to hand out Adam's campaign literature. Until recently, Adam's strategy has been to "stay below the radar" well into the campaign season, in the hope of instilling a false sense of security in his opponent, but it has come to his attention that Sneary already has been covering a lot of ground, in Delphos and elsewhere around the county. Given the paramount importance of "name recognition" Adam feels he needs to "step up his game."

Adam's campaign literature is crammed into the trunk together with a large stack of yard signs and boxes with campaign T-shirts, all featuring his logo—blue and white letters spelling "Vote Adam Blevins" over an orange background. The logo has been painstakingly designed with the help of both local and state party people. "This here is a regular science," Adam sighed the first time he showed it to me, "man, you wouldn't believe how many shades of orange there are." At his side in the front, Adam keeps a folder with the details for the day's operations. During the week prior, he has been to the Board of Elections to retrieve lists of Republicans and "independents" in the Delphos area.[37] Based on this information he has established a rough priority among the Delphos neighborhoods, favoring those with strong Republican and independent presence. With the help of Jen at the ACRP office, he has converted the voter lists into maps with separate routes, one for each participant, me included, but I quickly interject that I would prefer to walk with Adam.[38]

Adam explains the reasoning underlying this mode of operations: "We know this from experience: I won't be able to get more than maybe ten to fifteen percent of the Democrats—at best. The rest won't even consider me,

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[37] Ohio does not have partisan voter registration. Political affiliation is determined by if one votes in a partisan primary. If you request a Republican ballot in a partisan primary, you will be recognized as a Republican. If you have not voted in a partisan primary in the last two elections, you are considered to be "unaffiliated" with a political party, or "independent" (see Ohio voter information at

http://www.sos.state.oh.us/elections/voterInformation/regtovote.aspx, accessed September 26, 2011).

[38] I generally avoided playing the role of "foot soldier" in activities involving interaction with voters, opting instead for observation. I might add that I found it rather curious that they assumed that a social anthropologist from Sweden with, at best, unclear political leanings would make a fine Republican campaigner, but on the other hand, campaign activities were generally speaking, as I demonstrate below, surprisingly devoid of political *ideas* per se.

just because there is an "R" after my name, so they are just a waste of time and money. I should be able to get ninety to ninety-five percent of the Republicans if I just get to them. Then all you need to do is get fifty percent plus one of the independents." Adam's grandmother listens attentively but seems somewhat troubled by the suggestion of a set limit to the likability of her grandson: "We want everyone to vote for you, right?" she says. Jennifer agrees, and suggests that passing houses "just because they aren't on some list," would *indeed* be a waste of time and recourses. "Guys, trust me, I have been at this for years," Adam counters, "I know what I am doing. There is no sense in spending half the time and half the money on a part of the population that will be at the most, at the most fifteen percent for me."

Once at the rendezvous point, Adam gives quick instructions to his volunteers before they disperse among the low, white houses of Delphos. Adam and I start down one of our streets, carrying our bags of campaign literature. Every other house or so is on the list, but surprisingly few owners are home or, as Adam points out, inclined to answer the door: "They know it's that time of the year," he says. We pin the pamphlet in the screen door and move on. When someone answers Adam's knock, he hands over his pamphlet with a quick "good morning, my name is Adam Blevins, and I am running for County Commissioner." Most accept it with little or no comment, but there are a few exceptions. "You're a bit young, aren't you?" one lady asks. Adam, who recently was persuaded by a campaign consultant to change his haircut to look a little older, sighs as we walk back across the yard: "Well, everyone thought Kennedy was to too young too." Another woman wants to know what Adam intends to do about the water supply system in this particular part of Delphos, which apparently has been plagued by problems for years. Adam assures her he will look into it and asks her to get back to him next week.

Moving through the neighborhoods, it becomes clear how seriously Adam takes the campaign logic he spelled out in the car. When we approach a house with a yard sign for Sherrod Brown, the Democratic candidate for U.S. senator, Adam just makes a note of it and turns his attention to the next house on his list. The note will go into the party records for future use, Adam says. Approaching such a house, he goes on to explain, may actually do more damage than good. He repeats the procedure each time we find a sign indicating changing inclinations. "It's a tough year for Republicans," he remarks as his margin notes slowly amass beyond his initial fears.

Thus we move through the village of Delphos, on an elaborate zigzag path steering clear of any potential political opposition. There is not a Democrat in sight, not if Adam, with his pack of election stats, can help it. Not in the flesh anyway. At one point we bump into John, whose street intersects with ours. "It's going good, but I would be way ahead of myself if it wasn't for these Democrats," he laughs and nods in the direction of his two sons who are dragging their feet behind him. Adam chuckles and explains "it's a

joke, you know, that Democrats tend to be lazy—it comes from this idea that the government should do everything for them."

I. Among the Experts

As Adam had suggested, his campaign strategy was hardly a figment of his personal imagination. To the contrary, it was business as usual in local campaign efforts in Lima. In the months leading up to the election on November 7, I partook in similar events on some ten different occasions and with several different campaigns, Jim Jordan's congressional campaign and Kenneth Blackwell's gubernatorial campaign being among them. On each of these occasions I re-encountered the route maps, the zigzagging, and the careful monitoring of irregularities. During a door-to-door walk organized by the Franklin County Republican Party in a Columbus suburb, John, a party operative, noted the same ominous misfit between map and reality as Adam had: "That's three Democrats in three days," he exclaimed after having been brusquely turned away by a middle aged woman. "This could be a bad sign. I wonder if they are just 'Bush Democrats'—let's hope they are."

Adam's mode of operation suggests the extent to which even small-scale local campaigns are now shaped in dialogue with expert knowledge dispersed through political networks and organization. In the following, I will introduce some of the processes and people through which this kind of knowledge flows from political centers—Washington D.C. and in this case Columbus, Ohio—into the Ohioan periphery. Often conceptualized in terms of a "professionalization" of politics, such flows of expertise have been a transformative force in American politics over the course of several decades (e.g., Davies and Newman 2006; Johnson 2001). Perhaps most obviously, the mode of operation adopted by Adam and other local candidates carries immediate implication for the contact between candidates and voters, by partially determining which voters receive what campaign information, get to meet which candidates, and ultimately how voters come to perceive the issues and options at stake in the election.

Campaign practice provides an access point for understanding how democracy is *done* in a particular time and place—a key concern of "anthropology of democracy" as a "still emerging field" of inquiry (Paley 2008: 4). This chapter probes the campaign practices encountered in Lima for their implicit understanding of politics, the political body and the nature of political representation. It demonstrates that Adam's movements through Delphos on a particularly hot August Saturday in 2006 traced not only the shape of his own hopes for November, nor merely a campaign strategy circulating within the Republican Party and its candidates and volunteers but also, more broadly, a particular understanding of "the political" that has resonance out-

side the small circles of Lima politicians and activists. I argue that one can productively see Adam's tactics as a manifestation or an enactment of a particular representational ethos, which in turn is integral to the formation of political subjects.

The ORP Candidate Training Seminar

As Adam had suggested in the car, he had some familiarity with what he referred to as "the scientific aspects" of campaigning even before he decided to run for office. In addition to his volunteer work, he regularly watched C-SPAN,[39] and occasionally read the campaign magazines scattered around the ACRP headquarters. The Ohio Republican Party's annual Candidate Training Seminar in Columbus on July 15, 2006 provided Adam with a more explicit and thoroughgoing encounter with this body of expert knowledge. He had been invited to the seminar through the local Republican Party, and I had also been given permission, with the help of Chairman Keith Cheney, to take part. The seminar was held in a convention center in downtown Columbus. Some two hundred hopeful candidates—predominantly male and almost exclusively white—had travelled from across the state to attend the eight-hour program of lectures and discussions.

Ohio Republican Party Chairman Bob Bennett, addressing the assembly from a large podium flanked on each side by a breakfast buffet, was charged with the task of opening the seminar and warming the crowd to succeeding speakers. He reminded us that the most important thing now was to stay focused and to close the ranks after what had been a divisive primary season. While "we may not all love all the candidates," we all know that "the alternative is much scarier." "Speaking of scary," he continued, "did you notice coming in that the Midwest Haunters Convention is in session next door?"[40] "Well, here is something really scary for them," he said, bringing up a hugely blown up and not too flattering photo of Hillary Clinton on the large screen behind him—a photo which I had seen before, on a flyer comparing well-known Republican and Democrat women that Jen had shown to the volunteers at a recent local event. The audience roared with laughter, and the ice, it seemed, was officially broken.

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[39] C-SPAN, the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, televises U.S. political events, frequently featuring live coverage from of the U.S. Congress.
[40] According to their website, The Midwest Haunters Convention "is the largest Halloween show of its kind in the US, serving a primary audience of Haunted Attraction Producers, Actors, Artists and Home Haunters." http://www.midwesthauntersconvention.com (accessed on January 20, 2012).

"Voter Chimpology"

The program started off with two general presentations on "The Campaign Plan" and "Campaign Strategy" moving on, later in the day, toward more specific topics such as "Direct Mail," "Paid Media," "Earned Media," "Fundraising" and "Party Services." First out was Mark Weaver, described in the hand-out material as an award-winning national Republican political consultant with twenty years of experience from working on more than four hundred and fifty campaigns in thirteen states. In his presentation he continually stressed, as did virtually all speakers throughout the entire day, the "limited character" of political campaigning. The economic and human resources of campaigns are limited, Weaver said, as is the patience, interest, and knowledge of the voter. This, according to the presenters of the seminar, is the most fundamental lesson to be learned about campaigning.

From the podium the typical voter was characterized in terms of an unbridgeable difference from the prospective candidates in the audience, who laughed and giggled at assertions that "most people would run screaming out of here" and that "you, only by being here, are enough involved, to be forever separated from the voter." Perhaps the most common and gravest mistake inexperienced campaigners make, Weaver maintained in his presentation, is to underestimate the depth of this "abyss," assuming, as one of his slides read, "that YOU are an 'average voter.'" He speculated on the kind of thinking involved in making this mistake: "I listen to [conservative talk radio host] Sean Hannity—so everybody must" and "I stream judicial hearings on C-SPAN so everybody probably does." "No," he exclaimed. "Wrong!" The average man on the street does not have the interest, time or ability to engage with any of these things. Conversely, Weaver endowed those present with the righteousness of the eccentric, comparing an argument about the ideal color of yard signs he had overheard at the seminar some years prior to the irrational quarrellings of the inmates of a mental institution.

In line with this general understanding of the voter, Weaver said he understood his own line of work as a political consultant as a kind of "voter chimpology." "I have learned to observe voters in their natural habitat," he said, pushing the analogy a bit further: "I'm like that chimp lady in that movie, what's-her-name," probably referring to zoologist and gorilla expert Diane Fossey whose life and career was chronicled in *Gorillas in the Mist*. We were back to animal imagery again a little later, as Weaver was telling us a short story to introduce the subject of "name recognition." Once he had consulted on a local campaign for a guy named Sweeney. Sweeney, incidentally, was also the name of the Democratic opponent, a fact that Weaver initially thought of as merely a practical problem. The race was tight, but at some point during the campaign season, Weaver and "his" Sweeney discovered some sort of irregularity in their opponent's track record—something they felt amounted to a minor scandal and had the potential to tip the race to their

advantage. They launched a series of ads "blowing the whistle" on the opponent. Yet the expected effect in the polls failed to present itself; Sweeney's numbers in fact seemed to be dropping. Weaver was dumbfounded: What had gone wrong? Then, Weaver explained, he stumbled on a particular comic strip in *The Far Side* and "a light was switched on in my head." As he spoke, the strip, comprised of two panels, appeared on the screen behind him. The first panel, titled "What we say to dogs," depicted a man angrily pointing or wagging his finger at a dog, while exclaiming: "Okay, Ginger! I've had it! You stay out of the garage! Understand, Ginger? Stay out of the garage, or else!" In the second panel, titled "What they hear," only the text of the speech balloon had been replaced, now reading: "blah blah GINGER blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah GINGER blah…"

Raising his voice slightly to rise above the scattered burst of laughter provoked by the strip, Weaver went on to suggest that the same thing goes for voters. Political candidates talk policy and believe they are communicating a message to the voter, he said. Voters hear a name and attach a feeling to it. What had happened was simply that the voters had come to vaguely associate the name itself with something negative. Being in the spotlight a lot under this name had therefore become counterproductive. "Remember that dream, you're back in school, a test is handed out and you take a look at the first question and realize you're not prepared? For most voters, that's what Election Day is like. […] It is not exactly 'eeny, meeny, miny, moe' but it is just as stupid—they pick a name they recognize."[41]

Against the backdrop of this understanding of the voter, Weaver told the candidates in the audience to ask themselves a number of critical questions: "how will you win?" and "who will you talk to?" Each question corresponded to a PowerPoint slide appearing on the screen behind him:

> How…Will You Win?
> (Strategy)
> No one gets 100% of the vote
> Necessary to win: 50% + 1
> Some people are already against you
> Use a spreadsheet and look at past voter data
> Begin to find precincts: ours, theirs & swing

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[41] At a fundraiser for Robert Cupp's bid for the Ohio Supreme Court held at his family house outside Lima in the summer of 2006, I was introduced to a particularly creative version of this form of "memory politics": the "Cupp cake" and the "coffee Cupp," both, according to Judge Cupp's wife, reliable "party tricks" on similar occasions. Name recognition, Robert Cupp explained to me, is an even greater factor in judicial races, where ideological differences, at least in principle, matter less.

Who…Will you talk to?
(Targeting)
Resources are limited—money, time, people
Persuasion requires resources
Persuading enemies takes too many resources
Only targeting swing precincts and regular voters

Weaver's presentation moved on to consider the "message"—how to package it and how and when to distribute it—but these two PowerPoint slides neatly summarize an image of politics and campaign work that was hammered out throughout the seminar. What emerges from them is, in a phrase, the futility of political communication proper. Those interested in politics are inaccessible in their convictions. Those not interested can at best be lured, subconsciously and more or less against their will, to one side or the other. Political identity is in a sense incommunicable and inaccessible yet manageable.

   Campaigning, as an apolitical art and a field of instrumental expertise, of course does not necessarily imply a full-blown ontology of the political. If it presents us with a particular vision of the political world, it need not do so with the full assurance of truthfully representing things as they really are. Its truth claim lies, instead, at the level of efficiency. All it needs to claim and stand by is that "it works." Nonetheless, following its prescription, even if one does so merely "as if" it was true, lends it weight and reality to its provisional vision. Thus the zigzag path of an effective campaign also becomes a place from which to perceive the political in a particular way. After a long day in Delphos in the scorching August sun, Adam had only imaginary Democrats, lazily dragging their feet behind, to disagree with.

II. Mapping Democracy

As the short exchange in the car between Adam and his wife and grandmother suggests, the encounter between this, in a sense, rather cynical expert vision and the interactional intuitions of ordinary campaign foot soldiers or voters is potentially fraught with tension. This was also apparent for instance when Andrew, a young field director from "Ohioans for Blackwell," visited Lima to oversee the establishment of a local "Blackwell for Governor" action group. During a session at the Allen County Republican office a short exchange on telephone campaign tactics took place. Laura, one of the volunteers, questioned the value of phone campaigning, particularly the practice of leaving short messages on answering machines, as antithetical to "meaningful communication." Doug agreed and added that receiving such messages "really just bugs me, you know, someone at the door you can ignore, but

that's kind of invasive." Nods and murmurs around the room suggested widespread agreement on the points raised, but Andrew was of a different mind and promptly interrupted:

> It's effective. In fact, sometimes the machine is even more effective than talking to someone in person. And that comes straight out of the NRP [National Republican Party], so… You know, they are constantly working to refine our tactics. People may not like it, but it works. Actually, do you know the ideal time for a phone call? Fifteen to twenty seconds, anything above that is a waste of time. You're in, you do what you're supposed to, you're out. That's it.

With this, the topic was effectively closed down. After the meeting, a couple of the participants lingered in the reception. Laura felt that Andrew's reasoning had been a little bit too "abstract" and suggested that her point about leaving messages on people's answering machines might still have some partial validity. She recognized, however, that "his reasoning makes sense, in the larger picture," adding that "we are just small fish." In this way, emergent tensions tended to be understood in terms of an opposition between the naiveté of the relative layman and the realistic cynicism of the relative expert. The process of learning the tricks of the trade, so to speak, of becoming more politically savvy, appeared as one of coming to terms with the hard reality of politics.

What was striking, more generally, was in fact how limited and easily resolvable such tensions were. Without implying any particular relation of transference or causality, I would suggest that the vision of the campaign expert was basically congruent with conceptions and experiences of the political resonant well beyond the seminar room of the Ohio Republican Party campaign school. In interactions in and around Lima this congruence suggested itself along several different lines. In the following, I consider three partially overlapping themes: avoidance, geography, and representation.

Avoidance

One November afternoon, I was having a late lunch with David, the pastor of one of Lima's largest Catholic churches, at The Meeting Place, the somewhat "artsy" and "European" styled café in downtown Lima. David considered himself "very liberal for these parts" and claimed, half-jokingly, to have chosen the location to bring this point home. At some point of the conversation, we called on a waitress to order another cup of coffee. David, a regular customer, was obviously quite well acquainted with her.

Waitress: You boys look like you are really digging deep today.

David: Well, you know, just the usual—politics and religion.

Waitress: Oh, then I think I better excuse myself…

David: How's that?

Waitress: I don't know…well you know I like you and I wouldn't want to tick you off. I try to avoid making enemies…

David: Now, that is interesting. Tell me—why you would say something like that?

Waitress: Well, I'm sorry, but you're a pastor, and this is Lima. I'd assume we're on different sides of the fence…

As we saw above, Adam's zigzag route through Delphos was expressive of particular ideas about effective campaigning, dispersed through networks of expertise. Pastor David's exchange with the waitress—which presents us with what normally "would not have been" in the sense that she would normally have preferred to avoid it—suggests that this is only part of the story. In fact, the kind of party-sponsored evasion that Adam and other candidates practiced could simultaneously be conceived of as a buffed-up and formalized version of widespread common sense. More or less everyone I talked to, Republicans and Democrats alike, claimed that they consciously avoided bringing up issues with political, religious or moral implications at work or in other public settings, especially when the positions of their interlocutors were unshared or unknown. "It's no use really, all it does is tick people off" as one of the volunteers at the Allen County Fair explained. Katie, who self-consciously boasted her rather "confrontational nature" and claimed that she often started political arguments "just because," also acknowledged the necessity of "picking fights carefully." This meant avoiding political topics at work, in the presence of her father-in-law—"a die-hard union democrat of the worst kind"—and, even with her "hopeless" husband. She had "learned from experience" that it was pointless.

This discourse of avoidance thus assumes and, arguably, reproduces, an idea of the utter inaccessibility of political others. This was also evident in how people talked about the mindset and motivation of the Democratic or liberal opposition. Most straightforwardly, the politics of the Democrats were described as a simple power game. Frank, the pastor at Rousculp Church of Christ, for instance, suggested that "Democrats are in the business of buying votes. You give people what they think they want and you make them dependent on you." Or, in the words of Katie, "if they are going to be the compassionate selfless rescuers they think they are, they are going to have to create some kind of need, right?" Unions frequently played an important role in explanations of how this was possible. One of the volunteers at the Allen County Fair told me he could not understand "why anyone

would vote Democrat," continuing that "actually, I asked this guy I know. He said the union told him it was in his best interest." Tradition or habit represented another explanatory track—"I suppose it's more of a traditional thing, their parents voted Democrat so they do too"—as was, somewhat contradictory perhaps, education, and "the self-righteousness enlightened." This is Katie, again, talking about the "liberal mafia" at an internet forum she frequents:

> It is like a closed club or something; they all congratulate themselves for being liberals and thinking exactly like each other. They just think they have got it all figured out, they know how everything works, and they are offended that they in their infinite wisdom aren't running the show, deciding how it all should be. I also know best of course. They won't convince me of anything, I won't convince them. It's just that they never got that! They get so upset, yelling and screaming, calling me intolerant and uncompassionate—really hateful things. And I am the hateful one?

I address these ways of speaking about liberals and liberalism more fully in Chapter 3. At this point I would merely like to draw attention to their implications for the meaning of "the political" in general. None of these figures—the self-righteous, the know-it-all do-gooder, the unreflective follower, or the buyer or seller of votes—are exactly amenable to argumentation. "Lust for power," "self-righteousness," or "habit" are not states of existence built up by argument. At stake here, then, is a certain understanding of the very meaning of disagreement. On this point, Paul, the former Ohio State Representative and self-proclaimed moderate who has been involved in the unsuccessful "mutiny attempt" that I mentioned in the Introduction, offered a helpful first diagnosis of what he spoke of as a tendency to "demonize the opposition." What's been lost today," he said, "is a sense of civility. In politics you have to be able to disagree without being disagreeable […] but today disagreement always goes toward questioning the motives of your opponents."

Expanding on this formulation, one might say that the explanatory attempts cited above signal the impossibility of disagreeing rationally and with good intentions. There is no room in the picture they paint for different ways of rationally conceiving an issue and certainly not for the possibility of alternative rationalities. Perhaps this is typical for anyone engaged in conflict of some sort. But what is striking in these accounts of the opposition is that they do not frame political otherness in the terms of "error," either. That is, they do not operate at the level of truth and falsehood. In the final analysis, one's politics appears as primarily telling of whom, or perhaps more precisely, what one is. Politics appears not an expression of thought, but of being, and one is just a likely to convert a democrat as one is to convince a rock to be a tree. Accordingly, as Katie had it, "all it does is tick people off."

We may also take the exchange at the Meeting Place as a point of departure for considering how the object of avoidance is recognized, the waitress's laconic invocation of occupation and place of residence, being emblematic. Below, I consider the importance of the latter in particular. Generally speaking, preconceptions about "who thinks what" were markedly saturated by popularized knowledge of precisely the sort distributed at the Ohio Republican Party campaign school, and understood through categories of lifestyle, interest, income, consumption, habitation, occupation, creed, and so on. Beyond the most obvious and perhaps (treacherously) commonsensical correlations, such as church attendance, union membership, or skin color, one might for instance recognize a liberal, or so I was told, on the coffee he drinks—caffé latte rather than "regular"—or, as a campaign volunteer informed me in on a particularly hot summer day when I had left my sneakers at home, on the Birkenstocks.[42] As I discuss below in more detail, this heightened awareness of correlation also potentially becomes complicit, via deduction from preference to conviction, in processes of identity formation, giving rise to a kind of feedback between polling and politics.

Geography

If place, in general, is "good to think with," this would seem particularly true in the context of the American political geography. A federal economic and political system is, of course, one essentially comprised of borders. As such it is generative of difference in specific ways, thus generating both demands for explanation and opportunities of making simple sense of complex matters. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, political geography was a constant preoccupation among conservative activists in Lima. As I exemplify below, conversations about specific issues or candidates would conspicuously often be centered on its geographical implications. At the most general level, such

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[42] An interview I did with an Ohio native living in Sweden illustrates the dynamics of this "recognizance work" in relation to coffee drinking. She shared an anecdote with me about a job interview she had given a few years back. On the written application for the post she had stated that she liked to spend her spare time reading, writing or drinking coffee with her friends. During the interview this latter, and seemingly banal, activity was brought up by the interviewer, who, in a troubled voice, asked her what kind of coffee she preferred. Clearly, more was at stake in this question than merely making conversation. Drawing on a well-established genre of conservative social commentary that derides the cosmopolitan consumption patterns of the "liberal elite" in general and their caffé latte drinking in particular the question seemed aimed at disclosing exactly what kind of person this potential employee was. (For a prominent example of latte-bashing, see The Club for Growth's 2004 ad against Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, which suggested that he "should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs.")

geographical preoccupations pertain to the way that "the people," the ideal locust of democratic power, "comes into being in a particular situation labeled democracy" (Paley 2008: 10). Among conservatives in Lima, election maps, precinct statistics and geographical anecdotes appeared as vital tools in a perpetual process of imagining the political and the political body.

Hanging on the wall behind Jen's desk at the Allen County Republican office was a large map reproducing the election results of the 2004 presidential election between George W. Bush and John Kerry, state by state. "This map actually tells you a lot," Jen suggested to me on one of my visits. "In the middle there is the conservative heartland, the core part of the country, and then there are the liberal edges, and that's pretty much it."
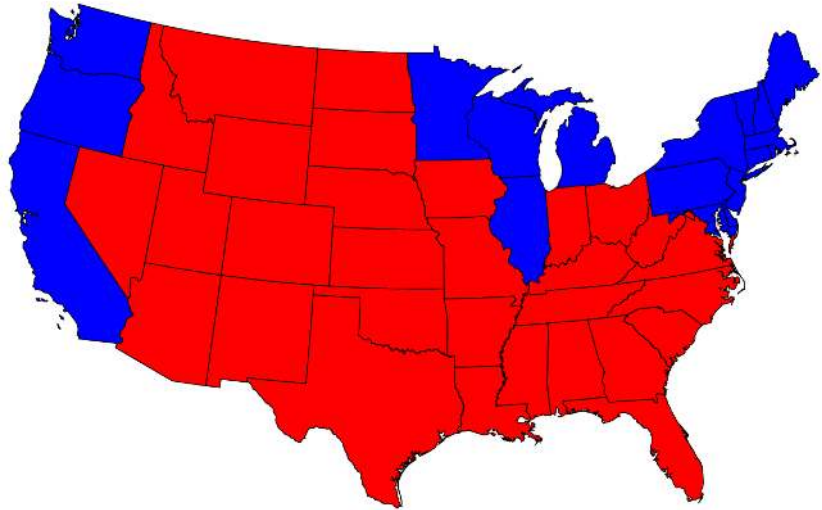
Figure 1. 2004 election results, state by state.[43]

Looking at the corresponding data on county level, she continued, is even more interesting. What then strikes you is the opposition between small-town-America and the urban elite, or, as she told me on a separate occasion, "people who think sitting in a café with a laptop means work." Conversely, she claimed, the people living and working in the farmlands and the small

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[43] The election maps and cartograms reproduced in this chapter were created by Michael Gastner, Cosma Shalizi, and Mark Newman at the University of Michigan. The originals are available under a Creative Commons License at
http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/2004 (accessed September 29, 2011).

towns in the heart of the country are the ones who "make it great" and "you can see where their loyalties are."
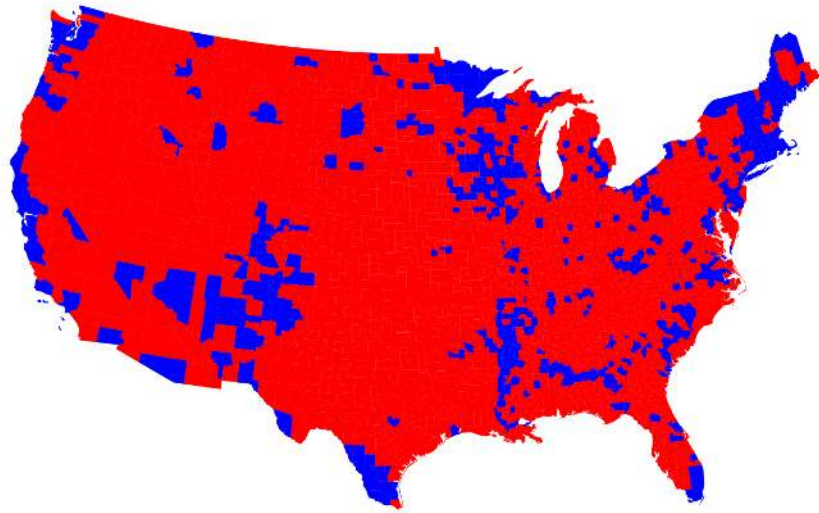

Figure 2. 2004 election results, county by county.

In a phrase that was recounted to me by different people on countless occasions over the course of my stay in Lima, she concluded that "America would be a much better place if we just let the coastlines slide into the ocean." A campaign assistant of Tom Raga, Kenneth Blackwell's co-ticket in the gubernatorial race, offered a perhaps more thoughtful account of basically the same point.

> The political divide in America, I think it has a lot to do with place, where you live. Have you seen the map of red and blue states? People in the middle, they are more down to earth people, kind of salt of the earth people. In the city they live farther away from what feeds them, they have less connection to the past and to a community, they tend to see life in more abstract terms. And that is really what the liberal mindset is about… abstraction, it's a more European style social program that is kind of idealistic and abstract. Liberals tend to be very afraid of anything destructive… but you know, destructive creation—that is what American greatness is all about.

What the 2004 map seemed to portray, then, was first of all the geographical dispersion of what I referred to above as different "modes of being" and their articulation through the medium of electoral politics. Just as in the quoted examples the physical distinction between centre and edge was often evoked

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to associate the conservative with the authentically American, as was the distinction between the rural and the urban, understood for instance in terms of production versus consumption, community versus individual, or physical versus intellectual labor.

In addition, such accounts were typically infused with a sense that the very ratio between red and blue on the map was meaningful in itself. Keith made this point explicit, suggesting that the 2004 election result map "tells you this is a pretty conservative country, really." The problem, he added in an ironic twist, was just that "there are so many damn people in those blue dots." This basic framework could be put to work in various ways. Katie, for instance, offered a slightly different reading of the meanings and mechanisms involved when I told her I was going to Berkeley, California, for a few days to visit a friend. Notice the swiftness with which she seamlessly moves from "lifestyle" to electoral politics, between being and voting, and back again:

> Man, I'd love to go there, see all the freaks. It's a different universe out there. You know all these people growing up in places like Lima but who never really fit in, it is like their dream to go to San Francisco. So you get a very… different population. Tree huggers, commies, straight homosexuals, transsexuals, bisexuals... cross-gendered... all these people. I mean, just take a look at the election maps from the last election. Do I know the kinds of things they do there? There're so many stories... maybe not appropriate conversation over lunch.

In the parking lot outside the restaurant, after having finished eating, she told me what she had had in mind: a San Francisco art project she had heard about that involved, among other things, a "series circuit enema." "But nothing surprises me anymore," she added. "If it's conceivable, someone's going to be doing it."[44]

In these kinds of accounts, then, we see how the geographically coded anecdote or representation—of the urban "worker," the "down-to-earth small town American," or the "series-circuit-enema"—and the statistical—regional polling data, elections maps—come to saturate and cross-fertilize each other. This would seem to be one of the pervasive ways that the metaphor of "Middle America" (discussed in Chapter 1) persists in the twenty-first century as a vehicle for conservative populism. The geography—regions, districts, areas—becomes charged with politics, and politics, in turn, with the meanings of geography, through this particular kind of social reflexivity. In sharing and consuming such accounts one gradually gains a particular sense of what

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[44] I have searched, not without hesitation I might add, the internet for records of this project, but without result. What a series circuit enema is, more precisely, thus remains unclear. When my friend in Berkeley heard of Katie's remarks, he recalled the reaction of someone he had met while visiting the Grand Canyon in Arizona: "Ah, so you're from Bizzerkley."

it might mean to be "liberal" or "conservative," or on the other hand, what it might mean to live in San Francisco. Moreover, as Katie suggested and as some analysts have argued, Americans have increasingly sorted themselves into geo-political clusters (Bishop 2008).

One should not infer from this, however, any whole-hearted faith in either statistics or anecdote on the part of those preoccupied with political geography. When I asked Katie about the San Francisco art project story, for instance, she said she probably picked such things up from talk radio, and in all likelihood from "Rush" [Limbaugh] whose "reporting," Katie was clearly aware, was to be "taken with take with a pinch of salt": "I don't think he would make stuff up... it is just that he had a pretty clear idea of which stories he picks up... it is not like it is representative or anything." Keith's lament about there being "so many damn people in those blue dots" similarly hinted at an awareness about the problem of mediation, by drawing attention to the way in which the map produces the *appearance* of a Republican landslide. Consider, in this context, a different way of visualizing the result of the 2004 election, one that better captures its complexities:
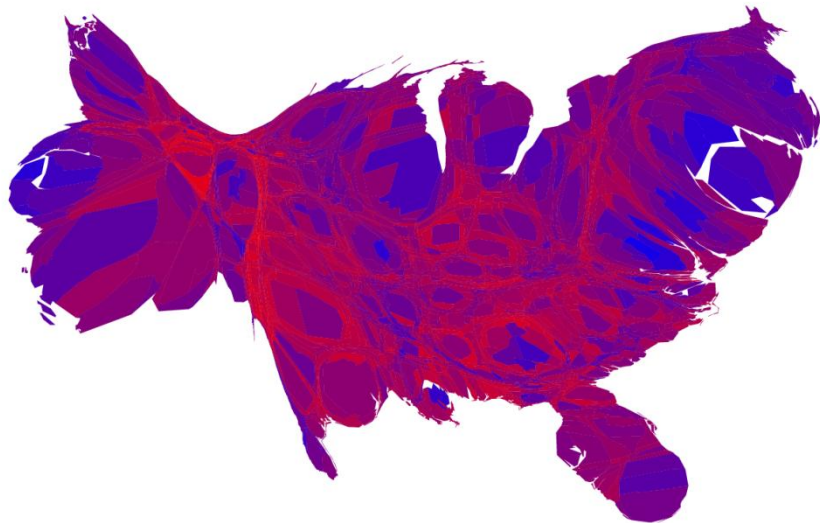

Figure 3. Cartogram representing the 2004 election results, county by county. The coloring represents the percentage of votes cast for each party's candidate. Counties have been rescaled in proportion to population size.

Keith's ironic twist neatly captures how reliance on the red and blue map can coexist with an awareness of the "purpleness" of reality. In fact, the very idea of "the regional" often appeared as problematic in itself. It was only

when speaking in the abstract about "American politics" in general that Lima, Allen County, or the larger region could occupy the role of the reasonable counterpart in any straightforward way. Common sense, that is, was not an absolute regional characteristic but only valid in comparison with the outside. When moving around town with Jen and Frank, Katie, or Keith it became clear that Lima alternatively could function as a kind of miniature model of America—thus, in fact, incorporating and containing within itself all the divisions and distinctions otherwise projected outwards.

This miniature model contained, for instance, the "dangerous" and downtrodden southern part of town, with its predominantly black population, many of whom were said to have moved in from urban centers in the south—possibly, Frank suggested, drawn by the promise of a relatively gullible welfare office. There were the old upscale neighborhoods west of downtown, home to lawyers and doctors many of whom were "old establishment Republicans." On the outskirts of town there were the several trailer parks where, according to Katie, "people assume everyone's Democrat, but I live there and I've seen the records—you'd be surprised." There was, more generally, the tension between the "liberal" and "urban" city proper and the more conservative outer regions and farm land beyond. Regional reference points beyond the borders of Allen County included prosperous and thoroughly Republican Findlay to the north, and the village of Alger to the east—in Katie's estimation "a haven for southerners, but not the good kind, the kind that drinks and parties, and throws up all kinds of trouble; the police pretty much leave them to themselves." In other words, things turned out to be less simple than they had first appeared, both in terms of politics, and in terms of socio-economics, euphemistically understood through the idiom of "lifestyle."

Geography, as a way of imagining the political, thus appeared intriguingly as simultaneously useful and problematic. Perhaps one can begin to understand this paradoxical pervasiveness by recalling the debate within anthropology about the concept of culture—of how territorial distinction invites comparison, how comparison demands explanation and how such explanations in turn have a tendency both to overstate their case and to stick beyond their expiration date (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997). I think this invites us to consider what may be thought of as the ontology of the border. A federal system is, of course, one essentially made up of borders—political, economic, and social. The border, whether the one imagined between inside and outside of a culture or of an electoral district, is always to some extent arbitrary. Once it is established, however, and once a particular population or constituency is conceived, it gains a certain kind of reality. This is not necessarily because its arbitrariness is actively denied, but because things start to appear from within the arbitrary. This is the basic productivity in the drawing of a distinction—once in place it enters into a process of becoming real as its arbitrary shape is continuously invested both with the general necessity

of making some kind of distinction, and with the retroactive proof of emergent difference. Problematic as it may be, the border renders something visible and comparable. In the context of American politics this process is magnified, I would suggest, through the medial spectacle of polling and campaigning.

When challenged with the task of conceptualizing and explaining the outcome of such ongoing comparison—as the democratic subject continually is—it is difficult to avoid overreaching. One important mechanism at work here seems to be what theorists of argumentation logic sometimes refer to as the ecological fallacy, i.e. the tendency to infer from the statistical or typical to the individual (e.g., Freedman 2001). The fact, for instance, that Protestant groups have higher suicide rates than Catholic ones, to quote a classic study sometimes accused of making the ecological fallacy, is not necessarily predictive of any particular individual's proneness to end his or her life.[45] Consequently, such aggregate data cannot alone support a theory of causality. When trying to make subjective sense of "the other's" politics using whatever statistical and geographical clues are available, on the other hand, this is precisely the kind of thinking one has to take recourse to. The binary 2004 election map becomes conducive of the construction of an implicit theory of political identity which is forceful enough to explain complete electoral polarization along state lines. The map, the anecdote, or the statistical fragment itself might, as we have seen, be subject to criticism or problematization, and might even be used explicitly in the mode of "as if." Nonetheless, the process of visualizing the political has already been profoundly affected.

Representation

"The question we face in a democracy," Allen County Republican Party Chairman Keith Cheney suggested in a speech before the central committee at the Lima Civic Center, "is who can best represent our values." This formulation—straightforward enough, it would seem—must be understood in light of the above, each semantic building block containing within itself a certain density of meanings. Beginning at the back with "our values," it is clear that this cherished conservative idiom is invested with the meanings of both avoidance and political geography. "Our values" are opposed to the values of a "them" given as a different way of being. This charges the situation with a certain level of urgency and suggests that "having values" is something that must be achieved. There is a slot, if you will, for "our values" in this conception of democratic politics, which must be filled with something.

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[45] See for example Day and van Poppel (1996) for criticisms of Durkheim along those lines.

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Geography separates "us" from "them" but also plays a more specific role in this context. Keith's complaint, quoted above, that "there are so many people living in those blue dots" hints towards this. What at first sight appears as unintentionally comical in this remark—the insinuation that red and blue country exist as such, and independently from the people who happen to inhabit it—in fact has specific resonance within the context of American politics. The American electoral system indeed endows geography with a kind of independent reality: The Electoral College ensures that most states unanimously nominate a presidential candidate; single-member congressional districts tie U.S. House Representatives to the interest of a geographical unit; and U.S. Senate composition—two Senators per state—is based on geography instead of population size (e.g., Maisel 2007: 10–23; Vile 1999: 65–87). These features of the American electoral system are connected to the basic constitutional notion of checks and balances, which emphasize that political power is inherently problematic and must be set up, as it were, against itself. What geography balances out is the pure mathematics of population numbers. One region is not to dominate another strictly in terms of greater numbers. This is, for instance, part of the logic behind each state having two U.S. Senators regardless of its number of inhabitants: to ensure the existence of a plurality of perspectives and to make sure that the various *parts* of the country get their say. Achieving this balance implies the winner-take-all district—which, ironically, renders possible precisely the domination of the pure mathematics, only at smaller geographical scale—"red country" is, of course, potentially fifty percent minus one vote blue. This is also relevant for how the categorization of "red" or "blue country" sustains and reinforces itself through the agency of the individual voter. As one disillusioned Lima Democrat laconically stated when I asked her why she didn't vote: "My guy [candidate] never gets to go." In a certain sense, then, the electoral system can be seen to generate a demand for "our values," both in the sense that differences internal to regions are obliterated in the production of a local voice, and in the sense that voters are incentivized to think in terms of regional confrontation.

Read in this context, Keith's somewhat ironic remark about the blue dots is in fact suggestive of a particular understanding of the relationship between geography and representation that was prevalent among the Lima conservatives. It was articulated, for instance, in relation to the practice of "gerrymandering" congressional districts.[46] During the 2005 "off-year elections"

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[46] "Gerrymandering" refers to the practice of dividing a territorial unit "into election districts to give one political party an electoral majority in a large number of districts while concentrating the voting strength of the opposition in as few districts as possible" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gerrymandering?show=0&t=1317034778, accessed on May 4, 2008). The word first appeared in print in a Boston newspaper on March 26 of 1812 in conjunction with a cartoon map of a Massachusetts state senatorial district cast in the shape of a reptile. The recent redistricting, obviously geared toward augmenting partisan control for the Jeffer-

the local party had been focused on countering a number of citizen initiatives aiming to reform various aspects of the Ohio electoral system.[47] One of these citizen initiatives—Issue 4, also known as the Ohio Redistricting Initiative—would require the drawing of more competitive electoral districts based on a mathematical formula.[48] "Fortunately, we succeeded in killing it," Jen said about the heated debate over the proposal which, according to her, "would have changed voting as we know it." While she agreed that polarized districts entailed certain problems, she defended the Republican Party's efforts, first in terms of "the simple math"—the proposal would have been negative for most Republican seats affected; but she also argued the matter in a more principled way, suggesting that "there is also a point in keeping the districts together: people have similar values, they share a lifestyle, an ideology." Representation, according to this understanding, is not simply a matter of adding up the numbers in the most mathematically effective way, it is also about reproducing a plurality of geographically defined perspectives at the level of representation.

One of the volunteers flown into Allen County by the Ohio Republican Party in the hectic last week before the general election, argued this point by inviting me to consider the hypothetical case of a region divided into one deeply red and one deeply blue area. Then, he continued, I should ask myself how these are best represented: by two moderates—if the region is simply split into two competitive congressional districts—or by one hard-line conservative and one hard-line liberal—if the region is gerrymandered to produce two safe districts. This hypothetical case brings three things in particular into relief. First, it involves the production of scale. Second, once the geographically defined community has been established (by means of subsuming internal difference in a performative process) the choice becomes one between representing and airbrushing reality. Third, what this understanding of the relationship between geography and representation implies is above all the postponement of the moment of compromise. It is not for the voter to "prematurely" consider the coexistence of different systems of value.

son Republicans, had been done under oversight of Governor Eldridge Gerry, and the reptile-like district was consequently dubbed "the Gerry-mander," The word eventually became a standard term for the spatial manipulation of electoral districts for partisan gain (Martis, 2008).

[47] An off-year election is an election held in an odd-numbered year, like 2005. Off-year elections generally feature election to federal or state-wide legislative office only in case of vacancy. Typically they are held only at the municipal level, but may also feature statewide citizen initiatives.

[48] The proposed amendment is available here in its entirety:
https://www.law.csuohio.edu/sites/default/files/lawlibrary/ohioconlaw/Scan-ReformOhioNow-Certification-1.pdf (accessed on September 24, 2011).

In light of this, "to best represent" comes to mean something like "to embody" or "to be at one with" the community. It is in this capacity of being at one with the electorate that the representative might be sent to confront other values and ways of being. In accordance with this conception, the worry most commonly attached to the figure of the representative was that of "losing touch"—of severing the bond to the community and the electorate. This concern was particularly strong in relation to the idea of relocation to Washington (or, somewhat less problematically, to Columbus), which seemed to imply not only geographical but also a spiritual, ethical and political alienation from the life world of the constituency: "Politicians are of another world," John, a construction worker in downtown Lima, told me. "It is like a machine, they might have good intentions going off to Washington, but once they get sucked into that environment, they lose touch with the people they are supposed to represent."

Frank, hanging around the church lobby after Sunday Bible Study, developed this theme more fully. Politicians, Frank suggested, "no matter how well-intentioned," are likely to be corrupted by the physical movement to Washington. "It is almost like there is a special interest among themselves that gets developed once they go there," he said, turning to mark out a physical space on an abstract textile piece occupying the wall behind him. The emergence of this special interest, Frank said, negates "the original idea of American democracy […] For what is democracy?" he rhetorically asked: "it is government of the *people, by the people*, *for the people*." The ideal model in this form of governance, Frank suggested, is the notion of a village community gathering in the shadow of a tree to debate and decide upon common issues. The problem today, he continued, is that as society progresses toward larger and less coherent units, democracy increasingly suffers from abstraction and disconnection with real people. "The representatives have become almost, like… a class in themselves," he said, struggling to find the right word and, interestingly, finding one he rarely made use of.

What, then, is the point, I asked him. Why bother with politics at all? Frank thought for a moment before answering:

> Good question, well, that is the cynical perspective I guess. There is a tremendous force on those who get elected… to get included in that… it is very difficult to resist… only very few manage to do it, it takes a person of strong character, strength […] It is difficult to know who might resist, that's the whole problem of politics. But I can say as much: if Jordan gets elected and folds I would be very disappointed… Blackwell, too, though I feel even more confident in Jordan.

With this, we are approaching the "who" of Chairman Keith Cheney's speech. It is clear that given certain understandings of the nature of disagreement, political geography and political representation, this "who" cannot be just anybody. While these understandings surely do not amount to any

positive political program, it is nonetheless clear that they delimit the politically possible in particular ways, and that to experience and visualize politics in accordance with them, is to be geared toward particular kinds of politics and particular kinds of persons. Put in another way, Keith Cheney's question to the central committee is rigged in a specific way. We may read it as: "Who [with what strength of character, understood in term of resistibility to external pressure] can best represent [personify, embody] our [as opposed to their] values?"

To occupy the place of the representative in this conception of politics one must tap into this structure. Listen, for instance, to one of the regulars at Rousculp Church of Christ, thinking out loud about what it is he "likes" about gubernatorial candidate Kenneth Blackwell, despite "not knowing much about him, really."

> Well, his Christian values… he's against abortion, gay marriage, that sort of thing. That gives you a sense of his character—you want to know what kind of person they are, if you're to vote for them. This is a conservative area, and we need someone to represent our views. Once in office all kinds of pressures set in, it is all like: I did this for you, you do this for me; and nobody is perfect, but at least that gives you a clue of what kind of person he is. It's hard to know really, but that's really what it boils down to. Everyone says they're going to do good things, but the question is: will they do what they say?

During the 2006 election cycle several local campaigns made very explicit use of these kinds of geographical references. Congressional candidate Jim Jordan's campaign literature, for instance, emphasized that

> Jim Jordan's beliefs are deeply rooted in the traditional family values of our area. As a member of Congress, he will work tirelessly to stand up for our values, defend our constitutional rights and, and protect our liberties. Jim Jordan helped lead Ohio's effort to protect the traditional definition of marriage […] He will continue to boldly stand up for our families and our values as a member of Congress.

Geographical references to area and state are here effectively coupled with the idea of resistibility, of boldly taking a stand. To similar effect, but a bit more playfully, one of Jordan's radio ads featured the candidate stating his conviction that "marriage is marriage" over an incessant banjo riff. Matt Huffman, running for Ohio State Congress, had all four rubrics of his campaign pamphlet geographically coded: "Deep Allen County Roots," "Active in the Community," "A Record of Accomplishment for the Allen County Community," "Committed to Allen County's Future."

It is in this context that specifically "propositional" or "confessional" issues, that have politicians stating their convictions—about gun ownership rights, abortion, or gay marriage—become particularly charged, because they provide an arena where one can plant and pick up clues about convic-

tion and character, and express and perceive local belonging and immersion in the lifestyle or life world one is to represent. This is particularly true of issues that are readily framed as in some remote sense "inopportune" and thus as "tough stance." An issue like gun ownership rights, for instance, has, apart from being a concern in its own right, the added value of conjuring up precisely this sense of *our* values. It dramatizes geographically coded differences of opinion, specifically between the rural and the urban, in ways that let voters feel they, at least, did not give anything away prematurely to some remote opposition.

Another vital campaign issue, the question of religion, might be understood along similar lines. To play a part in this electoral drama about conviction and resistibility to external pressure, it is almost as if Christianity is forced into a literalist mold. It is only as literal faith in the word of the Bible as God's eternal truth that religiosity can come to function as a watershedding electoral reference point in this way. The idea of biblical interpretation, conversely, begs questions rather than settling them, thus inviting suspicion of amenability to persuasion. Literalism thus emerges as a space for voters and candidates to mediate the demands of representation.

This is what ultimately interests me: how the demands of representation, as understood by the Lima conservatives, become part of the very fabric of political themes and motives as such. If biblical literalism and fundamentalism within the American context mainly has been understood as a cultural force influencing politics from the outside, it may be worth posing the question the other way around: To what extent has contemporary biblical literalism been shaped by impulses flowing from the political realm? That is, to what extent is the contemporary "fundamentalist" potentially a moderately conservative figure at heart, but one enticed, if not required, to ask him- or herself the rigged political question of "who" in abstract terms? More generally, to what extent can certitude or conviction as a kind of campaign fetish, be approached in this way?

This question, it seems, effectively summarizes the point I have been trying to make. What I hope to have shown is how the conservatives in and around the Lima Republican Party understand "the political"—the nature of disagreement, the meaning of political geography, and the nature of representation—in a specific way and how this in effect sets the stage for a particular kind of politics. Making use of a concept developed in a different context by Hanna Pitkin (1969), we may think of this as a "metapolitics"— an understanding of the stakes of politics that undergirds but does not amount to a positive political program.[49] In concluding this chapter, I want to

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[49] In her influential inventory of the concept of political representation, Pitkin (1969) suggests that "[w]hat position a particular theorist adopts [...] depends very much on how he sees and understands all the substantive political issues involved: the nature of interests, welfare, or wants; the capacities of representative and represented; the relationship between a nation and

contextualize the metapolitics emerging from the preceding discussion. To do so, I turn to consider briefly a long-staying interest within political philosophy in the inherently tenuous or paradoxical nature of democracy. This will be helpful for better understanding the problems to which the conceptions encountered above provide makeshift responses.

III. Paradoxes of Democracy

Anthropology has an obvious strength in its ability to trace "variations associated with the term *democracy*" (Paley 2008: 5, italics in original) as to denaturalize and render thinkable what David Nugent (2008) has usefully called "normative democracy"—that is, a dominant form of liberal democracy with a particular Western genealogy. For this approach to make sense, however, attentiveness to variation must be accompanied by sustained efforts to what makes sense of what, if not the prevailing common sense, nonetheless make these variations specifically variations *of democracy*. In this context, it seems to me that political philosophy can be of some help. Conservatives in Lima, as I have tried to demonstrate above, operate with a particular notion of democracy. Below I want to suggest that this notion can productively be understood as a mediation of tensions engendered by democracy as a form of governance distinct from other forms.

Debates about the inherently tenuous nature of democracy go back at least as far as Plato's famous treatment of Socrates' trial and execution in *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito*. Plato's Socrates, to recall, faced the paradoxical situation of being wrongfully accused by a system of governance which he in principle thought just and whose procedures he had, at least tacitly, consented to and benefited from. To honor this consent, Socrates rejected the possibility of escaping from prison and faced his execution (see Pitkin 1965 and 1966 for a useful discussion). In this sense, Socrates' fate presents us with the democratic contradiction between the demands of collective decision-making and those of individual proliferation and well-being at its purest. Being a subject of democratic governance, this suggests, involves navigating contradictory, sometimes perhaps even paradoxical, demands. Speaking in general of the problems inherent in democratic theory, Barry Holden (1974) has suggested that they all "stem from one central difficulty: how can many and different individual decisions be combined in such a way that it might be said that all the individuals have made a single decision (or set of decisions)?" (Holden 1974: 98). This "central difficulty," Holden demonstrates, generates a wide array of problems, ranging from questions of the kind that

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its subdivisions, the role of political parties and elections; and the very nature of political questions. It depends, in short, on what one might call his 'metapolitics'" (Pitkin 1969: 20).

Socrates faced about the nature of democratic consent and obligation; via issues of minority-majority relations; to the logical difficulties associated with aggregating voters' preference rankings (as opposed to only their first preferences) (1974: 98–119).

More recently, a number of influential political theorists have taken contradiction—variously construed and variously seen as a weakness or as strength—as central to, even constitutive of, democracy as such. William Connolly (1987), for instance, has identified a tension between the individuation and the harmonization of individuality and collectivity as central in this respect. John Dunn (1979) has described democracy as located at the crossroads of two incompatible rationalities: one based on the principle of the "least bad alternative," the other on the principle of substantive human joy and fulfillment. Claude Lefort (1986) has argued that the democratic "emptying" of the locus of power implies an institutionalization of conflict, or even of the non-existence of society, in a certain sense. While the specifics of these debates and discourses lie beyond the scope of this study, they provide it with a context for considering one particular treatment of the tenuous nature of democracy more specifically: Richard Wollheim's so called "paradox of democracy."

Wollheim's Paradox

The much debated "paradox of democracy" formulated by the British philosopher Richard Wollheim (1962) tied the problem of consent and obligation more explicitly to the specific context of democratic elections, and gave it a rather more technical twist. The difficulty with which Wollheim concerns himself appears in the relationship between "the democrat," as a figure implied by the notion of democracy, and what Wollheim terms the "democratic machine," a machine which aggregates individual choices to produce the best favored option.[50] A democrat, in Wollheim's conception, is minimally committed to the belief that this aggregate outcome ought to be enacted. It then follows that

> if a man expresses the choice for A and the machine expresses a choice for B, then the man, if he is to be a sound democrat, seems to be committed to the belief that A ought to be the case *and* to the belief that B ought to be the case […] If this is so, then the difficulty would seem to constitute a paradox in the very heart of democratic theory. (Wollheim 1962: 78, emphasis in original)

Simply put, the democrat, in order to be part of the collective decision making process, must hold commitments about which course of action that ought

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[50] To avoid confusion, it may be worth emphasizing that "democrat" here refers not to supporters of the Democratic Party but to anyone committed to a democratic form of government.

to be taken. Yet at the same time, the democrat must be committed to the opposite, if that is what the demos decide. That is, ideally "the democrat" does not merely participate in the opposite course of action as someone following an injunction supported by threat or physical force; he or she does so as the co-author of the command. In this sense, Holden's "central difficulty" is at work in Wollheim's paradox, too.[51] Wollheim's own attempt at dissolving the paradox rests on a distinction between "direct" and "oblique" moral principles. This allows him to locate convictions about specific issues and convictions about procedural outcomes on different levels, and thus on non-conflictual terms. Others have suggested there is no paradox (Schiller 1969), or that the paradox is banal in the sense that it is merely an example of incompatibility between general moral principles (Harrison 1970)—a solution that seems to miss the crucial point that if there indeed is a paradox specifically pertaining to democracy it is because democracy as a specific institution systematically produces situations of this kind.

The strictly logical question aside, I find Wollheim's formulation instructive in the framework of what one may call a "phenomenology of democracy," that is as a description of how the political appears, or becomes an object of experience, for the "democrat." Conceived along those lines, Wollheim's account simply points out something distinctive about living in and with democracy. To restate the point in terms of the purposes of this chapter, perhaps one can say that the subject of democratic citizenship necessarily finds him- or herself in the tenuous, if not paradoxical, position of being both a "voter"—committed to particular "truths"—and a "democrat"—committed to the outcome produced by the democratic machine and ultimately to the reduction of these particular "truths" to "opinions" in the democratic contract. The question then becomes how the contradictory demands of commitment and compromise are to be mediated in practice.

Taken in this sense, Wollheim's paradox speaks not only to classical "democratic theory" in Holden's sense, but to contemporary and, in a sense, less esoteric debates about the current state of democracy and political participation—debates that seem to have gained in intensity following the 9/11 attacks, the "war on terror," the increased visibility on the world stage of a variety of so called "fundamentalisms," and the gradual deterioration of the "secularization thesis." At stake in these debates, is precisely how to negotiate the uneasy relationship between conviction and compromise, between political intensity and procedural balance.

Perhaps, as some critics of liberal democracy argue, "the current 'post-political' *Zeitgeist*" (Mouffe 2005: 8, italics in original) with its emphasis on

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[51] It has been pointed out that Wollheim's paradox might be seen as "a contemporary version of the paradox to which Rousseau addressed himself. Namely, the problem of how the democrat can reconcile his subscription to the majority rule […] with his own judgment about what ought to be done" (Schiller, 1969)

tolerance and consensus and—that is on "opinion" rather than "truth"—ignores the demands of proper political struggle, even to the point of negating the antagonistic core of "the political" as such, rendering them unthinkable from the standpoint of democracy. Chantal Mouffe, for instance, suggests that

> [t]he political cannot be grasped by liberal rationalism for the simple reason that every consistent rationalism requires negating the irreducibility of antagonism. Liberalism has to negate antagonism since […] what antagonism reveals is the very limit of any rational consensus. As far as liberal thought adheres to individualism and rationalism, its blindness to the political in its antagonistic dimension is therefore not a mere empirical omission but a constitutive one. (Mouffe, 2005:12)

Postponed Compromises

The theoretical discussion about the nature of democracy provides a context for understanding what I referred to above as "metapolitics." It is to the extent that a tension between truth and opinion, conviction and compromise, voter and democrat, is endemic to democracy, and therefore in some sense permanent, that democracy must be mediated through some kind of "metapolitical" sensibility. That is, since such tensions cannot be transcended, they must be lived with in some way. This gives us some sense of the stakes involved in the ethnographic situations considered above, from Adam's zigzag path through a Delphos neighborhood, via the ORP Candidate Training Seminar, to Jen's and Andrew's preoccupation with political geography and Keith's concern with "*our* values."

In these situations, I argue, my informants grapple with the paradox of democracy in a particular way. For them, it is not for the democratic subject to "prematurely" consider how a diversity of perspectives may ultimately be incorporated into some harmonious whole, but merely to vote his or her identity, and then "let the fight begin," so to speak. The moment of democratic compromise is, in a sense, postponed, and its outcome is imagined as something of a "byproduct" that can be achieved only by not paying direct attention to it. One side of the "paradox of democracy"— the idea of the citizen as "democrat"—is externalized and rendered superfluous, while the ideal of a "voter" committed to particular truths is given free scope. Thus a space for a certain kind of ideological inflexibility is opened up by the fact that plurality is always already there in specific ways. As I try to show in the following, this in turn shapes the content of conservative politics.

3. "Liberals Hate It!"

In February of 2006, as I drove into Lima for the first time, I passed a road-side billboard ad for a local talk radio station. The billboard advised passers-by to tune into its AM frequency, and added, by way of persuasion, the simple assertion that "liberals hate it." Naturally, I followed this advice, finding there a well-known mix of local news, syndicated talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, Christian call-in shows and contemporary Christian music. It seemed likely that quite a few liberals would indeed dislike many of these programs.

The catchphrase of the ad had nonetheless struck me as somewhat peculiar, and it sprang to mind a couple of weeks later, as I was starting to make my way into the local Republican establishment. I had been invited by Keith Cheney, the chairman of the Allen County Republican Party, to partake in a central committee meeting at The Civic Center in downtown Lima. Apart from overseeing the swearing-in of four new party members, the meeting was to mark the beginning of the general election season. Keith was "rallying the troops," he said. The assembly had pledged allegiance to the flag and the party, and the aspirants had approached the podium to take an oath, before Keith commenced his rallying speech. He lingered first on the "historical battle" of 2004, and in particularly on the exceptional energies that had been released in the local campaign efforts. The election cycle of 2006, he continued, would perhaps not display the same apparently epic qualities, and truth be told, the prospects for Republicans were, by and large, "looking grim." The election outcome would nevertheless be absolutely vital for the future, not least because of the effect it would potentially have on the upcoming redistricting process, which was to set the table for statewide politics for a decade to come.[52]

The main points of Keith's speech were easily graspable even for a newcomer to Ohioan politics. The force behind the emotional peak of the speech, however, failed to make immediate sense to me. It came as Keith was assur-

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[52] Redistricting is the process of redrawing electoral distinct boundaries in response to demographic changes registered in the decennial population count performed by the United States Census Bureau. It is in this context that "gerrymandering" may occur (see note 46).

ing his audience that despite the bleakness of the situation, the party would prevail. "We will defeat *the enemy,*" he exclaimed. This last word, uttered with exultant emphasis, was immediately greeted with spontaneous clapping and cheering, at an intensity that struck me as disproportionate. Keith further emphasized his choice of wording by adding that: "Yes, I know what "enemy" means; I looked it up in the dictionary. It doesn't mean to say you're out to kill someone, just that you're not afraid to face the reality of the situation." After the meeting, as people were slowly getting out of their seats, I turned to the woman next to me to ask about the enthusiasm these remarks had provoked. A month or so prior, she explained, the daughter of one of the most prominent local Democrats had written an opinion piece in the *Lima News*. She had criticized the local Republicans for deploying inflammatory rhetoric to stir up political controversy and stifle sensible debate. The piece had mentioned Chairman Cheney in particular for referring to the Democrats as "the enemy" at a recent Republican Party campaign event. At issue, another seat neighbor, whom I later came to know as Keith, chipped in, was "not just words" but "real political difference." According to the Democratic world-view conflicts and differences are always to be smoothed over, Keith explained, continuing: "and if that's the kind of world they want, you know. As Republicans we need to stand up for the fact that we don't accept certain things. Why would I pretend I'm OK with what you're saying if I'm not? That's all just smoke and mirrors."

In retrospect, these two snapshots—the roadside billboard and Keith's Cheney's remark—strike me as a rather appropriate introduction to the field. What stands out in them is a certain willingness, perhaps even an urge, to confront, to oppose, to recognize or make contraries real. In both the ad and Keith's remark, as it was fleshed out by my seat neighbors, it is not just that a certain distinction in political thought or preference is made or pointed out. Crucially, the very act of pointing is also included in the statement itself. We are to be reminded, by its style and tenor, of who is who in the conflict in question, and on which side conviction, fighting spirit and the will to draw a line is to be found. Crucially, it was not primarily some particular issue that had the crowd at the Civic Centre excited, but rather a certain attitude toward issues in general. At political rallies, in informal conversations, and in the Bible study at Rousculp Church of Christ, conservative identity was continuously re-animated by such an explicitly contrarian ethos. While the preceding chapter provided a general outline of a conservative metapolitics, this chapter considers one particularly important aspect of it—the liberal enemy.

I. The Liberal

I have already indicated in the preceding chapter some of the attributes typically ascribed by Lima conservatives to the political opposition. I noted that "liberalism" and "the liberal," as the most general names for this opposition, would often be conceived along the lines of political opportunism, more specifically as an elaborate form for the buying of votes, in terms of being an unexamined habit, or as form of intellectual snobbery accessible only for those with educational capital.

The billboard ad and Chairman Cheney's speech suggest a few additional liberal qualities: lack of conviction, a particular kind of intolerance or self-grandeur and, further, a certain touchiness or proneness for feeling "hurt." "Liberals hate it," because they believe they are a little bit better than the common man; because the passionate confidence—in America, in God, the market, freedom or the troops—disseminated over the airways will make them feel uncomfortable. They think they see through all that. Liberals themselves, as Keith suggested in relation to the enemy remark, are unable or unwilling to believe in anything with conviction.

On the other hand, as Katie emphasized in the previous chapter, liberals are also too sure themselves, in the sense that they think they know better than the average man, how he should live: "They just think they have got it all figured out, they how everything works, and they are offended that they in their infinite wisdom aren't running the show, deciding how it all should be." Such contradictions are in fact evident on all points. Depending on context, conservatives in Lima would associate liberalism with unthinking habit or intellectual snobbery; with the "dependence" of what was often termed, in typical contrarian manner, "the so-called poor," and with the tastes and habits of the "cultural elite"; with cynicism or naïveté. Yet as we will see, such inconsistencies do not subtract from the usefulness of the concept of "the liberal." What we need to be aware of, from the outset, is that "the liberal" above all is a flexible rhetorical form, rather than a failed mythological construct.

In everyday interaction, "the liberal"—or "the Democrat," "the atheist," "the pacifist," "the socialist"—was not primarily a *topic* of discourse. More typically, the liberal was there as a reminder, a figure whose presence was subtly suggested in a joke, or a choice of wording. Quoting the other's discourse—real or imaginary—was one particularly prominent form for these hints. People would half-jokingly refer to themselves or each other in the terms of the familiar stereotype of an ignorant, chauvinistic, and uncompassionate small-town conservative redneck. A statement of opinion—for instance that "most people on welfare are really just too lazy to work"—could be amended with "oh, but where are my manners" or "I really need to sign up for sensitivity training." In a similar vein, the one of the volunteers at the

provisional "victory center," set up in the weeks before the general election, stroked the arm of her husband as he was rounding off a lengthy rant on the Iraq war and lovingly called him "my little redneck."

At times, such imaginary "quoting" would be extended into more elaborate acting. Someone particularly prone to this was Pastor Frank, who liked to play the role of "the atheist" during discussions of moral and political issues in the Bible study. Slouching back in his chair, arms across his chest, he would defiantly answer every positive claim with a "why?" or a "says who?" thus making tangible the supposed arrogance and vacuity of critical thought in the absence of a God. Another mainstay of his actor's toolkit was a British accent, which actually sounded more like Ohioan on helium, and which he sometimes used to convey the overbearing and condescending mannerism of the imagined speaker.

An interesting ambiguity is at work in this quotidian practice. On the one hand, it reads as satirical appropriations of the other's discourse. We can indeed almost hear the quotation marks surrounding each of the active terms in question: "manners," "sensitivity," and "redneck." The normative values of each term, the prevailing sense of moral worth ascribed to the phenomenon signified, are conserved, so to speak, within the quote itself. Manners, as something in itself, are still a good thing, and rednecks, in and of themselves, are still dumb white guys with pickup trucks. The speaker is above all reminding himself and his listeners of the remote presence of a political or cultural other, inclined to deploy these meanings to do harm, and thus ultimately of the callousness of this remote other. On the other hand, such expressions may also tend toward a statement about the actual speaking subject. The quotation marks in a sense "wither away" and the utterance comes to index the other only indirectly. In the first example above, this would include the actual claim of not being mannered, and by extension the notion that manners are not actually valuable, that they, for instance, incline you toward avoiding conflicts grounded in the truth of a situation. Along similar lines, the ignorance of the redneck may also be understood as a levelheadedness of sorts.

The listener is in a sense free to laugh in both directions. In its ambiguity, this discursive form becomes a mediator of tensions of conservative identity, perhaps most obviously that between someone like Paul, a moderate upper class old-old establishment Republican, who lamented the "redneckification" of the local party, and Keith, uneducated, underpaid, proud owner of a pickup truck, and much more open to the positive dimensions of redneckhood. Less obviously perhaps, it mediates the tension between conservative identity as on the one hand firmly mainstream and on the other as identified with the unthankful but heroic task of preserving a value system increasingly alien to contemporary American life. The quotidian joke does not demand clarification on either of the points.

The Culture War Thesis and Its Critics

The ideological remoteness of the liberal opposition was typically understood as the outcome of a process of gradual polarization over time. In conversations with Republicans and Democrats alike, this theme constantly came up, most typically in the shape of a claim about the other side—Republicans or conservatives, Democrats or liberals—that they had grown "more radical" in recent times. From the Republican side of this supposedly growing rift, it was for instance clear, as several people independently told me, that John F. Kennedy "would have been Republican today"—that he would never had stood for the "pro-abortionism" and "economic interventionism" of the Democratic Party anno 2006.[53]

John, an Ohio Republican Party official, dwelt on his theme in relation to his experience of campaigning during a door-to-door walk in a Columbus suburb. In his experience, grassroots politics had undergone massive transformations since he had first got involved in political campaigning some fifteen years ago. In particular, he had noticed tremendous shifts in people's habits of party affiliation. When he started out, politics had seemed, in a sense, much more confusing. Back then, political worldview, creed or general philosophy did not necessarily determine your party affiliation. Today, everything seemed to him much more predictable. "If I know, for example, that someone is conservative, socially, economically, or steady church-goers, well, I can pretty much conclude they're probably with us [the Republican Party]. But if they're more liberal, less devout, they're probably not."

Such accounts must first be located in the context of a larger debate. The idea of ongoing political polarization or "culture war" represents a "major and persuasive theme in discourse about American society" (Baker 2005: 5), one with appeal well beyond the ranks of Republican campaign activists. "Images of U.S. society as polarized into warring moral camps are increasingly evoked by political leaders, media pundits, and scholars alike" (Davies and Robertson 1996: 756). The polarization debate largely stems from the formulation of the culture war thesis launched by sociologist James Davison Hunter in his *Culture War* (1991), and elaborated further in the dramatically titled follow-up, *Before the Shooting Begins* (1994). The proponents of the culture war thesis argued that Americans were increasingly polarized into two opposing camps over issues of religion and morality (see e.g., Baker 2005: 64–73 for a useful summary). On one side are Americans of orthodox religious views, who subscribe to biblical literalism, moral absolutism, and traditional views of family, gender roles, and sexuality. On the opposing side are those with less orthodox views on religion, who tend toward relativism, and who promote gender equality and tolerance. These diverging

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[53] Or, as The Simpsons had Fox News announce in one episode: "J.F.K turned Republican post mortem."

worldviews, the culture war theorists further argued, were increasingly defining American politics through confrontation on a number of so-called "hot-button issues" like abortion, gun control, separation of church and state, stem cell research and same sex marriage.

The polarization thesis, which struck a chord not only with pundits, but with many ordinary Americans as well (Winseman 2004), has also generated a great deal of empirical work, testing its claims. DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson (1996) first tested it against decades of General Social Survey data, and a number of other scholars have done work along similar lines (e.g., Baker 2005; Evans 1996; Fischer and Hout 2006; Wolfe 1999). Generally speaking, these studies found little or no evidence to support the claim that Americans in general were becoming more polarized on social issues—with the exception of abortion (e.g., Baker 2005: 74)[54]—or along demographic lines. Instead, most studies have found that "American values" have been both surprisingly stable and evenly dispersed across large segments of the population (Baker 2005). What is more, "on many controversial topics, Americans seemed to agree more in 2005 than they did in 1970" (Fischer and Mattson 2009: 438).

That fact notwithstanding, political controversies surrounding social and moral issues did escalate through the 1990s and 2000s. What studies have found is growing divergence between Republican and Democratic officials and activists since the 1970s onward. Party positions have become more internally coherent and more closely aligned to the religious-secular divisions at stake in the culture war thesis (Fischer and Mattson 2009: 438). Thus while Americans have not become more divided in terms of substantive issues, they have "increasingly sorted themselves by party association" so that party affiliation has increasingly "conveyed clearer signals about ideology and policy and more sharply demarcated voters in 2005 than in 1970" (Fischer and Mattson 2009: 439). John's fifteen years of experience as a campaigner thus seemed to have endowed him with a certain practical sense of these changes.

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[54] It is worth noting, however, that Ebaugh (2007) criticizes Baker (2005)—and implicitly the DiMaggio and Evans work Barker draws on—for not taking the "exception" of abortion seriously enough. "I take issue with Baker's conclusion [that the culture war is largely a fiction]" Ebaugh writes, "especially as to the importance of divergent American attitudes toward "family values," and, in particular, abortion […] It is precisely in the arena of "family values," including such issues as gay marriage, stem cell research, cloning, assisted suicide, and pre-marital sex, that moral-absolutist and moral-relativist stances most clearly divide Americans along religious lines, with conservative/evangelical churches and organizations more likely to assume absolutist positions and mainline churches more open to relativist positions. What Baker sees as the exception to the convergence of America's values, namely, abortion and its correlates, I see as the current litmus test for political candidates and as having the potential to divide the country along lines not seen since the single issue of slavery divided North and South" (Ebaugh 2007: 5–6). That remark also effectively conveys the difficulty of actually settling the polarization question simply through providing "more evidence."

Polarization as a Project

Addressing these issues through ethnography provides insights that are both complementary and alternative. In fact, ethnography can add something to this discussion that it is difficult to capture with statistical data—a sense of the situational character of "values" and "opinions." The notion of deep level consensus cutting through superficial differences makes sense in relation to the Lima ethnography, despite the fact that liberals, as we have seen, were readily framed as "the enemy" by my informants. During the course of fieldwork, presumably as people got more comfortable around me, political phrases and formulaic statements often gave way to more nuanced ideas and sentiments. Jen, for instance, often spoke of the welfare state as little more than producer and maintainer of a chronically poor, state dependent, and therefore Democratic-leaning electoral segment. Nonetheless she explained in a more thoughtful moment that those who "*really* cannot take care of themselves" or "receive help from their communities" must get medical and economic help from society. This seemed to recast her initial denouncement of welfare *tout court* as a hyperbolic overstatement. Analogously, the pro-life battle cry that "abortion is murder" in fact rarely carried the conviction that abortionists in fact are murderers and ought to be convicted as such (see below). Such examples suggest precisely that on a wide range of heated issues, there may be more agreement than apparent at first sight. Or as Paul told me in a moment of self-reflection: "I think we sometimes set up these mystical fictions of how the other side thinks and acts. The differences are perhaps more cultural than anything."

Deep level consensus, then, but on the other hand, as the quote also implies, "polarization" can mean very different things—a push to set up "mystical fictions of how the other side thinks," for example. If there is real agreement, then what explains the drive to create symbolic conflict? The fact that rigid distinctions and oversimplifications, deployed consciously or not, have become socially useful in specific ways must be understood as important and interesting in itself. More generally, the "shared values thesis," though no doubt partially valid, seems to me incomplete, because it is based on too crude a distinction between the real and the symbolic. For anthropologists, of course, symbols are always real in effect and consequences, if nothing else. This, incidentally, is something we share with conservatives who often denounce as arrogant the dismissal of "their" issues as "merely symbolic." No doubt, conservatives share more with the opposition than they would like to acknowledge, but this very act of misrecognition must be considered a fact in its own right. Perhaps "polarization" should be taken in a slightly different sense—not as an already established set of objective differences, but rather as a continuous process, or a project.

This conceptual shift is also implied by the way contrarian discourse actually unfolds in everyday interaction. Above, we saw "the liberal" emerge

as an inherently paradoxical figure, in a sense even impossible to believe in. Now, one of the most striking things about contrarian discourse was in fact its self-conscious disregard for realism—the mood of playfulness, careless-ness or, if you will, "non-literalism" animating it. No doubt, the figure of liberal at times appeared as an enemy real enough, but just as often it was deployed as an entertaining or vaguely useful overstatement. This, in a sense, immunizes contrarianism against the facts formulated by the shared values thesis, assuring it efficiency beyond any empirical reference.

Consider, for instance, the following discussion of infidelity from the Bible Study at Rousculp Church of Christ in which this particular usefulness was made explicit. Frank had opened the discussion by telling us, in his words, a "real story" about a man who leaves his wife and kid so that he may continue "screwing the maid." At a certain point of his monologue, Frank glimpsed an opportunity to make use of the Swedish—read atheistic—presence in the room. This was not at all uncommon. "So Erik," he said, "I guess in Sweden most people would be ok with this, huh…You know, who's to say what's right or wrong? This guy… he's to follow his heart, right?"

Frank's remark had come across as somewhat uncharacteristically blunt and before I had time to think of a proper line of response Susan had inter-vened. "Frank, that's actually not… really fair. It's not like you can't have a sense of right and wrong even if you don't have Jesus." Her voice had risen and gained a slight but noticeable edge. Several other participants loudly agreed. Frank all of a sudden found himself outnumbered. His voice strug-gled to rise above the chatter: "Guys, guys, calm down, that's not exactly what I said. I was just making a point… sure you *might* have it [morals], but, really—why? It might be more of a conventional thing, I guess, but if you'd sit down and ask them, there would be no real *reason* for it." With this, Frank appeared to effectively have defused the emergent situation.

Everyone present was likely to have recognized Frank's point as one be-longing to his standard repertoire, frequently evoked in sermons and casual conservations, in- and outside the church. It turned on the distinction be-tween a morality grounded in the explicit language of the Bible and one sub-sisting in the habits and customs of individuals and communities. While the biblical literalist has "reasons" for his moral stance, the traditionalist does not. The moral atheist—or more precisely non-literalist, since the distinction turns on ones attitude toward biblical language—is thus cast as either oblivi-ous or hypocritical. On any given issue, he or she might "get it right," moral-ly speaking, but for the wrong reasons. I will return to the implications of this line of argumentation in Chapter 4. Here, I would merely like to draw attention to Frank's first line of defense—the insistence that he was "just making a point," implying that we should not take the particulars too seri-ously; that they existed in his discourse only in a secondary or provisional way. The actual point, it seemed, had been directing our attention away from the level of the empirically demonstrable—the level at which the initial reac-

tion of Susan and the others had lingered—and toward a purely philosophical level on which we would be free to speculate about differences in the abstract.

Jennifer, wife of Adam, the young candidate for county commissioner, provides us with a parallel example. Standing outside the Republican booth at the annual Allen County Fair, she was reflecting on the relationship between religious faith and politics:

> Well, Republicans tend to be more religious, Democrats more atheistic. At least that's the general idea, but I know in many cases, it might as well be the other way around […] Politics is really about practical matters, you know, how to solve this or that problem, so in terms of faith I don't think it's all that straightforward, really.

Reservations about this and other "general ideas" often surfaced in interviews and conversations. What was striking, however, was that this did not necessarily subtract from their usefulness. Jennifer's remarks, for instance, was directly preceded by a reference to her religious faith as the condition *sine qua non* of her loyalty to the Republican Party, as if the two had been simply premises of a deductive argument. Just as Susan and the others in the bible study had been able to appreciate the usefulness of Frank's moral distinctions once they had been amended with a certain measure of empirical modesty, Jennifer apparently found a particular kind of utility in the idea of Republicans as inherently religious, even amidst doubts about its factual status.

If, at this point, we return briefly to where I began this chapter—in the car, driving past the talk radio billboard ad—we can see that its catchphrase, which initially had struck me as somewhat peculiar, actually makes more sense when read in light of the remarks above. For when people actually commented on the *Rush Limbaugh Show* or some other program offered by the station, it was clear that many of them "tuned in" precisely in the blatantly oppositional manner suggested by the billboard itself. To most frequent listeners, the general attitude or atmosphere of poking fun at liberals actually "rang truer" than the particular content, which was generally taken with a grain of salt—a fact often lost on critics of conservative talk radio.

What these episodes suggest, then, is that the "liberal" was not at all times or exclusively an allegedly empirical figure, but also a merely hypothetical one—the embodiment a philosophical attitude or a stand-in for tendencies and dangers lurking in human nature, in American life in particular or in the contemporary in general. Taken as such, it becomes clearer why inaccuracies or inconsistencies pertaining to the image of the other appeared unproblematic—it is a discourse geared toward effects.

Reproduction, Formation

From the standpoint of anthropological theory, conservative's ongoing performative preoccupation with "the other" might be understood from the perspective of social reproduction. Social categories, anthropologists have often emphasized, are never purely descriptive, but in fact always performative in some sense. On topics ranging from ethnicity and ethnic conflicts (e.g., Barth 1969), to gender (e.g., Moore 1994) and identity (e.g., Hall and du Gay 1996; Taylor 1994) anthropologists and sociologists have grappled with the processes whereby a "we" or an "I" emerge in large part through a concern with that which separates them from an outside—what Freud termed "the narcissism of small differences." The experience of sameness, similarity, or self-identity is never simply there, but only becomes possible in relation to a sense of difference.

One might assume that this mechanism has a specific role to play in the context of a political universe that, by and large, functions as a political two-party system, where electoral success typically assumes the establishment of an unholy alliance; in fact, American political history might productively be read as the history of such alliances. Even if the Allen County Republican Party is a relatively homogeneous organization, I could quote numerous instances where contrarianism worked to smooth over internal division in very concrete ways despite its emergent tensions. Amidst emergent internal conflict about the causes, possible mistakes and futures of the Iraq war, for example, it was always convenient to turn the conversation to the liberal media establishment's war coverage instead (I discuss this at length in Chapter 4).

While social reproduction and internal cohesion are thus clearly at stake in contrarian discourse, this seems to me to be only part of the picture. First, the relationship between reproduction and what I identify as the figurative style of contrarian discourse is unclear. Reproduction, it seems to me, would rather imply sincere misrecognition in one way or another—in the reproductive schema, difference is *unconsciously* overstated, imagined or misconstrued. From this standpoint it makes more sense to think of contrarianism as a flexible form that renders particular identities inhabitable and a particular politics thinkable. The subtle difference, which in no way implies incompatibility, is perhaps above all one of temporal emphasis. On the one hand, contrarianism might be taken as a way of organizing what is already there—this is, for example, what is accomplished when attention is turned from the Iraq war to the "liberal" journalist covering it. On the other, the figure of the opposition might be taken to open up a space for particular forms of identity and thought. The constant reminder of the presence of the other, then, is not only to recall the bigger difference dwarfing emergent internal squabbles, it is also to call to attention and remembrance the conditions under which one is thinking and acting politically. It enables the subject to think, speak and

act politically in certain ways given what the liberal—at once vaguely empirical and merely hypothetical—is up to.

II. Political Becoming

This formative function of opposition becomes particularly apparent if we look at how people narrate the relationship between personal life and political conviction. Such stories sometimes capture precisely how unstated impulses and intuitions accumulate and solidify into convictions and identities over time, in ways unthinkable without the reference point of "the other." Let us turn to consider a small selection of examples of such stories, starting with two key informants already somewhat familiar from the preceding discussion.

Narrative Work

Jen and Frank live together with their four children in a small house just to the north of Lima city proper. To recall, she works part time at the Allen County Republican Party office; he is the pastor at Rousculp Church of Christ, and, in his spare time, the moderator of a political blog, *Conservative Culture*. Both, but Frank in particular, also devote considerable time to the home-schooling of their children. Their biographies overlap to a certain degree. They are both from relatively humble origins. Both are also converts to the conservative cause, motivated in large part by what they speak of as "social" and "moral" concerns—particularly the "three Gs" that Paul identified as main rallying points for the new local party majority (see the Introduction, page 13). This was particularly true of Frank, for whom god, gays and guns were standard themes of sermons, Bible study sessions and blog posts alike.

These biographical similarities withstanding, Frank and Jen came from radically different backgrounds. In Frank's words, Jen's story "proves that in America anyone can make it." Jen, daughter of union autoworkers, spent her early years in a downtrodden Detroit suburb—a place where, she said, "the ugliness people are capable of is on display on a daily basis." Among other things, Jen's parents were "swingers." They regularly threw parties where guests would leave their car keys on the kitchen table on arrival and then go home with whoever fished them out of the pile at the end of the evening. The parents divorced when Jen was thirteen. As the only one of four siblings, Jen went to stay with her father in a trailer park in a small town in Indiana. One morning a couple of years later, she woke up to find her father missing. In the ensuing chaos a local church helped her out with money for food and a network of supporting adults so that she could stay in school and eventually graduate.

Proof of the validity of the "American dream" or not, Jen's biography and political worldview are inscribed and redoubled in each other in a rather remarkable way. It is almost as if she had spent her formative years living through a conservative morality fable. Brought up and abandoned by Democratic union factory workers, who now personify for her everything despicable she ascribes to post 1968 liberalism—"entitlement mentality," atheism, relativism, urbanism, irresponsibility, promiscuity—she somehow managed, with the help of precisely the kind of church-based local community she is convinced must be the foundation of any decent society, to break with a social legacy that still seemed to be haunting her siblings. Through this she had confirmed to herself that in America you can indeed make a better life for yourself and your children as long as you have faith and optimism.

Frank grew up on a small farm in Michigan together with his parents and grandparents. He often referred to this setting as a social ideal: the rural community in which everyone knew what you were up to and there was a natural sense of social cohesion. Yet there was also something unresolved in his background that he was reluctant to talk about. He no longer stays in touch with his parents or close relatives. His parents distanced themselves from him when he was "reborn" in his early twenties. He narrates this religious rebirth—though he actively resists the word "religious"—as the indirect outcome of an episode at college when he suffered ridicule for "speaking out against the liberal consensus on pornography" at campus. Drawing out the implications of this experience, Frank said, led him to reformulate his relationship with Christ.

Establishing distance towards things liberal was an ongoing concern—especially in relation to their children. Frank and Jen have four children together, two boys and two girls, ranging in age from eight to seventeen, and all frequent campaigners who proudly wear their Republican campaign t-shirts around town. Since Frank and Jen do not trust the school system to instill in their children the values and ideals they feel they need to lead good and successful lives, all four of them are homeschooled, by Frank primarily, until they start high school.

Through that and other similar strategies, Jen, Frank and the kids struggled to lead substantial parts of their lives in a Christian-conservative parallel social universe of sorts. Once, for instance, Frank, his kids and I were driving through a Lima neighborhood on a door-to-door literature drop. Frank, suffering from back pain after a car accident some weeks prior, was stuck in the driver's seat talking to me while his four kids ran with bags of campaign literature. Back in their seats they took turns plugging their iPods into the car's audio speakers. "It is all Christian music," they explained. "Don't you ever feel like you're missing out on other things," I asked, but they assured me they did not. Gradually, as the music played on, I understood why. It was all there, everything from boy band pop to "gangsta" rap, and heavy metal, each genre meticulously reproduced with all appropriate

mannerisms intact—even those usually deployed to communicate alienation, libido or rage. It was just that the lyrics were all about Jesus. Frank was nodding along to the beat but declared he was more into "the classics." When his turn came, he got out a CD from the glove compartment, and to my surprise the familiar riff of The Clash's "Should I stay or go" came rolling out of the speakers. Order was restored momentarily, however, as the lyrics, only slightly altered in the cover version by the Christian rock parody band the *ApologetiX*, kicked in: "Calling on God to let me know/Should I pray or should I go?/If you say that you don't mind/I'll be here 'til you send a sign."[55]

While neither Frank's nor Jen's story are representative, they resonate in interesting ways with the autobiographies of several other informants. At the center of them lies a confrontation with values or tendencies understood as "liberal" that allows the narrator, by way of strength of character, to emerge vitalized to move on in life and to become a political subject. There is a sense here that this very plotline as such is in some profound sense tied to conservatism or conservative identity. This was also true in the case of Katie.

Katie is in her early thirties, but from the look of her—petite, lively and often dressed in a baggy sweatshirt with a baseball cap pulled down over her ears—she might as well be seventeen. She is well aware of this fact and sometimes likes to play on the expectations it gives rise to, surprising adversaries in political "bickering" and pool games alike. Katie lives in a mobile home on the outskirts of town with her husband—"a typical union-Democrat" as she describes him to me—and a twelve-year-old son from an earlier relationship. The biological father has been absent more or less all along, initially on account of being locked up for repeatedly breaking into Katie's mother's house. Nowadays, Katie is not sure where he is or what he does. "Just as good," she laconically comments on the situation.

Katie's political interest was sparked in her late teens. Echoing formulations I picked up from many of the younger conservatives, Katie would quote her college experiences as activating and in a sense "radicalizing" her politically. She had always been fond of "bickering," she said, but before college this fondness had never taken the shape of an interest in things political. In her narrative, her stubbornly clinging to "common sense" in an environment dominated by "liberal wing-nuts"—her professors—provided her with her political grounding. Time and again they provided her with examples of how one cannot think.

Apart from such ideological reference points, Katie's college experience had also provided her with a vital source of a sense of accomplishment and pride. She was the only one in her family with a college degree and she did it, in her words, "all on her own." As a studying, single mom at age nineteen,

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[55] "Should I Pray or Should I Go?" appears on the ApologetiX's 2003 CD *Adam Up*.

she was able to get public assistance for books and tuitions, but that was all. She recalls working at Taco Bell to nine in the evenings, coming home, studying until two or three, and then getting up at six, starting the day with another working shift before classes. "I wouldn't tell my mom about my economic situation, because I knew she wouldn't eat in order to help me out" she says. Speaking of her poor background in southern Ohio, with a sickly mother and an alcoholic and largely absent father, Katie said she "learned I could clean up my own messes when I was fourteen," only to swiftly embark on a self-consciously politically incorrect monologue about the "the-so-called-poor": "…the funny thing is: they all have cell phones…every last one of them, with ring signals they bought from the web and little tattoos on them. I don't have a cell phone right now, you know why? Because I don't have a job right now!"

Since college, as Katie has moved into a more homogeneous political environment, she has been prolific in collecting material for maintaining this sense of contrast—perhaps her openness toward a Swedish fieldworker should also be seen in this light. For one thing she is a proud member of *Mensa*, the famous high IQ society, and sometimes she likes to "stir things up" at the political section at their web forum, which according to her is thoroughly dominated by liberals. She feels this fact has something to do with the sense of smartness and superiority unifying the *Mensa* community. She recalls being offended by some of the responses the first couple of times she posted on things like taxes, war, or social programs. Respondent would call her uncompassionate, bigoted and all kinds of "nasty things." Now such pejoratives just run off of her: "I am more like, how is that compassion working out for you?" She frames her participation at the forum in explicitly contrarian terms: "I sometimes like to play poke the liberal—because they cry."

Among other things, Katie's story highlights the implications of using political categories and connotations to craft a message about oneself. Her use the conservative/liberal distinction often seemed useful for maintaining a certain distance toward the threatening hopelessness of her own background or socio-economic situation. Conservatives, she explained, "don't feel sorry for themselves." But there is also fragility inherent here. Once, when discussing her untenable job situation, Katie mentioned in passing, and with a somewhat forced easiness, that she had been hit by severe depression last time she had lost a job. She had been unable to get out of bed for a week. In a sense, Katie's entire person, her energy, wit and disillusioned optimism, seems preconditioned precisely on keeping such threatening episodes at bay. "Conservatism" understood as the opposite of "liberalism" emerges as instrumental in this narrative work.

Susan also used these terms to frame her biography, though in a rather different way. Susan is in her mid–forties, she is wirily built and with a serious, thoughtful countenance. She lives with her husband Charles in a small

house just outside the city of Lima. He works in mid-level management at a local car parts manufacturer; Susan takes care of their house and their twelve-year-old son, David, who suffers from a number of severe cognitive and physical handicaps and regressive conditions. He is practically incommunicable—mentally at the level of a four year old, according to Susan—and needs attention twenty-four hours a day. Susan, who has a university degree in pedagogy and once dreamed of an academic career, has been home taking care of him ever since he was born.

I first got to know Susan through Frank's Bible study at Rousculp Church of Christ, where she was one of the more active participants. With time I also became a regular Sunday dinner guest at Susan's and Charles's house. During our dinner conversations I gradually learned that Susan was not entirely satisfied with Frank and the Bible study. While Susan felt that Frank "seemed to communicate the truth," she felt that they had been going over "these same truths for years now" without ever being able to move on or put those truths to work. "We know the world is wicked, that the churches are all compliant… but what's next?" Susan said she was searching for new ways of making "God real in my life." She eventually took an unofficial hiatus from Frank's group to try out a new form of Sunday praise, conducted in Susan's kitchen, together with James, another member of Frank's study at Rousculp.

This initiative was marked by a kind of seriousness and independence of mind that seemed to characterize much of Susan's preoccupations. It was evident, for instance, also in her relationship to politics. While she typically ended up voting a more or less straight Republican ticket, she refused to call herself a "Republican," and there was something strikingly un-dogmatic about her decision process. On my visits, she would sometimes bring out her "election folder" in which she kept the season's yield of campaign literature. The amount of margin notes in these sometimes rather unreadable pamphlets attested to her careful reading. Moreover, her relationship to some our common acquaintances with more partisan leaning was somewhat strained. Once, for instance, she commented on a conversation she had recently had with Jen about the upcoming election: "She just seems too convinced," she complained, "talking about Jordan and Blackwell and the others—it is almost like she had been indoctrinated. You know what—it scares me a little bit." Like Jen, Susan ended up voting a straight Republican ticket in November, but she did so with a clear sense of compromise. In the end, however, she felt more reassured with someone representing "her values."

Her sense of compromise seemed to have a lot to do with David. The family was under economic strain, and on several occasions social programs that they had been eligible for because of David had come under concrete political threat, typically from Republican initiatives. On one occasion, Susan told me, she had travelled down to Columbus together with other parents of disabled children, to try to influence their Ohio House representative, but

without luck. Republicans, Susan complained, were often too business oriented and preoccupied with economic issues. But on the other hand, she also saw the abortion issue and, more broadly, themes of lifestyle, sacrifice, faith partially through an understanding of David as a "divine gift and responsibility." David, his significance as well as his well-being, thus had a clearly political dimension in Susan's mind, if not of unambiguous party color.

David's birth and its relationship to Susan's life trajectory is particularly interesting in this respect. When I explained to Susan and Charles, during one of my first Sunday dinners at their house, that I was in Lima doing research for a doctoral thesis, Susan keenly recalled her own educational background. She spoke of her degree in pedagogy and mentioned that she once had been on a path to a doctorate herself. Inquiry, she felt, had always come naturally to her, and this basic orientation remained unaltered. David's condition, for instance, had sparked her interest in autism. As a result, she had done quite a lot of reading on the subject, and eventually had become involved with volunteer work with autistic children in the community. She was particularly enthusiastic, she explained, about applying recent research on the benefits of involving other kids in the treatment.

Susan's pregnancy, and the realization that things were not well with the baby, naturally came as a shock. Apart from the distress of the pregnancy itself, the situation also involved considerable social pressure. Susan's mother in particular tried to convince Susan to stay in school, perhaps even to have an abortion. Susan recalled "being torn" between her plans and ideas for the future, and what she "knew deep down was right." In the pressure exerted by her mother, Susan also saw something more wide-ranging—the outline of a "general culture" inclined to view her decision "to put nurturance and homemaking before career and money and earthly things" with contempt. "Liberals," she said in this context, "speak of freedom for women, but really they want to shame us to be more like men. It is not that I don't believe in freedom, it is the opposite—it's that I believe in our freedom to be who we are."[56]

In line with these concerns about the fate of gender roles in American society, and as a part of her ongoing effort to "make God real" in her life, Susan had recently started a women's book club, which convened at her place every other Friday night for dinner and discussions. First on their reading list were two volumes by John and Stasi Eldredge: *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul* (2005) and *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Mystery of Man's Soul* (2001). The two books launch a general assault on the

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[56] Susan's predicament bears striking resemblance to one of the activist interview by Faye Ginsburg in her book on the abortion controversy in Fargo, North Dakota, whose "defense of homemaking as a choice of vocation" is also "embedded in a critique of what she considers to be the dominant culture. What she does defend is the social and economic consequences of having made a decision that she senses as unpopular" (Ginsburg 1989: 189).

"femininization of men" and "masculization of women;" processes which, according to the authors, are rampant today, causing rising divorce rates, outbursts of domestic violence and a general disintegration of society. Speaking of *Wild at Heart*, the first of the two volumes, Susan told me that

> it deals with something we discussed with Frank in Bible study: How God doesn't want his men to be nice. That's not God! He is all about courage, adventure, you know, wandering through the desert for forty years. Today that is almost completely lost. In the sixties we had what we call the "women's movement," and basically what they did is they wanted men—and women—to feel ashamed for what they are. Men were supposed to be more like women: caring, have emotions, you know—to suppress their nature. After a while that ideal became more or less accepted and today the churches have become a part of that movement… so in the churches the men get their you-know-what cut off. That is one thing I like about Charles: he drives me crazy, but at least he will not have that, he just doesn't buy into it. So this book deals with this from the women perspective… what can we do to stop this development in our own lives?

Again, the liberal-conservative opposition appears through these remarks as above all existentially useful in the context of Susan's experience. Her recurring decision to invest her vote in the Republican Party, despite her qualms, makes most sense seen as part of an ongoing effort to come to terms with the tensions of her own life. What the conservative critique of feminism thus seemed to offer Susan was a position from which to view her own life in more positive terms: she had accepted, not without sacrifices, a difficult challenge, despite social pressures to do otherwise and she had come out a better person for it.

Politics in a Contrarian Mode

Staying with Susan, we can also zoom in from the temporal scale of the autobiography to consider concrete instances of political thought or argumentation in action, and to ask how the formative presence of the other is visible in them. Drawing on a particular conversation with Susan and a few of the other the members of the Bible study, I want to indicate the central importance of the figure of the liberal for how the content of conservative politics takes shape and becomes thinkable.

One Sunday morning after Bible study I lingered in the church lobby, chatting with Susan, Frank and a couple of the others. We were talking about one of the statewide races, when the issue of abortion came up. Even if few candidates on the ballot here—Republican or Democrat—explicitly ran as pro-choice, Frank and the others nonetheless placed a much "stronger trust" in the "sincerity" of the Republican candidates. The subtext to this rather common framing seemed to be a deep-seated cynicism about the political

process in general. One can never be sure of the earnestness or character of any particular politician, Frank once explained. "Knowing what voters like to hear is one thing, delivering on the issues is another."

Apropos of this conversation, I asked the group to clarify something for me. When I had spoken to pro-lifers in and around the party, they typically argued the moral equivalence between killing a fetus and a person, claiming that "abortion is murder." The argument would often be a negative one—establishing conception as the defining moment of human life, by stressing the ambiguity and arbitrariness inherent in any alternative: "Why week twenty one—and not week twenty two," they would rhetorically ask. "Why at the moment of birth? Wherein lays the qualitative difference between an unborn and a three-month old baby? Neither of them has developed any sense of self-awareness. So, if I can kill one, then why not the other—should I realize, in retrospect, that I did not want it after all, that it interferes with my career, my love life, or my holiday plans?" When probing or challenging the arguments of pro-lifers, such demands for definitional clarity would virtually flood me.

However, considering the fervor of such demands for definitional clarity, pro-lifers would be confusingly vague and hesitant in their advocacy for any specific judicial remedies apart from "overturning Roe vs. Wade," the groundbreaking 1972 Supreme Court decision repealing most anti-abortion laws effective at that time. To spark reaction, I would sometimes suggest to them that if abortion was indeed murder, then the same punishment ought to apply. Consequently, the abortionist doctor should be considered a "contract killer" and the would-be-mother an "instigator" of murder. In Ohio, this would mean that capital punishments would be on the table, especially for second or third time offenders. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no one seemed to take such suggestions seriously. To the contrary, they would be hesitant to move beyond the rhetorical level of condemnation to address any practicalities or concrete judicial consequences. For instance, Adam, the young candidate for County Commissioner, claimed to "strongly hold the view that abortion is murder." Yet, when one of his closest friends had an abortion a couple of years back it did not undermine their friendship or Adam's understanding of her as a moral person. How was that possible?

It was obvious that the description of my bewilderment had touched a nerve. Frank said that he often had to fend off similar "charges of a double standard" and Susan felt the entire question was: "…odd—one of those hypothetical questions that have no real basis in reality." For them, my incomprehension seemed to imply the archetypical liberal pro-choice position: "hypothetical," "overly theoretical," and "out of touch." Susan and I continued the exchange later over e-mail.[57] She wrote:

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[57] Susan has given me permission to quote from the e-mail.

First of all, there would never be a death penalty for doctors and nurses who perform abortions in this country because it has been declared a legal activity by our government. Our government would not pursue them or give the death penalty for performing a legal procedure. If anyone should get the death penalty, it should be the Supreme Court Justices who allowed it in the first place. The blood on their hands down through all these decades surely cries out to our Father.

Susan's formulation, exemplifies what I would like to call the "enthusiastic fatalism" of much pro-life discourse—an unwavering and energetic commitment to the cause coupled with an absolute disbelief in its future prospects. We are now living "after the fall" of *Roe v. Wade*, since the law carries a moral message to the public—the federal government, in Frank's words, "encourages abortion." This seems to blur the entire issue. Abortionists and women who undergo abortion "know not what they do" in some sense, because their government has already foreclosed the moral issue at stake. Consequently, the only conceivable candidates for punishment would the Supreme Court justices, or more broadly those who "believe in abortion." Politics in this situation becomes above all an ethical message directed at the liberal, not a meditation on how to address the social issue of abortion practically. In this sense, the apparent "lack" of a positive content behind a slogan like "abortion is murder" ought not to be understood as incidental or illogical but, rather, precisely to the point.

Commenting on the exchange later Frank sighed that "the real frustration is that you even have to think about these things. You know fifty years ago this whole argument would be unthinkable." A catchphrase like "abortion is murder" must remain in a sense "empty" precisely because its primary function is to separate those who accept *without argument* that which "should not have to be argued," from those who "just don't get it"—one of Frank's standard phrases. It is not a literal proposition or argument, not even an attempt at coherently expressing a thought or an idea, but rather a condensation of a certain kind of frustration that one simply may or may not identify with. Perhaps we can see conservative slogans more broadly in this light. For instance, is this not what makes tautology—to speak with U.S congressional candidate Jim Jordan's radio campaign ad (already mentioned in Chapter 2) "marriage is marriage"—such a practical vehicle for conservative truth?

III. Concluding Remarks

The political universe of the Lima conservatives is one characterized by avoidance of communication across political fault lines. In the preceding chapter, we saw how such fault lines are reproduced through a kind of poll-driven identity politics where polling data and other "analytical fragments"

become circularly linked to the logic that you carry certain convictions because you are a particular kind of person, with particular tastes, habits and so on. The logical endpoint of this process would seem to be the realization of a kind of post-modernist perspectivism, where "truths" can only refer back to specific identities. This chapter has explored how conservatives in Lima make use of the "liberal other" to frame their interaction, narrate their experiences and take particular political stances. It has suggested that under conditions of polarized identity production, when all politics is ultimately directed toward an imaged other, distinctions between literal and figurative or poetic, the sincere and the strategic, the argument and the hyperbole, become blurred, leaving any given statement, opinion, or value hanging in a general atmosphere of ambiguity. Either you "get it," or you don't.

With this in mind, I want to briefly recall the discussion of ethnography from the Introduction. Drawing on Laura Nader's observation that "[e]thnography […] has never been *mere* description (Nader 2012: 211), I argued anthropology can add something to our understanding of contemporary conservatism by paying attention to "the unexpected." A central challenge facing an anthropology of contemporary conservatism, I suggested, has to do with the fact that the ethics and epistemologies of social science are always already implicated in the conservative's perpetual work of differentiation. This chapter has, I think, substantiated that observation. It is precisely in the context of what I have referred to as "performative polarization" that I want to suggest that a space for analysis can be opened up by paying particular attention to "the unexpected." This will be of central importance as I turn my attention, in the next chapter, more explicitly towards the content of conservative politics.

4. Political Attachments

Turning our attention, in this chapter, more specifically toward the content of contemporary conservative politics, it may be useful first to recall the discussion from Chapter 1. All subtleties aside, American conservatism is characterized by its fusionism of economic liberalism and moral traditionalism. In this fusion lies not only the exceptionalism of American conservatism, but also some of its fundamental tensions or contradictions. In my interactions with conservative candidates, campaign activists and voters in and around Lima, three political themes stand out as particularly prominent focal points for thought, debate and idle conversation: war in general, and the ongoing war in Iraq in particular, capitalism or the idea of a "free market," and religion (though this particular term was frequently opposed).

This chapter takes these three themes into specific consideration. To a certain extent, this will involve making a tentative and incomplete inventory of each theme—of recurring ideas, opinions, and arguments—paralleling and partially overlapping the work of Sara Diamond (1995) and others referred to above. This, however, is not the main point of the chapter. Such an inventory of beliefs, as I suggested in the Introduction, has a tendency to merely restate the obvious, and moreover to do so in a way that is anticipated by those holding them. Instead, by considering each theme through the prism of one or a few striking ethnographical fragments—an episode, a noticeable turn of phrase, or a personal narrative—I hope to arrive not at an improved understanding of *who* believes *what*, but rather at a sense of *how* they believe it—how political arguments and ideas come alive in the experience of specific people. On the one hand, this task is broadly speaking a phenomenological one—that is, one of understanding how the world reveals itself in a particular ways—and on the other, a conceptual one, in that it aims at understanding the processes by which experience becomes geared toward particular conceptual systems. Furthermore, it is conceptual also in a slightly different sense, in that it lends itself to an inquiry into what "belief" means today.

This line of inquiry, I will argue, also helps us better understand the uneasy coexistence of the ideological elements of contemporary conservatism, most notably perhaps laissez-faire capitalism and evangelical Christianity. As I have also mentioned above, social scientists and political philosophers

have been much preoccupied with the apparent unholiness of this union. Robert Bellah (1983), for instance, in a well-known lecture, claimed that "the unrestrained greed that capitalism at the moment seems to be propagating is the chief threat to our morality, traditional or otherwise." More recently, Wendy Brown has suggested that one of the theoretical challenges presented by contemporary American conservatism is that of understanding how "a rationality that is expressly amoral at the level of both ends and means (neoliberalism) intersect with one that is expressly moral and regulatory (neoconservatism)" (2006: 692).

Max Weber (2001 [1930]) , in his influential work on the Protestant work ethic, suggested a causal connection between Protestantism and capitalism. Working to understand the early development of capitalism in northern Europe and the New World, one of the central puzzlements for Weber was how a sufficient number of people were originally recruited into capitalist production. The Protestant, and in particular the Calvinist, notion of work as a calling—as and an end in itself—provided him with one set of answers. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Protestantism and capitalism belong together in a very specific and transitory way in Weber's account. Once in place, capitalism would become self-sustaining, and by the 1900s, when Weber first published his series of essays, he noted that the religious underpinnings of the Protestant work ethic had largely vanished.[58] The question regarding the contemporary coexistence of capitalism and Christianity as posed by Bellah and Brown is thus not forgetful of Weber, to the contrary.

This chapter, I hope, will work on three interconnected levels. First, it constitutes an addition to what I referred to above as an "ideological inventory" in that it addresses certain manners of thinking and speaking about war, the "free market" and God. Second, I will suggest that these manners allow us to problematize the notion of "belief" as such. This entails a shift on focus from *what* they believe to *how* they believe it. Third, taking up Wendy Brown's challenge to grasp what might appear as logical contradiction at the level of ideas as in fact "partially and unsystematically symbiotic at the level

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[58] "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells and into everyday life, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into its mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. […] To-day the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer […] and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, […] the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport" (Weber, 2001 [1930]: 123–124).

of political subjectivity" (2006: 693), I hope to show that such a shift from what to how, adds to our understanding of how evangelical Christianity, capitalism, and hawkish foreign policy coexist in contemporary conservative politics.

I. War

In February 2006 the Iraq war was on the eve of its fourth year. In early October, a month before the general election, approximately fifty thousand people were estimated to have been killed in the conflict, 2,757 of whom were American soldiers.[59] Meanwhile, the job approval ratings of President George W. Bush gradually plummeted to new lows, according to most political commentators largely as a consequence of these and other ominous facts about the military efforts overseas.[60] In the media, the 2006 Midterm Election was increasingly being referred to as the "Iraq election," implying that the outcome of many races across the country would be determined by the candidates'—and their parties'—ways of handling the Iraq question. At Rousculp Church of Christ, I talked to some regular Republican voters, Susan and her husband being among them, who indeed were starting to lose their patience with Bush and with the war: "What I really don't understand is why we have to go around the world cleaning up other people's mess, it's not like we're getting much credit for it anyway," as Susan stated the matter.

Supporting the Troops

Within the local network of campaign volunteers, however, support for George W. Bush and for the war did not yet seem to be dwindling. On the contrary, Iraq appeared as a privileged conversational site for displaying or performing sustained loyalty and resolve. One of those who seemed to have Iraq constantly on his mind was Keith. Passionately political and extremely talkative, Keith always seemed to find a certain pleasure in the very mental state of having opinions in general. Commenting on idiotic things he had seen or heard, he would often say they gave him "a kick." Such kicks would often set him off into frenzied political discourse. Often he seemed just to be performing the stereotype, speaking in slogans of "supporting the troops," of

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[59] It should be noted, however, that the official death count has continuously been challenged. In October of 2006, for instance, critics estimated the relevant figure to be in the order of six hundred and fifty five thousand (http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N12286979.htm, accessed on November 8, 2010).

[60] http://www.gallup.com/poll/26083/Bush-Ratings-Iraq-Reach-New-Low-Economy-Ratings.aspx (accessed on November 8, 2010)

"turning Iraq into a parking lot," or of making sure "marriage is marriage." Other times he would improvise self-consciously "far out" monologues about how Middle Eastern unrest might be read in apocalyptic terms or about how his "greatest fear" was Hillary Clinton running for and winning the presidency in 2008, going on to "help Bill take over the UN." Precisely in the sense I described in the Introduction, I would often be at loss trying to imagine how this stream of words might be put to work analytically.

Yet at times Keith would also produce rare moments of unexpected ambiguity that seemed to transcend any such specific topical substance. During one of several parades that the ACRP took part in during the fall of 2006, we got to talking about Iraq and Bush's dropping popularity ratings. Keith claimed that the poor ratings did not bother him at all. "Abraham Lincoln must've had the worst approval ratings in history," he said, obviously referring not to some *CNN* poll, but to the more hands-on resistance Lincoln had met in his day. "But," he continued, "today he is one of the presidents we celebrate on Presidents Day." In difficult times, Keith argued, the president must be able to make hard decisions, regardless of the latest polls. Indeed, he understood this ability as the main point of the institution of presidency—to partially balance out the drawbacks of "true democracy": the endemic indecisiveness, the pandering to special interest, the "pork-barrel spending":

> In a true democracy there is always the danger of not getting anything done. So we need a strong leader, who is able to stand fast even against the momentary passion of the people, because we don't have all the info, we can't second-guess what they are up to.

All you can really do, according to Keith, is to ask yourself if he is a man of conviction—if he has a clear vision and is not going change his plan every ten minutes: "It's like a business plan; you got to stick with it, otherwise you will never make it." Thus the true meaning of a presidency, according to Keith, is to be revealed only in retrospect. In an ambiguous formulation of patriotism and presidential loyalty in a time of war, he then declared that "I *have* to believe we are in Iraq for the right reasons—for Iraqi freedom and American security." Bush, Keith agreed with the president's critics, is "a scary, scary cowboy… but he is also a man of God."

I find Keith's remarks noteworthy for several reasons. First, they exemplify a widespread preoccupation with the president's character as key to the war. Andrew, an aide on Kenneth Blackwell's gubernatorial campaign who was surprisingly outspoken about his "philosophical differences" with both his boss and with the sitting president, was on to something similar:

> I'm not sure about the war […] but if I truly understood [President Bush's] character I would probably have a better idea if the war was justified. I have a couple of different hunches, though. One, he is either a really kindhearted, Christian man who is only concerned with the wellbeing of America… who

just unfortunately happened not be that bright. Or… he is a deceitful, lying
son-of-a-bitch. And I am pretty sure it is one of the two.

While Andrew drew different conclusions than Keith, both approached the
war with an eye to President Bush's public image as "decider"—someone
who goes with his "gut feeling." Keith's remarks evoked this aspect of the
president's image by referring to him as a "cowboy." As cultural historian
Richard Slotkin has shown, the "frontier myth" continuous to carry "broad
appeal and persuasive power" (1998: 4) in the American cultural imagina-
tion. In this capacity, it is often drawn upon to make sense of political reality
or to advance political positions. Historically, it has been made to "explain
and justify the establishment of the American colonies" and "as the colonies
expanded and developed […] to account for our rapid economic growth, our
emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctively American ap-
proach to socially and culturally disruptive processes of modernization"
(Slotkin 1998: 11).[61] Political figures as diverse as John F. Kennedy and
Ronald Reagan have made use of frontier rhetoric and symbolism to frame
and market their political projects.[62]

To bring this theme back into the immediate historical context of Keith's
remarks—2006 and the Iraq war—one only needs to recall some of com-
ments made by President George W. Bush in the wake of 9/11:

> I appreciate being with people who love the land and appreciate open space. I
> realize there's nobody more central to the American experience than the cow-
> boy. […] You know, when the enemy hit us on September the 11th, they must
> have not figured out what we were all about. See, they thought we weren't de-
> termined. They thought we were soft. They obviously have never been to a
> national cattlemen's convention before. […] I intend to find the killers wher-

[61] The standard reference in this context is Fredrick Jackson Turner's "frontier hypothesis."
The American spirit of "rugged individualism" and U.S. perpetual economic growth, Turner
argued, were products of the confrontation with "the wild" on the western frontier and its vast
untapped resources (Turner 1893).

[62] President John F. Kennedy developed the signature image of "the new frontier" "to sum-
mon the nation as a whole to undertake (or at least support) a *heroic* engagement in the 'long
twilight struggle' against Communism and the social and economic injustices that foster it"
(Slotkin 1998: 3). Ronald Reagan's reliance on frontier mythology seems less easily pinpoint-
ed because it is more all-encompassing. His public aura of heroism, Slotkin interestingly
notes, marks a point in U.S. cultural history when "the myths produced by mass culture have
become credible substitutes for actual historical or political action in authenticating the char-
acter […] of political leader"—since Reagan's claim to heroic character was based entirely on
references to imaginary deeds performed in a purely mythic space" (1998: 644), they enjoyed
a new kind of legitimacy. More substantively, Reaganomics may be understood in part as "an
attempt to revive the 'cowboy economy' under 'postindustrial conditions'" (1998: 646): "A
bonanza of new capital, released through measures favoring business and the wealthy (tax
cuts and deregulation), was to act as the magical guarantor of perpetual and painless economic
growth, in just the way that the opening of "vast untapped reserves" of free land or gold or
cheap oil on the Frontier had energized the economy in the past" (1998: 646).

ever they may hide and run them down and bring them to justice. They think there's a cave deep enough; they're wrong. They think that we're going to run out of patience; they are wrong. […] Either you're with us, or you're against us.[63]

On a similar note the president seemed to suggest, during a Pentagon question and answer session, that the iconic "Wanted: Dead or Alive"–poster might be an appropriate way of conceptualizing Osama Bin Laden's standing with the law.[64] One can only suppose, then, that the president would have found Keith's cowboy comparison, in part at least, accurate or flattering.

What is really striking about Keith's remarks, however, is their ambiguity: the way that they simultaneously aspire to and undermine the certainty of a true believer. Keith's wording almost calls to mind the form of a riddle: Why does one *have* to believe" in a "scary, scary cowboy"? The historical richness of the positive connotations on which they draw here renders the disruption of "scary, scary" all the more dramatic. Yet this was hardly a random curiosity or a slip of the tongue. In fact, Keith's curious willingness to self-consciously engage with unquestioned belief, and actively to submit to presidential authority, was often on the horizon of conversations about the war, if not always as explicitly as in Keith's enigmatic remark. I suggest we understand it in the terms laid out in the previous chapter under the heading of "politics in the presence of the other." Keith's position does not make sense taken literally as a self-enclosed proposition, but only in relation to a particular kind of resistance, real or imagined.

Media Slant and Counter-Slant

A first set of issues to consider here revolves around war and the media. I have already noted in passing (see Chapter 3) that conversations about Iraq tended to give way to less tangible meditations on the topic of medial representation. I would ask something concretely about, say, the Abu Ghraib scandal, and invariably end up talking about the relationship between modern journalism, public opinion and war in general. The Iraq war itself—its rationale, its recent events, and the fortunes of the troops—often appeared secondary to these less concrete considerations. There was always a sense that this topical drift transpired in the general direction of, for them, safer

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[63] George W. Bush, "President Discusses Ag Policy at Cattle Convention, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/20020208-1.html (accessed February 12, 2012)

[64] George W. Bush, "Guard and Reserves "Define Spirit of America,"" http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-3.html (accessed February 12, 2012). For a useful discussion of these and additional examples of George W. Bush's "cowboy-talk," which also draw on Richard Slotkin's work, see Stephenson (2007).

and, perhaps even more importantly, more conveniently shared argumentative ground.[65]

Even within the core group of local party volunteers there could be wide disagreement on the concrete issues regarding the Iraq occupation, but practically everyone subscribed to the notion that the reporting from Iraq was slanted, and evidence of the anti-Americanism of the "liberal media elite." On several occasions, I partook in conversations during which critical differences of opinion regarding the war itself were tactfully smoothed over through this topical drift. On these terms, for instance, Paul, the former State Representative, who felt the decision to invade had been made too lightly and by people with the "privilege to be ignorant about the human costs of war," could find common ground with Keith who, in one of his less subtle moments, claimed to be of the opinion that "we should have nuked them back to the Stone Age a long time ago."

During 2006 many instances of what my informants took for evidence of "liberal slant" appeared in mainstream media. The perhaps most conspicuous and widely cited example did not concern the American war efforts directly, but Middle Eastern conflict and U.S. regional policy more generally. On 12 July of 2006, tension on the Israeli-Lebanon border erupted into open conflict between Hezbollah paramilitary forces and the Israeli military. During the thirty-four-day war that followed Israeli forces launched a ground invasion of southern Lebanon and numerous air and artillery strikes at Lebanese civilian infrastructure. A picture taken by a Reuter's photographer after one of those strikes which had received wide circulation in U.S. news media was found to have been digitally manipulated for dramatic, and perhaps political, effect.[66] Pointing toward such instances, Lima conservatives were convinced mainstream media has liberal "slant."

Concern about media bias—especially liberal bias—appear to be widespread in the United States. A recent Gallup poll on media perception, for instance, found that "[t]he majority of Americans (60%) […] continue to perceive bias, with 47% saying the media are too liberal and 13% saying they are too conservative.[67] These numbers are perhaps best understood in

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[65] To an extent this evasive tendency might be said to mirror the "fractured discourse" that, according to Carol Greenhouse (2008), legitimized the Iraq invasion in the first place. The Bush administration, Greenhouse argues, never addressed the prospect and rationale for invasion head on. Rather, it moved between different and sometimes conflicting motives— weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, spreading democracy—and framed its legal groundwork in largely hypothetical terms. This strategy facilitated both the construction of a coalition for the war that far exceeded the support for any specifically reasoned rationale for it, but also a fracturing of the opposition to the war.

[66] See, for instance, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5254838.stm (accessed August 8, 2009).

[67] This is according to a recent Gallup poll, available at http://www.gallup.com/poll/149624/Majority-Continue-Distrust-Media-Perceive-Bias.aspx (accessed August 13, 2012).

the context of the American media environment's continuous drift toward becoming "a niche market based on partisanship" (Mutz 2006: 229), a process driven both by technological change (Mutz 2006: 245), and political initiative—notably the Federal Communications Commission's repeal, upheld by President Ronald Reagan in the mid–1980s, of the broadcast impartiality policy known as the Fairness Doctrine (Zarkin and Zarkin 2006: 104–106). In effect, American media consumers are to a remarkable degree free—and compelled—to choose the kinds of news and the styles of reporting to which they wish to be exposed.

In Lima, skepticism about the media's trustworthiness was not withheld solely for so called "liberal media." Given the general liberal slant, many of my informants understood conservative alternatives like *Fox News*, of *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, not as simply unbiased, but precisely as *alternative*. While most of them tuned into *Fox News* regularly and to *The Rush Limbaugh Show* at least occasionally (the show, repetitive and loud, is clearly not meant to be listened to from start to finish but in fragments, especially while driving), they also tended to express a particular kind of distrust of them. Many said they listened, not primarily because they thought Limbaugh or *Fox News* were objective, but rather, because they saw them as counterbalance to "the liberal media establishment." In the words of Katie: "What I dig about Rush is that he is a demagogue all the way... and he likes it."

Objectivity as an ideal could hardly be farther from this perspective. Or, perhaps better, here "objectivity" is not unambiguously opposed to partiality. Jim, Keith's friend from work, suggested as much. He had been listening to Mr. Limbaugh more or less since his show went national in the late 1980s. When I asked Jim what he made of the critique of Limbaugh, he replied: "He is objective! I think, you've got *ABC*, *NBC*, *CBS*, the *CNN* stations, I think there's a fair balance there, because there is *Fox* and Rush, and then there are these other stations." Echoing sentiments that were common among conservatives in Lima, Jim said Limbaugh "says what everybody already knows and what they think, and what should be said, but are too scared to say [...] because of all these politically correct idiots. They think you have to say things in a… nice way or whatever. But I'm like: 'No, I'm going to say: No, you can't do that!' And it hurts people." With such remarks in mind, the often heckled slogan of *Fox News*, "fair and balanced," could perhaps be understood more along the lines of "it is only fair that we counterbalance the slant of the opposition." Interestingly, Bill O'Reilly, conservative *Fox News* anchor and favorite liberal hate object, could hint at this logic himself at *The Factor*, claiming that is no such thing as "covering *a* war" since no one can claim to have oversight in such confused and fragmented situations.[68]

Lack of "real" trust, however, does not necessarily undermine the media's ability to give form to political others. In one sense, it seemed to open up for

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[68] *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News. March 21, 2006.

a kind of playfulness with the facts—it is not necessarily the content itself that matters, but rather the work it is deployed to perform in a paradoxical situation. Vacuuming the country for "promising" stories, conservative commentators will always find something in the diverse vastness of America. There is always someone with something to say about something that is going to tick someone off—it is just a matter of giving them airtime. Put on parade day after day, and week after week on talk radio and Fox these scattered fragments gradually morph into a faceless, indefinite "them," seemingly capable of anything. As we may recall from Chapter 2, for instance, Katie could bring bizarre anecdotes from the San Francisco art scene to bear on liberal politics more generally, regardless of the fact that she knew they were not representative. Accuracy or trust does not seem to be a requisite for this media logic to function.

We should note, in passing, that this kind of double attitude toward the media, as simultaneously unreliable and foundational, can be said to be a general characteristic of late-modern society. All we know about the world, as Niklas Luhmann observes, we know though mass media:

> On the other hand, we know so much about the mass media that we are not able to trust these sources. Our way of dealing with this is to suspect that there is manipulation at work, and yet no consequences of any import ensue because knowledge acquired from the mass media merges together as if of its own accord into a self-reinforcing structure. Even if all knowledge were to carry a warning that it was open to doubt, it would still have to be used as foundation, as a starting point. (Luhmann 2000:1)

The function of mass media is not in fact to provide factual information but to be the starting point for communication. This formulation neatly captures the ambiguous status of mediated knowledge among the Lima conservatives.

One interesting aspect of this emphasis on slant and counter-slant was that it seemed to render the consumer of media responsible, in a radical way, for the news he or she happens to be in harm's way of. That is, one becomes responsible for the world of facts one comes to inhabit—and one's values and ideals become circularly linked to that world. Frank, in characteristically associative manner, stumbled into this subject through an unrelated conversation. It was the Fourth of July. The celebrations in Lima Park were just ending and Frank was dragging a gigantic freeze box still half full of soda towards his car. He was talking about some of his favorite movies, *The Terminator* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—which Frank viewed as a "funny but filthy" satire of "manmade religion." "Have you seen *The Lone Rider* TV series?"—another old time favorite of his—he wondered. I responded that I had not, and he continued:

> Oh, they were so great. The hero always wore a white hat and the bad guy always wore a black hat. Light against darkness. Not like today when every-

thing is supposed to be *so* realistic, the characters fighting their inner demons or whatever; might as well be the bad guy in the white hat! That is all well I guess, but really, what is so horrible about having ideals? But that's the thing today, no one has the will to… I mean, how are you fight a war if you're not even sure that you're the good guys? But the *New York Times* or *CNN* couldn't care less, right?

The key to these reflections, it seems to me, lies in the way they problematize the relationship between the "real" and the "ideal." Frank's point is not to deny the fact that everyone has their demons—"that is all well, I guess"—but rather to suggest that to "have ideals" one needs to denounce realism hands down. Analogously, or so the seamless topical shift from movies to war reporting suggests, even *if* the media simply represented reality, but that reality was destructive to the ideal, it would be slanted. To have ideals, in Frank's terms, or to believe in the "active" way that Keith's reflections seemed to indicate, implies occupying a particular attitude toward knowledge which involves taking care not to be in the way of certain kinds of information. The thought that stirs in this outlook is that if we insist on the exclusive primacy of our critical faculty, and on sufficient knowledge as the sole basis of certainty and legitimate action, we become unable to act at all.

It is also worth noting that similar, or at least compatible, distinctions and sensibilities may have guided, to some extent at least, the attitude that the George W. Bush administration cultivated toward journalism and information in the context of foreign policy. Ron Suskind, a Pulitzer Prize winning political journalist who has published extensively on the dynamics of George W. Bush's inner circle, relates a fascinating exchange with a Bush aide, supposedly Karl Rove (Danner, 2008), that suggests as much. The Bush aide has just confronted Suskind with the administration's disapproval of one of his most recent pieces. Suskind recalls the conversation that followed:

> The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors… and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (Suskind 2004)

This pushes the problem of liberal slant, if possible, even further in the direction indicated by Frank above. Knowledge of reality is in itself problematic to the extent that it undermines resolve and action.

"War is Nasty Business—Get over It"

World War II would frequently be brought up as a kind of focalizing point for these rather abstract and intangible worries about partiality, information, and public opinion. The general agreement was that if the journalists, the politicians, or the general population of the present had been in place back then "we would all be German now." The usefulness of this formulation lies in the moral unambiguity that it suggests. It provides an end against which all means must be measured.

The "accessibility" of World War II as a reference point in this context may to some extent be understood in relation to the particular place that it occupies in the American imagination. As for instance Catherine Lutz (2001) has shown, Americans still live, to some extent, in the wake of it. The war set off massive social transformation domestically, introducing "new social permeabilities, new anonymity, and new wealth" and "challenging existing social relationships […] between whites and blacks, men and women, and rich and poor" (Lutz 2001: 92). The mythology of World War II as the last "good war" (Adams 1994)—disseminated in large part through film and television—also helped legitimize a "preparedness for war" that became an intricate part of American political reality (Lutz 2001: 45–86).[69] Conservative interventionists have perhaps been particularly apt at making use of this "good war" mythology.

This does, however, not really capture the subtlety with which World War II was made use of by war hawks in Lima. Frank's ruminations on the fate of "the ideal" are helpful for bringing this into focus. As we saw, Frank explicitly juxtaposed the ideal and the real. Faced with the two, he asked us to choose the former. Perhaps the revelation that World War II was not that great after all would come as a surprise to many conservatives invested in the "good war" narrative. Yet we should not assume from this that such a realization would necessarily falsify their point and undermine their position. In a certain sense, World War II was a "good war" because it was perceived as such. This was in fact one of the points of comparison frequently brought up. During World War II, the media's nationalist bias—its ability to divert the truth—in some sense had helped focus public attention and support. Today, in an era of mobile phone cameras and "embedded" reporters—a form of journalism often criticized for being "in the pocket of the military" but also, as I learned in Lima, for providing "too much truth"—such mecha-

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[69] The perhaps most concrete aspect of this preparedness had to do with incomplete demobilization. After World War II, "[f]or the first time, the U.S. military fist was not fully unfurled" (2001: 84). More fundamentally, preparedness was linked to an interventionist turn in U.S. foreign policy, to the erosion of the rule of law in decisions to declare war, and with the installation of a "military definition of the situation" (C. Wright Mills [1956] cited in Lutz 2001: 85) in which political initiatives regarding everything from infrastructure to science education had to be related back to their contribution to military defense and national security.

nisms of social cohesion have become increasingly undermined. "As a people," one of the volunteers at the Lima County Fair Republican booth told me, "we have lost the ability to wage war," painting a bleak picture of liberal media, uneasy politicians and pollsters and a generation of spoiled voters forming a giant circuit of doubt and suspicion.

"War critics," Katie similarly complained, "will always cite this or that reason why a particular U.S. intervention is unjustified, when in fact they too know there will always be such reasons." At heart, then, they are all closet pacifists, secretly convinced that nothing is worth dying or killing for, she deduced. The only real choice she recognized was the one between embracing a de facto pacifism and mustering up the will to support a particular war—Iraq—in all its horror and brutality. "War is nasty business—get over it," as she summarized her point. Such conservative sarcasm represents an attempt to mediate the uneasy co-existence of the hypothetical potential of just causes, democratic transparency, and politics in the shape of an "endless campaign" for re-election. In doing so it sets up an interesting relationship between the general issues at stake—concerning the possibility of just intervention and the changing terrain of propaganda warfare—and the concrete example—Iraq. In a sense, the general issue is rendered internal to the example, so that the question of one's attitude to war as such is understood as entirely exhausted in the question of Iraq. Iraq becomes the site were one's general sensibility is performed and proved.

Scott, a 27-year Army veteran just home from his second tour in Iraq, shared much of Katie's frustration. In his view, lack of conviction and confidence, something he associated "more with the Democrats than with the Republicans," had very real effects on the ground in Iraq:

> I mean, Iraq also displays a weakness. We should have been there with one million troops instead of three hundred fifty thousand. We should have secured the border, but all they wanted was to get off easy. I am the last guy wanting to go to war but *if* we go to war, we fight to win. Take nothing off the table. I mean *nothing*. As a nation, both the leaders and the people, I don't think we are even capable of winning a war anymore. We are no longer capable of the commitment it takes. We're just all *so* politically correct.

I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by "politically correct," and he continued:

> It means… a way of talking about things that just makes you feel good inside... an evasion of the facts in order to avoid doing something for real. For example, they keep talking about "the war on terrorism." Well, that's just bullshit. We are not in a war against terrorism, terrorism is a strategy, you can't be at war with a strategy. We are in a war against radical Islam, just so happened to be that these people use terror as a strategy. But can't they say it out loud? No, because that would mean that they had to go in with a whole different attitude.

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Scott ends up arguing something quite similar to Katie, albeit in a slightly less sardonic voice; in order to retain the ability to successfully wage war, one must have the strength to occupy a position that does not "make you feel good inside." Negating "political correctness" in this way becomes an end unto itself. Liberal reluctance to *really* wage war, Scott also suggested in this connection, is in fact also responsible for the failure to end the war, and thus in a way for the perpetual nature of war itself. Going in with resolve, "taking nothing off the table," conversely, might be construed as the route most likely to produce peace.

James, one of the members of Frank's Bible study, seemed to go even further in the direction indicated by Scott. During his regular Friday breakfast meeting with Frank he accomplished a complete reversal of the usually—and perhaps commonsensical—understanding of the relationship between foreign policy "hawks" and "doves" through a meditation on the meaning of peace. Liberals, James suggested, are fundamentally mistaken about peace. They see themselves as "keepers of the peace," because they are "benevolent, emphatic, tolerant and kind," but this conception, in James's view, only signals a grave misunderstanding. Instead, "you must prepare for war if you want peace. Jesus Christ came with a sword, you know. The idea that we should be pursuing peace over everything is absurd." Peace, in James's telling, is better understood as the "byproduct" of the decisiveness and willingness to go to war over ones convictions. "Just think of dogs," he clarified his point, "—the dog least sure of himself is always the most aggressive. People are just like that. Confidence in the self is everything."

To Believe in a "Scary, Scary Cowboy"

Keith's riddle-like formulation of war-time presidential loyalty—the claim that he "*has* to believe" in the president—should be understood in the context of frustration, disorientation and worry that I have sketched above. It does not distinguish good from evil in any straightforward manner. Rather, it departs from a generalized suspicion that there will always be those others—faceless liberals—who, regardless of the circumstances or the urgency of the situation, will persist in arguing that we need more wisdom before we act; that we must always wait and see just a little while longer. Keith implicitly accepts the pessimistic premise that the present (or any) state of knowledge is necessarily marked by imperfection. Yet far from tempering his political views, this realization re-invigorates and radicalizes them. Against this background of uncertainty, rashness or even recklessness becomes a goal in itself, an outward sign of character and leadership. To put it crudely, for Keith, only a "scary, scary cowboy" (who is also a man of God) can be an agent of good in the contemporary world.

The amendment "also a man of God" carries a confidence that this agent will be disclosed as good from the perspective of last judgments, but Keith also seemed to take the opposite possibility quite seriously—even to the point of implying that authentic acts always, in a sense, risk the world. This became clear on another occasion when I was visiting Keith at his job at an electronics warehouse. During the lunch break Keith ran into an acquaintance who, when he realized Keith was working for the Blackwell for Governor Campaign, went into a rant about a YouTube video proving that the Bush administration had been behind 9/11. "That guy is a nutcase," Keith later remarked. "On the other hand," he continued with a crooked smile, "the Bible does say that we—the faithful—will put the prince of darkness into power before the last days. So you just never know."

Both critics of conservatism and conservatives themselves like to speak of "conviction" or "certainty"—the dangers or virtues of being sure. Yet Keith's presidential loyalty helps us open the black box of war support as simple conviction. It belongs, I would argue, to a rather more ambiguous register of political belief, at once modest and overtly confident of itself. Any critique in the conventional mode of confronting perception with truth is here effectively foreclosed. Keith already knows that Bush is a scary cowboy, but to him, the opposition merely gives itself away as naïve or secretly motivated by anti-Americanism when it makes this fragment of truth explicit.

II. Market

It has often been noted Americans in general are relatively reluctant to think of themselves, their circumstances and future possibilities in terms of class (e.g., Hartz 1955; Lipset 2003; Lipset and Marks 2000). More precisely, a relatively large section of the American public considers itself to be part of the middle class, understood as a kind of non-category—not too rich, not too poor, and not significantly circumscribed in their opportunities by past or present socio-economic circumstances (e.g., Taylor et al 2008). Framing this theme in familiar terms, a 2005 *New York Times* article vignette read: "Americans cling to alluring myth of 'getting rich'. Many in the US think they'll get rich some day. Most won't, and there may be more to be gained by dropping the idea altogether" (Dunleavey 2005). This provides a suitable starting point for considering the Republican ideal of the "free market." For this "alluring myth of getting rich" is particularly central to the Republican brand; if not for the existence of this sort of popular consciousness, conservative politics would not be what it is.

The vignette is also noteworthy for its wording. The term "myth" effectively condenses the sense of irrationality which emanates from these num-

bers when they are taken at face value. True, they are sometimes rationalized in terms of "exceptional socio-economic mobility," but it is a well-documented fact that socioeconomic mobility has been declining in American society, and that the middle class is, in effect, shrinking (e.g., Bradbury and Katz 2002; Jäntti et al 2006; Aaronson and Mazumder 2008; Bradbury 2011).[70] Recourse to "false consciousness"-theorizing therefore seems endemic to the topic itself. We are compelled to try to explain the peculiar vitality of this all-American dream in terms of the construction, manufacture, and dissemination of ideology, precisely to the extent that it appears to us incoherent and delusional. While this perspective can generate important insights (e.g., Frank 2004),[71] it has little to tell us about what I have referred to above as the "stickiness" of notions of universal opportunity and individual success.

In the following, I ask *how* conservatives in Lima, a place heavily marked by economic decline, persist in dreaming the American dream. Listening closely to how they talk about economics, I suggest that it involves, for one thing, a reversal, from the standard standpoint of social science, of causality. Social mobility, in this conception, is in real decline only to the extent that people have already been secretly convinced—by "European-style" liberals, social scientists and media elites—that they are in fact restricted by their circumstances. True freedom, according to this formulation, must involve a sort of provisional bracketing of "the social." In the following, I will try to explicate what this means.

Clinging To Myth

No doubt, many people and situations I encountered in Lima could be understood in the terms provided by the *New York Times* vignette, as driven by an "alluring myth of getting rich." One particularly emblematic situation arose in late August as gubernatorial candidate Kenneth Blackwell and Ohio Supreme Court Justice Terrance O'Donnell visited Lima to speak at an event hosted by the regional National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB).[72] Approaching the Bistro, a classy restaurant on Main Street where the event was to take place, I was surprised to find Keith waiting outside the door. He was dressed up in suit and tie, for him a rather unusual outfit. While most NFIB members were local entrepreneurs and businessmen,

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[70] See also the 2005 *New York Times* series "Class Matters" available online
http://www.nytimes.com/indexes/2005/05/15/national/class/ (accessed February 12, 2011).
[71] See Weiner (2005) for a useful discussion of Frank (2004) in terms of false consciousness.
[72] NFIB is a leading trade association and lobby group with a membership of some three hundred and fifty thousand small businesses (http://www.nfib.com, accessed October 5, 2009). Its opposition to "Hillarycare" in the 1990s and, more recently, to President Barack Obama's Patient Protect and Affordable Care Act has drawn particular media attention.

Keith, who, in his own words, "happened to be an employee at this particular point in time," had convinced his boss to occasionally let him "represent" the company at similar events. He was quick to assure me that he felt perfectly at home in the social setting and that he shared with its participants many fundamental ideas about society and politics.

Economic status, both in terms of actual wealth and in terms of relationship to the means of production, thus seemed to Keith very much a nonissue. It was above all a matter of "what happens to be the case" at a particular moment and in no sense generative of any significant social barriers. At one time, I sought to provoke him by referring to a recent study tracking the relationship between worker and CEO wages over time, finding a staggering shift from a 1 to 40 ratio in the early 1980s, to a 1 to 400 ratio in the early 2000s. But Keith simply shrugged his shoulders and replied that "when I look at that person I think: that is my potential—that is what is possible in America." Frank, who had overheard the conversation, added that "the first reaction I get is: Wow, I would like to make that much money!" What I had hoped could spark some discussion was in fact very much a non-question. The fact that someone is willing to pay someone a particular amount proves that that person is worth it, because, in Franks' words, "who is to say otherwise?"

The question of what is possible in America aside, Keith was not a rich man. And what above all was clear when I encountered him at the NFIB event was that there was a certain readiness on his part to clarify his being there—that the non-existence or non-pertinence of socio-economic barriers was something that he obviously felt compelled to explicitly state and elaborate upon. This came out even more clearly in an informal interview I did with Keith some weeks later. We had briefly touched upon a number of political news items, including the 2006 ballot initiative to raise Ohio's minimum wages, and the conversation slowly drifted to the subject of his current job at a local electronics warehouse. He told me he made eight dollars an hour but he immediately went on to defend his politics in light of his modest wage:

> I know what you're thinking: you're thinking I'd probably benefit from it. Maybe directly, but in terms of the larger consequences, no way. Look, I am aware that I don't make a lot of money, but I refuse to think I'm a member of lower class of people... or that I deserve something just because [...] Isn't it true that most people over there [in Sweden or Europe] think they belong to a certain income bracket; that they probably will stay there more or less for the rest of their lives? No wonder they don't get anywhere. That's just not my way of thinking; I know I could be rich, if I was just willing to put in the hours. This is America! Anything is possible.

Keith made the political twist clear: He finds "the standard statement" that a lower wage automatically pushes you toward the Democrats "offensive"

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because "money isn't everything. I'm not rich but I can think for myself just the same."

   This same sense of refusal also came out when Frank addressed the role of social and economic circumstances in shaping our life chances. When I suggested that his kids—who have loving parents, are home-schooled, and so on—might be better poised than some kid living in a poor area, with absent parents, who goes to a terrible school, he thought for half a second and exclaimed: "No!" I persisted and brought up the case of a child that Frank used to know and had once mentioned in Bible class. The kid, Frank had told us, had a secret deal with his mother, that if he came home after school to find a cookie on the porch this meant mother was inside with a customer, and he was not to enter. "Don't you feel like this kid might be worse off in some way," I asked him, "wasn't that implicitly the point in bringing it up in the first place?" Frank, more thoughtful now, acknowledged that "yeah… sure I can feel like that, but see the thing is that I can't let that feeling control me. Look, why do two people under the same circumstances end up at totally different places in life? Just look at Jen, her father left her with the bills in that trailer, away from home, and now she's got a good life, a family, a decent job, all of that. There is something inside a person that makes all the difference, there is that factor x, your resolve." But is it not at least less probable, I asked, that the cookie kid goes to meet a prosperous and fulfilling future? "Yes, I guess," Frank replied, impatiently, "but that's beside the point, it doesn't explain anything… people are still making it out of bad circumstances."

   Doug, during a conversation at the "Victory Center" a few days before the election, tied this theme to an idea of an "Atlantic divide." "Maybe it is my stereotype, he said, "but my idea of Europe is that most people there think they and their kids are forever stuck in the situation they are in now. That perspective is so strange to me. I don't believe that it is productive to think like that." In connection to this he went on to consider the concept of class, asking if it is "mentioned anywhere in the Constitution or in the Declaration of Independence," responding to himself that

> no, so where does the idea come from? It comes from someone looking at someone else and saying you are richer than me—that is not equal! It comes from envy… it is envy made into a concept. […] Well geez, how are you going to explain the people who have proved otherwise? How are you going to explain that some people who grow up poor make a fortune and the other way around? Something has got to account for that. It is all in the spirit, all in the attitude.

This recurrent insistence on explanation is worth dwelling upon. It indicates that we are not merely dealing with a call to optimism or with a general disinterest in probabilities, but rather with a confrontation between the anecdotal and statistical as such. Statistics, of course, have limited explanatory

power in the individual case (for a related discussion of the "ecological fallacy," see page 74). In other words, to demand a conceptualization consistent with an explanation of every singular success story is therefore in effect to exclude statistical knowledge as such, and regardless of its power to cast some light on the greater mass of cases. Frank's "factor x" is, in a sense, a very precise name for what this demand implies—an unknown and essentially undeterminable variable hidden inside the individual. This position is perhaps best understood as an attitude that implies an ontological choice of sorts. Since it turns on an understanding of the relationship between particular ways of thinking or knowing and the effects these are thought to have, this choice must in a sense precede empirical knowledge. In a strictly logical sense, it is impossible to combine its vision of personal development with openness toward probabilistic concepts. The truth of this vision can only be known, as it were, from the inside out.

Paul, who on this as on many other issues seemed to occupy a tenuous but illuminating limit position, illustrates this logical problem in an interesting way. When I asked him why he still was loyal to the Republican Party despite disagreeing with many of their current stances, he replied: "I'm going to tell you what I told a professor who asked me that same question in an argument back in college: It is because I believe in the possibility of freedom […] You come to America so that you can develop freely and spread your wings." Liberalism, he claimed, in one way or another always turns on the idea that "society must be managed." At issue, he said, is "what we call the American dream." It is supported by a great deal of "biographical evidence," he suggested, adding that this fact does not mean there is no such thing as circumstance, or even class: "It might be a bit naïve to believe in it full heartedly… and yet it works somehow." Does this mean that a certain kind of naiveté is the price to pay for prosperity and social mobility, I wondered. "Yes, that's exactly it. And it works as long as there are safety nets!"

When Tom Raga—gubernatorial candidate Kenneth Blackwell's co-ticket—visited the Allen County Fair, I got a chance to speak to his campaign assistant. Much like Paul, he spoke of the American dream as "something of a myth but it is also a motivation." There is an economic rift in America, he agreed with me, and that it is a huge problem, but

> the way to address that is not to tear down the ideal. No, we need to infuse the idea that people can make it on their own even harder. That's what's great about America; you can still start your own business, work your butt up and make it to the top no matter who you are. I think liberalism's focus on entitlements and rights, the legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society, has been immensely harmful to our nation.

Retrospectively, this ambiguous notion of an "informed naiveté" also seems to resonate with the words of Keith, Doug, Frank, and with the active dis-

missal of probability or circumstance in the name of efficiency more generally. Circling, as it does around the power of the mind, the discourse of the free market is easily drawn into this particular kind of self-referentiality. It is "thought about thought" and as such always one step behind itself. By way of analogue, we might imagine the situation of a patient benefitting from placebo treatment. On one level, such a patient is cut off from reality. On the other hand, the effectiveness of the placebo itself demonstrates the very real power of the human imagination. Yet there is no sense in which these two realities might be reconciled. Paul in particular could be understood as speaking from the paradoxical position of defending the efficiency of the sugar pill known as the American dream. His willingness to acknowledge this fact should perhaps also be understood against the background of his own relative socioeconomic security. For those invested personally in the efficiency of the pill—Keith or Katie for instance—the situation is not quite so simple since it might become real only to the extent that probability is violently denounced. Ideological moderation, in this sense, might be thought of as a kind of luxury, available only to those with enough economic or symbolic capital to look upon the promise of future success from the outside. This also helps shed some light on the class dimension of emergent tensions within the local Republican Party, and the role that Paul and "the old guard" played in them (see the Introduction, page 12).

Returning to what I said at beginning of this chapter, it is precisely in this sense that it is useful to shift attention from the question of *who* believes *what*—to which the answer can only be a factually correct but analytically unproductive version of the article quote "Americans believe in myth of getting rich"—and rather ask what belief means or involves in this context. Here, the notion that "anyone can get rich in America" feeds on a practical blurring of the ideal and the descriptive. From this standpoint there is nothing problematic about the fact the American dream writ large is sustained by merely anecdotal evidence. To the contrary, that is the whole point. And indeed, anecdotes about success proliferated in abundance among the Lima conservatives. Everyone had a repertoire of stories about people who had "made it" *despite the odds,* through hard work, faithfulness and sacrifice.

These stories are immune to statistics, not because those "clinging" to their promise are delusional, but because they are modeled on a "bracketing" of the representational ideal of statistical knowledge itself, in accordance with the logic that if we focus exclusively on what is, we may never know what might have been. Statistics may convey truth in a restricted sense but as Frank had it, this is "beside the point." Those who succeed are thought to have done so because they managed to break through the vicious cycle of self-fulfilling class fatalism. "America," in turn, is understood as above all the place where this break is, or at least ought to be, possible. It is a place of experiment and optimism, where the "sociological" laws of the "old world" are suspended. I was often struck by the way people maintained a distance

toward "old Europe" by recalling their historical ancestor's departure from it. "We came here to..." was a recurrent form for affirming the living promise of exceptional American greatness. An expression of false consciousness or not, this says something important about *how* subjects persist in "cling[in] to [the] alluring myth of getting rich."

Being conservative, then, is perhaps less a matter of subscribing to particular dogmas or descriptions of the world, than of standing in a particular relation to the political as such. The political is above all reviewed with reference to its potential to inspire or dissuade its subjects. The principal question posed to a political program is not one of direct effects but rather of what the people affected by it will make of it. How will they understand its rationale? How might they be expected to incorporate it into a moral narrative about themselves and their world? A listener calling into Rush Limbaugh's daily talk radio show to thank him for his life-changing message may serve to illustrate this point. Some years ago this listener had been out of a job, and on the wrong path in life. But listening to Rush on his car radio, the caller said, convinced him to do something about his situation and to become part of the "entrepreneurial American spirit." He had sold his house and started his own business, which was now thriving and had several employees. Drawing out the political implications of his story he wondered why in the world Americans vote for the Democrats in November? You could not find a bunch of more "uninspiring" people anywhere. Limbaugh, rounding off the segment, left his listeners with a rhetorical question: "Isn't the free market great?" One may of course question the representativeness of the caller's narrative, even its factuality, yet in light of the above this is "beside the point." Its power of persuasion, turning on it being possible, is to some extent immune on both these counts. The narrative becomes believable, significant and true through its effects.

The Preferred Path to Socialism

"To preach anything is to give it away," Gilbert K. Chesterton wittily wrote apropos of Nietzsche's theory of will: "First, the egoist calls life a war without mercy, and then he takes the greatest possible trouble to drill his enemies in war. To preach egoism is to practice altruism" (2004 [1908]: 44). This provides an interesting starting point for thinking about the relationship between individualism and sociality. Free market ideology, as we have seen, is supposed to make *everybody* rich. Or rather, in the truly free market, uncontaminated by every notion of entitlement or victimhood, everybody is a potential subject of the narrative of personal success. While universal wealth may not have been among the key concerns of those economic thinkers generally associated with neoliberal doctrine, we may note in passing that Ulrich

Beck (2007), speaking about "the neoliberal agenda" as such, similarly observes that it

> represents an attempt to generalise from the short-lived historic victories of mobile capital. […] Afterwards, that which is good for capital becomes the best option for everyone. Stated ironically, the promise is that the maximization of capital, in the final analysis, is the preferred path to socialism. (Beck 2007)

What this suggests, I argue, is that the language of "individualism," while often deployed by my informants themselves, hardly goes all the way in capturing what the "free market," or "capitalism" might mean in grassroots conservatism today. Too often, it seems to me, the social vision of neoliberalism has been overlooked or dismissed as merely a rhetorical cloak for more sinister aims. While this may or may not hold for neoliberalism as such, I would argue that one of the attractions of free market individualism, for people in a place like Lima, is in fact this "socialistic" quality—or, to speak with Chesterton, its perceived quality of "drilling enemies for war."

Consider, for instance, Sharon's argument against what she termed—anticipating the rhetoric of the Tea Party movement—"socialized medicine." First of all, it was clear that her views on the matter did not in the least depend on any illusions about the present state of affairs. For various reasons, she and her husband had been without medical insurance during much of the time their children were growing up, and she was well aware of the problems associated with being uninsured. Once, Sharon told me, her son had been rejected from the emergency room with a bad cough and shortness of breath. She recalled a terrifying drive to the next hospital, during which she was sure he was dying in the backseat of her car. In 2004, Sharon's husband was laid off and they were back to being uninsured again. Two years later, when I first met Sharon, her husband's unspecified "medical issues" were part of the reason why they were selling their house. It was thus not without a certain justification that Sharon could claim to know what she was talking about: "Trust me, I know about exposure, but it doesn't make me a Democrat."

In Sharon's and her daughter Donna's telling, the American health care system was corrupt on all levels. Doctors are "inventing" new conditions to "feed their pockets." The poor and uninsured have become comfortably reliant on the costly and feeless care of the emergency room, while the unlimited greed of the insurance companies makes life for ordinary citizens a living hell. "I have stopped going," Sharon laconically summarized her relationship to the American health care system. Against this background, both Sharon and Donna were impressed with what I told them about the mainly government-funded Swedish system healthcare, but they ultimately thought that America is "too big a country for socialized medicine to work." It is "a

land of individualists," too greedy for something like that to become functional," Donna said. "People would just "swamp the system," and in the long run everyone would be worse off. Jaded as this defense of the status quo appears at first sight, it was nonetheless curiously fervent. On several occasions, I heard Sharon passionately derail the godless socialists aiming to reform it. Their crime, it seemed, was primarily an unwillingness or inability to face this specifically American reality.

On this view, people, in America at least, are better off facing the reality of the situation—that they are all alone in a war of sorts—abandoning the false hope that the world is potentially just and that victimhood at least holds the promise of resurrection. Along similar lines several informants argued against what was generally thought of as "black victimhood," not on the grounds that it is historically or morally inaccurate but because it does not "get you anywhere." The Democrat or liberal could thus be understood as occupying the position of "real racism" or "real contempt for the poor" as proponents of a politics that secretly convinces its followers that they are not really a part of the American dream. Perhaps borrowing from President George W. Bush, Katie spoke in this context of "the soft bigotry of low expectation."[73] Such accounts index above all a profound disbelief in the possibility of justice or solidarity—not simply racism or contempt for poverty or weakness. The logic here, to push Chesterton's metaphor one step further, is that if peace does not appear to be an (American) option, then drilling ones enemies in war might indeed appear the most altruistic option available.

A note of empirical qualification is in place at this point. If the understanding that the free market lets everybody get rich was one of the main staples of unsolicited in-group talk among my informants, interviews and conversation revealed a broader spectrum of understanding. John, the junior college economics teacher, for instance, aired the view that large income differences in themselves are good for society. What this underscores is that contemporary conservatism perhaps must be understood not primarily as a coherent ideological outlook, but as an assemblage of viewpoints with a specific history and conditions of possibility. To the more important of these belongs the non-pertinence of specific differences—and in extension a certain mode of coexistence of ideological differences. In other words, the coalition between those inclined to a kind of liberalism "mugged by reality," as Irving Kristol famously characterized his neoconservative position, and neoliberalism proper, is preconditioned on the notion of society as de facto a

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[73] For example, in a speech about his No Child Left Behind Act, given at the Kirkpatrick Elementary School in Nashville, Tennessee, President George W. Bush stated that "[w]e are challenging the soft bigotry of low expectations. We believe every child can learn. And I'm convinced when these programs are fully implemented, children will learn and America will be better off" (http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030908-2.html, accessed September 15, 2011). Michael Gerson, one of George W. Bush's most prolific speechwriters, has been credited with coining the phrase (Goldberg, 2006).

kind of war of all against all. If society de facto is war of all against all, then there is no ground for the latent conflict between these two viewpoints to rise to the surface. This non-surfacing appears as one of the most vital conditions of possibility of the Republican coalition of the George W. Bush-years and beyond.

It is worth noting a kind of proximity on this point between popular support for neoliberalism and its opposite. All it takes for *anti*-capitalist rhetoric centered on "greed" to turn into its opposite is a reification of that greed as a non-contingent part of human nature or of society. Facing this reality becomes a matter of abandoning the naïve dream of justice or equality proper. At least its realization *in this world*, we might add, for in addition, this is an import point of convergence between neoliberalism and Christianity. "Socialism," as Frank once put it, amounts to "trying to bring about heaven on earth." Whether this primarily amounts to heresy or merely bad economics is perhaps a matter of personal taste.

All this makes for a capitalist utopia peculiarly devoid of any particular substance. In the sense I explored in Chapter 4 this discourse on capital seems more interested in negating its adversary than anything else. It is linked to positive, sometimes utopian, visions of sociality primarily in a negative manner, through their common opposition to the welfare state. Messing with free market relations, the argument goes, also means messing with organic social relations.

"What I really want is to have people owing me," Katie told me when I asked about social ideals, "I don't mean like a loan, but people relying on each other you know… that's the way it should work, by favors and favors in return, not by obligation." The flip side of her laissez-faire attitude to economics, in fact, seemed to be a particularly strong sense of public engagement. She was more or less always on the run to a fundraiser, a Young Professionals meeting, or Girl Scout event and she sometimes spent money on tickets to the Lima Symphonic Orchestra, despite the fact that she detests classical music and most often ends up not going. The Orchestra, however, is "important for the community"—it is one of the things that put Lima on the map and make it a habitable place. She understands these and other engagements with various non-profit organizations precisely in terms of this reciprocal social ideal of people owing each other in an endless chain of favors and favors in return. "Government intrusion," she maintains, is destined to break such a sociality down through abstract rights and entitlements.

During lunch at the Ohio Republican Party Candidate School (see Chapter 3) Gary Lankford shared a more elaborate version of this vision. Gary, the president of *Family Vision*, "a non-profit leadership training ministry" committed to "building families, training leaders"[74] and the founder and headmaster of the *Westerville Area Homeschool Association*, was attending

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[74] http://www.familyvision.us/bio.htm (accessed on September 7 2010)

the seminar in his function as "social conservative coordinator" at the Ohio Republican Party.[75] Gary identified himself as primarily a "values voter," and the conversation circled around the question of what precisely this might mean today. I asked him if social conservatism does not in fact amount to a model for "treating a symptom" in the sense that the negative social trends under scrutiny are in fact linked to the economic transformations of industrial capitalism.

Gary identified this as a "very important question" and took his time thinking it through. In response he offered a condensed history of the "tragedy of the social movements and of socialism in general," beginning before 1933 and the New Deal. Back then, of course, there was poverty, social problems, and so on but, Gary asked, "do you really think that people were left to die in the street? No, of course not, and who took care of them? The churches and the families did, person to person." The great thing about this arrangement, Gary argued, was that it treated "problems as wholes," dealing with the social and spiritual as well as the economic causes of poverty and desolation. In the decades following the New Deal, this structure of support was gradually eroding, according to Gary, and by the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, it had all but been replaced by the welfare state. Welfare, Gary continued, is commendable but ultimately flawed: "It is a bureaucratic machine; it can only attend to the physical needs of people in a very anonymous way. So instead, for example, the welfare system today contains incentives for divorce: many people on welfare will actually be better off economically if they get a divorce." This narrative provided Gary with the background for his own model of ideal government: "God set up four forms of government: the individual over himself, the family, the churches over its members, and civil society over all. And what you want is a balance of these forces. But as the civil government expands the three others face contraction. So when people talk about small government, I want one thing to be clear. I don't work for smaller government because I hate the government, or think is it redundant, I do it because I love families and churches."

When I asked Pastor Frank and James to elaborate on "capitalism" during one a Friday breakfast session, they tied religion, values and capital together in somewhat different fashion. What, I asked them, is the relationship between capitalism and the "decline of values" they worry about? Does not capitalism encourage some of the "limitless greed" evident in the news clippings they had made a habit of bringing to our meetings? I certainly did not

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[75] Later in summer of 2006, Gary Lankford was fired for having distributed a message on a Republican e-mail list questioning the sexual orientation of Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ted Strickland. See Columbus Dispatch
http://www.dispatch.com/live/contentbe/dispatch/2006/07/27/20060727-A1-03.html
(accessed February 2, 2008)

expect agreement on any of these suggestions, but neither did I expect the relative absence of resistance that they provoked. It was rather that the premises of the question did not seem to make sense to either James or Frank, and that the whole discussion they invoked therefore were, again in Frank's words, largely "beside the point." "Capitalism," James suggested, "is just a mechanism for sharing." The fact that some people "choose to do immoral things" is another story altogether. He elaborated this point, while simultaneously constructing a bewildering illustration on the back of a piece of paper, claiming that "capitalism has its own set of absolutes." In the 1880s a man struck oil here in Lima, James informed me. That made it possible for him to hire workers who in turn create a base for someone else to start a business, for example making sweaters. However, "evil" enters into this functional system when someone increases a price without reason or realizes he can take advantage of his workers by paying less than it costs to live, thus "playing workers out against each other." "You see more people fall out of this kind of society, as the old farm economy deteriorates and so they wind up in prison or on welfare, and this is what gives rise to socialism," James said, Frank adding that "a lot of people don't realize that many of the laws in this country are socialist in nature." In addition, this evil also creates the need for women in the workplace. "This is what Western culture is about today, and democracy cannot do anything about it, because the ones on welfare also vote." It is worth noting that controversies over conservative initiatives to reform election rules, apparently geared precisely toward disenfranchising or reducing turnout of minority and/or low-income voters, are recurrent across the country (see e.g., Weiser and Norden 2011).

This vision of what we may call, following Slavoj Žižek, "capitalism without capitalism" (1993: 210)—of capitalism as an apolitical arrangement where the different "limbs" of an idealized social body can function together—is achieved at a precise point: when "exploitation" comes to be understood as a pure spiritual "evil" at work in human nature. The drive to increase profits must be external to capitalism itself, James and Frank argued, because it ultimately undermines the system, or "destroys the nest" in James's words. The irrationality of greed "proves that it is spiritual" in nature.

At this point we may also briefly return to the biography of Jen, treated in detail in Chapter 3, to reflect upon how this negative coupling of capitalism and the social occur not just in argumentation but also in life itself. Jen, to recall the fundamentals of her story, was abandoned in a trailer park in Indiana at the age of fifteen, and helped along by a local church. Such experiences might become politically activated in different ways. On the one hand, they might become empirical evidence in an abstract argument about the nature of society and the direction it could or should be moving. On the other hand, the subject living through such difficulties "despite all," and in the relative absence of the state, might emerge with a repertoire of experiences

and narratives revolving around personal character, keeping faith, or around the power of the family, the local community, or congregation. Now, if the route of abstraction is likely to produce critique of the state of affairs that generated the situation of suffering in the first place, these experiences and narratives of survival are likely to stand in a more ambiguous relation to its generative social realities. While they are not necessarily the exclusive property of the Right, they certainly lend themselves to a conservative reading and elaboration.

Necessary Illusions

Confronted with the triumphantly individualist language of the "the American dream" the anthropologist might be tempted to enter into an analytical mode of "setting the record straight," that is, of pointing out the ways in which everything is always and already social. While this is important and legitimate work, I would suggest that my ethnography points in a somewhat different direction. Among the Lima Republicans the "free market" or "capitalism," as I hope to have shown, are not merely names for headless and misdirected self-interest. It is also an existential incantation of action, progression, and success and, simultaneously, at some level, a way of imagining particular kinds of sociability. What is clear, then, is that the language of "neoliberalism," "individualism versus collectivism" or "egoism versus altruism," evoked by both critics and proponents of conservatism, only takes us so far in understanding the grassroots appeal of contemporary conservatism.

This awareness may be placed in the context of what seems to be a growing uneasiness among anthropologists with the concept of "neoliberalism," particularly with its deployment as an epithet (Guyer 2007: 414) or a "shorthand for all that is wrong in the ethnographic present" (Elyachar 2012: 76). Addressing the one-sidedness of prevailing approaches to neoliberalism, Dominic Boyer (2010) notes that "[i]f you look back at the entanglement of liberalism and socialism in modern European social theory and political philosophy, it makes no sense whatsoever to talk about the one without the other":

> So, in a nutshell, liberalism acknowledges relatedness but valorizes autonomy; socialism valorizes relatedness but acknowledges autonomy. Both liberalism and socialism can only move so far without getting entangled in the interests of the other. After all, without autonomy, what is relatedness? And without relatedness, what is autonomy? And if you look closely at liberal and socialist theory you'll see that this plays out in the way that both "sides" often contain within their philosophical and political arguments an embryonic version of the other, a kind of philosophical vanishing twin. (Boyer 2010)

David Graeber (2010), drawing on Marcel Mauss's (2007)[76] work, has made the related point that, perhaps contrary to appearances, all major social possibilities are simultaneously present in any society. If fact, even if we do not acknowledge it, most of what we do in everyday social life remains permeated by "individual communism," modern individualism or neoliberalism notwithstanding. In the context of the present study, the one-sided analytics of neoliberalism are particularly problematic, because they are so easily absorbable into the "culture war narrative" of two self-identical and mutually exclusive sides battling it out on the scene of history.

One theoretical formulation of the interconnectedness of agency and sociality that strikes me as particularly useful in moving beyond this impasse is that of sociologist Barry Barnes (2000, 2001). In closing this section, I would like to point toward a series of broader theoretical themes and problems suggested by reading Barnes alongside the Lima ethnography. One of the vital questions that Barnes's work poses is why human beings, who so obviously are socially over-determined in a multitude of ways, nonetheless tend to describe themselves and each other primarily as responsible agents, in possession of rationality and free will. Barnes's solution involves grasping the two as part of each other in an interesting way:

> The conjecture must […] be that responsible agency, as specified in everyday discourse, comprises mutual intelligibility and mutual susceptibility, the basic necessities for the maintenance of coordinated interaction. And we can conjecture further that, in a rough and ready way, the rationality of the responsible agent is her intelligibility (or accountability) and the free will of the responsible agent is her susceptibility […] Voluntaristic discourse needs to be understood primarily as the medium through which our sociality is expressed, not the medium in which our independence is celebrated. (2001: 348)

Barnes notes that to a certain extent this tendency to "reify our collective agency into an individual power" might be understood as a product of recent Western cultural history and a development toward understanding relational capacities as properties of things and persons. Yet this is only part of the story. We must also, according to Barnes, acknowledge

> the special importance of what is reified here. The status of the responsible agent is the most rudimentary of all social statuses, and the crucial default status of the institution of responsible action. As such, it is a vital focus for the attribution of responsibilities, for praise and blame according to how they are met and for demands for response when failure to fulfill them gives rise to demands to others. But responsibility must be localized, whereas causal connection delocalizes. The ideal carrier of responsibility is an uncaused cause, a clearly distinguished and demarcated target for demands and expectations

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[76] Mauss wrote, for instance, that it is a "fundamental mistake […] to oppose communism and individualism" (2007: 101).

(and, as optional extras, rights and powers). And even if in reality human be-ings are buffeted by causes like flotsam in foam, it may still be that these causes are largely discounted, or airbrushed from reality by various devices, and for this reason. (2001: 349)

One of the central merits of Barnes's discussion, it seems to me, is that it renders the gap between the literal significance of voluntaristic discourse and its social functionality thinkable. To speak and think in terms of the respon-sible subject is in fact a way of continually reinscribing it into a system of dependencies with others. Crucially, as the above quote suggests, this gap is, in some sense, necessary. Social interdependence must to a certain extent be hidden in order to work. We must act and think *as if* we are free for our in-terdependencies to fully function.[77]

Yet, there is also something deeply ambiguous about the entire argument. Significantly, Barnes himself follows it into a general denial of "an individu-alistic notion of agency" (2001: 349, see also Barnes, 2000) as merely a rei-fied version of collective agency. In so doing he both betrays his insight and shows us something essential about it. The ambiguity springs from the fact that the very act of stating the necessity of voluntarism, simultaneously casts it as illusory. In explication it becomes *necessary illusion*. Conversely, the truth of the matter—that everything is always already social—emerges as a sort of secret knowledge that must remain absent from the social actor in acting. This, in my view, does not amount to a mistake on Barnes's part; it is merely a testament to the incongruity of agency and structure as epistemo-logical categories. While the one implies the other, they cannot simply by caught by one observational act. Once we pose the problem explicitly, we are drawn, by ways of its self-referentiality, into a more or less binary situa-tion in which it is exceptionally difficult, logically speaking, to think both at the same time, or opt for a middle way.

On this point, Barnes's analytical predicament is reminiscent of an ambi-guity identified by Pierre Bourdieu (2002) in the structural analysis of rela-tions of reciprocity. Structuralism, according to Bourdieu, is able to under-stand the social efficiency of gift-giving by construing gift and counter-gift as constituting a synchronic system. Yet, at the same time, this insight con-tradicts, just like Barnes's insight does, the very principle by which the sys-tem reproduces itself.

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[77] These considerations also allow Barnes to make an interesting observation about standard criticisms of modern liberal society as exemplified by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre, Barnes observes, "has criticised them [differentiated societies and the liberal state] above all for embodying a form of individualism that at the same time he knows cannot exist" (Barnes, 2000: 138). This observation is particularly striking when read in the context of Boyer's and Graeber's insights about the ubiquity of socialism.

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[T]he operation of gift exchange presupposes (individual or collective) mis-recognition (*méconnaissance*) of the reality of the objective "mechanism" of exchange, a reality which an immediate response brutally exposes: the *inter-val* between gift and counter-gift is what allows a pattern of exchange that is always liable to strike the observer and also the participants as *reversible*, i.e. both forced and interested, to be experienced as irreversible. (Bourdieu, 2002: 5–6, emphasis in original)

In the structural model, perpetually and essentially unfinished relationships are "completed in advance." The uncertain, unfinished time between gift and counter-gift—the active ingredient of reciprocity as a social technology—is impossible to grasp in terms of the synchronic model. Crucially, the insider and outsider account are both in a sense irreconcilable and interdependent in a particular way, since the objective structure of reciprocity is itself depend-ent on features necessarily reduced in the process of objective analysis.

To overcome the opposition between structure and experience, Bourdieu argued that the social scientist must make a "double epistemological break," first with the experience of the actors and secondly with "the scholastic point of view" itself (1990). Assuming, as I think we might, that this holds for the social scientist, it still remains to be considered what the initial moment of irreconcilability means for the participant of reciprocity. Is reciprocity, as a social technology, preconditioned on a sort of forgetfulness of its systemic effects? And analogously, getting back to Barnes and voluntarism, what is the producer and consumer of voluntaristic discourse as "the medium through which our sociality is [necessarily] expressed" to make of its status as a necessary illusion? On both these counts, then, we might say that ongo-ing sociality, seen from the inside out, is on rather uneasy terms with socio-logical knowledge.

I am not introducing this problem to propose a set of solutions, or to make a methodological point, but instead to suggest that it is implicit in contempo-rary social and political life itself. The tension between ongoing sociality and sociological knowledge, between first and second order accounts of the so-cial, is immanent to what Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash and Ulrich Beck call "reflexive modernization," a process by which society becomes, among oth-er things, "a theme and a problem for itself" (Beck 1994: 8). Thus, sociolog-ical knowledge, statistics dealing with life chances, for instance, becomes part of the self-image of society itself. The predicament of the "insider" of Barnes's or Bourdieu's discussion is therefore part of the contemporary con-dition: How is its status to be understood?

This question belongs to what I would like to call the *genuine* problems to which contemporary conservatism implicitly addresses itself. The political resonance, even among counterintuitive categories of people, of neoliberal ideas and policies, is not exclusively a matter of ideological programming; it is also an approximation of a pragmatic attitude toward such genuine prob-lems. As we saw above, in the speech of Keith or Frank, the American

dream can be understood as a sort of stubborn denial of the consequentiality of circumstances, a denial which became explicit in Paul's justification of it as a form of productive naiveté. Socioeconomic circumstances are, in Frank's words, "beside the point" and must not be allowed to "control you." This formulation, as we saw, refuses to settle the issue of whether this is so because circumstances in fact hold no causal power, or because putting them aside lends them as little causal power as possible.

Reading Barnes alongside Giddens et al helps us understand why this is so, by shedding light on the stakes, simultaneously self-centered and social, implicit in this vision of the American dream. What is striking in the defense of the American dream that we encountered above, is first of all its blurring of first and second order accounts. It attempts, we might say, a second order legitimization of notions of the first order. The subject is to cling to certain modes of thought, based on their second order efficiency. The fervor of contemporary conservatism becomes understandable only if we acknowledge that it in this way actively engages in speaking back against scientific objectification as such, and that this speaking back has become part of the implicit stakes of contemporary conservatism. As the predicament of Barnes's actors suggest, this move must be made a priori, or else be already contaminated by fatalistic knowledge.

Expanding further on Barnes's understanding of the interconnectedness of voluntaristic discourse and sociality also suggests that we need to trace voluntaristic discourse back to its social conditions of production. Perhaps the public support for neoliberalism, what we may think of as an intensification of voluntaristic discourse in Barnes's sense, indexes, above all, transformations of the social conditions for imagining sociality and progress. Perhaps the heightened sense of choice between engaging potentially productive myth and being "drawn down" by reality, emerges in part from the experience of economic decline and social insecurity in places like Lima. We should therefore see in voluntaristic discourse not only specific ideological axioms but also more or less desperate attempts of imagining and engaging with subjective and social becoming *despite all*.

III. God

As the history of Christianity in the United States makes plain, Christian ideas and practices may lend themselves to politics in different ways. According to William Fogel's (2000) influential schematization, for instance, this history has been dominated by "Four Great Awakenings" with distinctly different political implications. The First Great Awakening, which lasted from the 1730s to the 1830s, was associated with the emergence of predestination doctrine, the Protestant work ethic, and the establishment of egalitari-

anism as a national creed. The Second Great Awakening, active from the early 1800s through 1930s, gave rise to several major reform movements, the temperance movement and the abolitionist movement among them. The Third Great Awakening, with its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, was focused on social, and thus politically addressable, sin. It became linked to labor reform, civil rights and the women's movement. The Fourth Great Awakening, a product of the 1960s and roughly coextensive with the emergence of the New Christian Right (see Chapter 1), reasserted the idea of personal sin and individual responsibility, drove the "pro-life" and the "pro-family" movements, and mounted a sustained attack on various economic entitlements. For Christian conservatives in Lima, who very much belong to that most recent wave of religious fervor, theology pertains to politics because the United States "was founded as a Christian nation" or, less rigidly, because American greatness in one way or another is dependent on what was often termed "Judeo-Christian values." In this section, I seek to move beyond such abstractions by exploring the everyday experiences of faith that animate them.

Frank's Wager

One Sunday morning at Rousculp Church of Christ, Frank introduced his Bible study class to this classic apologetic argument commonly known as "Pascal's wager," though Frank seemed to have been unaware of its origin and spoke of it simply as "an experiment in thought." Pascal, to recall, addressed the question of God's existence through a kind of probability calculus. In the absence of binding evidence, thought Pascal, there is more—infinitely more—to be gained from wagering on the existence than on the non-existence of God. One stands to win eternal life, but only to lose earthly pleasure, transitory in nature. Every rational person, Pascal—and Frank—thus argued, should live as though God exists, even though the truth of the matter cannot actually be known.[78] While Frank spoke, he drew a four field table—one box for each potential outcome—on a large white board hanging on the wall of his office.

A somewhat confused discussion ensued. James, a man in his forties who attended the group very infrequently, promptly exclaimed that he "never liked that one, because it seems to suggest that it is all logical." He turned to me—Frank had just informed him I was "an agnostic from Sweden"—and continued: "The Holy Spirit is real, man, I'm telling you, there is a division between light and darkness, we cannot always understand it, we just need to accept it." Susan was of a similar mind: "It's not as simple as an argument… that is what faith… *trust* is all about." Expanding on this, she dwelled on her

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[78] The argument appeared in Pascal's *Pensées*, published in 1669.

own experience of being "born again." Prior to that experience, she "did not really hear from God," she said, "that was my problem, I just had this *idea* of religion, and I really think… well, the people who come here every week, year after year, who are stuck in religion, without ever making a change, they need to be reached on another level." Picking up on Susan's remark about "hearing from God," Jane, one of the other regulars in the group, added that "maybe what I think of as God, others think of as gut feeling or conscience." This drew loud objections from the others. "How do you separate that from the voice of the devil?" Frank wondered.

Though several speakers had appeared to be polemicizing against Frank's initial remarks, he seemed pleased with the direction the discussion was taking and nodded as he listened: "The mitigation of risks, it's the basic principle of *religion*," he added, "but Christ doesn't work like that. You have to let him into your heart, into your life, not just your head." A little later, he returned to the Pascalian "thought experiment" to specify its importance. The point, he emphasized, is not that it exhausts the meaning of faith, only that even from the standpoint of logic—"the science of faith," in Frank's words—atheism does not make sense. This means, he said, that there must be "something else at work" in the atheist's view of the world.

A few weeks later, I wrote Frank an e-mail[79] to ask him to expand on the notion of a "wager." In his reply, Frank began, as he would, with a Bible quote—a passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus tells Thomas that "because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." He continued:

> The wager is right in that Jesus Christ won't pop into your room tonight... at least I wouldn't hold my breath. But based on the testimony and the evidence I would wager that the testimony is true. Wager and evidence mesh together well. […]

> But let me quickly summarize... the ABCs

> Action based on
> Belief sustained by
> Confidence that what God said is true.

> Every world view could be fit to this... so how people act and live is based on belief sustained by confidence in something... the question is... Is what your confidence is based on going to prove true. People challenge Jesus Christ but rarely will they challenge other more secular beliefs. I hope you get what I mean.

> Sincerely,

> Frank

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[79] Frank has given me permission to quote from the e-mail.

Frank's elaboration, read in the context of the group discussion, exemplifies several pervasive themes that I encountered in my interactions with Christian conservatives at Rousculp, in and around Frank's Bible class, and within the local Republican Party. In particular, the episode highlights three important things I want focus on in the following. First, it exemplifies an emphasis on life and lived experience as the medium of conviction, or, in the terms of Frank's e-mail, on the importance of acting on a confidence that hopefully is "going to prove true." Second, the episode highlights a constant preoccupation with what might be thought of "the problem of certainty," centered on questions about what certainty is made of, how it is sustained, and what constitutes evidence or knowledge. Third, it hints toward the importance of secularism and secularists for Christian conservative self-understanding. In the following, I explore these three themes and ask how they are related to each other.

Narrating Transformation

The story of personal transformation is no less central to evangelical Christianity than it is to conservative understandings of the free market. Yet what the evangelical transformation narrative affirms again and again is, of course, that God is the only agent of real change, personal or otherwise. If attending to the ways in which the American dream becomes real for people highlighted the need to bracket certain kinds of authoritative truth claims, religious transformation suggests a need to engage with and embrace others. Let me begin by recounting a few stories of such transformation.

Sharon is in her early fifties, a mother of three daughters, a passionate member of a local Pentecostal church, an occasional foot soldier for the local Republican Party, and a sometime international missionary. She offers her story, which takes its beginning in her early childhood, with the stated intention of providing "proof that God is real." Sharon's relationship to her mother was always a strained one. Her mother never wanted to have kids in the first place, and had come to hold her husband and their only child responsible for the manifold disappointments of life. The family's circumstances slowly grew unbearable. One night, after an intense argument, the mother threatened to shoot Sharon. Soon after, her father filed for divorce. A two-year custody battle ensued from which the father emerged as primary caregiver. The mother got visitation rights, and came to see Sharon every other weekend or so, but only out of spite, or so Sharon assumed. The visitation rights were revoked, however, after the mother abducted then fourteen-year old Sharon and locked her up in a motel room across the Indiana border. Sharon was safely returned to her father a few days later, but after the incident she did not see her mother for more than twenty years. During this period Sharon was, among other things, "born again."

One day she was approached by a representative of some kind of agency that had been in contact with her mother. Her mother was ill, without money and unable to take care of herself. Would Sharon consider helping her in some way? Sharon recalls:

> Anyway, my mother and I, we never bonded emotionally. There was never that special connection between us. But sometime during this period, one night I dreamt I was sleeping next to my mother, just laying there beside her. Then, as I was waking up out of dream stages, I could hear great sobs coming out of my chest…And you know what had happened was that the Holy Spirit had come down and created that bond while I was sleeping. It was all the pain of my faulted childhood coming out in those great, big sobs […] and this can happen to you even if you are in abuse, in drinking or in drug habits…He alone can change your psyche […] This is what psychological and social thinking won't tell you.

After a few weeks of agonized indecision, Sharon finally decided to let the mother come stay with her and her family in Lima, but, she continued: "*I never had that in me*—it was *God's* will. You know, on my way down there, I made up my mind at least a dozen times to turn back… but I just didn't."

In the Bible Study at Rousculp Church of Christ, similar stories were in constant circulation. During one Sunday session, Mike, the youngest and most recent member of the group, recalled the painful process of going through divorce. Mike and his wife had parted ways about two years ago. Several months of deep depression ensued for Mike. During this time, he said, all his thinking "circled around how badly I wanted things to go back to the way they were. I was caught in my own thinking, and I couldn't see any way out." He prayed every night that his ex-wife would come back and that they would be able to work out their differences. But, again, while this was what *he* wanted, perhaps it was not God's will? "In those prayers I limited God's will to my will, I put God in my power. So sometimes I think we should humble ourselves. It's what God wants, not what Mike wants." It was by this realization that he was finally set free. "Surrendering one's will to God can be a very liberating thing," he concluded. I was captured by this formulation and I asked him later to relate it to the idea of America as the "the land of the free." "Well, it is, but without God it is only the freedom of the open sea," Mike replied, conjuring up the image of a ship adrift without either bearing or compass: "Maybe we take this stuff about freedom too literally sometimes, make too much of it; there can also be too much freedom, it's what God says, not man. It's like pure water; you die from drinking too much."

Susan's story was different from Sharon's and Mike's in that it was in progress, unfolding in the weeks and months that I got to know her, and therefore told to me piecemeal. As I mentioned earlier (see Chapter 3), Susan had grown frustrated with Frank and his teaching at Rousculp, and had

begun looking for ways to "make God real in her life." There was the kitchen "church" she practiced with James; there was also the women's reading group. Susan was also looking for ways to work her faith into personal relationships. In late November, as I was preparing to leave for Sweden, she was planning a trip to the east coast to meet with her sister and her brother-in-law, in an attempt to help salvage their marriage. In the course of several years their mutual commitments to each other had been deteriorating, Susan explained, with him traveling a lot in his work and drinking too much when he was at home. Susan had been following the process from a safe distance, without ever addressing the issue head on with them. Recently she had found, in her reinvigorated dedication to put faith to practical use, the courage to do something. One Friday night over dinner, Susan proudly announced that she was flying out to see them. She had called her sister's house on a night when she knew she would be out. Susan's brother-in-law had answered and they had spoken for half an hour or so. Susan had sensed resistance but possible "opening up." In the end they had decided on her visit. Susan, while still pessimistic about the future of her sister's marriage, was enthusiastic about "actually doing something."

One is struck, in all three of these narratives, by the insistence on agency. Sharon, Mike and Susan all give form and weight to religious experience by charging it with a particular kind of practical necessity: something now realized would have been impossible without faith. Ultimately, this is what proves that God is real. They thus direct our attention toward a potentially "enabling" dimension of faith. Reference to the transcendental here seems to open a space or a temporal frame where it becomes possible to take various forms of action: to transcend an ingrained structure of desire, to forgive despite oneself, or to offer help or guidance to someone without direct personal gain. Certainty emerges from lived experience. It has no purely logical or argumentative grounding. God here appears almost as the name of a deficiency in the human condition—an acknowledgement of our inability to master our own fates completely. In the words of Steve, by self-description a "simpleminded man, a see-and-tell-kinda-guy," who also participated in Frank's Bible Study: "there are things in our lives that cannot have been of our own making; I have seen things in my own life that could not have been my own thing."[80]

In his sermons at Rousculp, Frank often located this enabling dimension of faith within the framework of a larger and more abstract confrontation between "the demands of God" and the "demands of this world." As human beings—by default "of the world"—the former can be adhered to only by

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[80] The appeal that George W. Bush exerted on evangelicals seems to have stemmed in part from the fact the he too had such a story to tell: "There is only one reason that I am in the Oval Office and not in a bar," he once told a group of religious leaders, "I found faith. I found God. I am here because of the power of prayer" (Frum 2003: 283).

way of "self-denial," defined by Frank as "giving up desire of the flesh, giving up ownership of oneself" or, more suggestively, as "dying daily." Frank often spoke of how difficult this was. Typically drawing on quotes from the Gospel of Mark, he emphasized the extent to which turning one's back on the world would attract the hatred of fellow humans. In this context, Frank also liked to emphasize that "self-denial isn't something we Americans do very well." He thought of this more specific issue in terms of "the general culture." "Just look at advertising—it's all about me. We are constantly bombarded with this message that is telling us that we are the center of the universe." In this connection he could also state that "greed is the root of all evil."

With a recent surge of anthropological interest in Christianity, several prominent anthropologists have noted anthropology's strained relationship to Christian belief and practice (e.g., Cannell 2006, Engelke 2002; Harding 1991, 2000; Robbins 2007). Cannell (2006) has noted that "Christianity has functioned in some ways as "the repressed" of anthropology over the period of the formation of the discipline" (p. 4). Anthropologists, Robbins (2007) similarly notes, have typically received Christian conversion narratives in particular with an unfair amount of suspicion. He suggests several reasons for this, some historical, others having to do with the culture of the discipline, but above all, Robbins suggests, anthropology operates by default with a linear model of time which is radically at odds with the experience of conversion. In keeping with these insights I want to suggest that taking the central claim of these stories at face value might be analytically productive in particular ways. By suppressing the urge to deconstruct them, a number of alternative, and, in my view, more important questions are rendered thinkable. More specifically, it becomes possible to ask for whom, i.e. for what kind of subject, under what circumstances, and through what means it indeed becomes true that "God alone truly transforms" or, more generally, for whom "surrendering one's will" in fact becomes "a very liberating thing."

The subject of these stories of transformation is above all a strikingly circumscribed one. In them, aspects of human behavior that might be thought of in terms of solidarity, altruism, or even forethought are made inexplicable or impossible from the perspective of human nature. It is therefore only thinkable in terms of transcendence and accomplishable by a leap of faith. Given this "minimalist anthropology," Susan's effort to save her sister's marriage, Mike's overcoming of grief or Sharon's capacity to forgive "would not have been possible" without God. "Why do you think I am here?" James, another acquaintance from church once asked me, studying me from across the table at a local breakfast restaurant. Firmly dismissing my fumbling attempt to answer, he went on: "I mean: What's in it for me, really? I don't know you, so why do I care about your soul? What it comes down to is love, and that's what proves it is spiritual."

Christian call-in radio shows are instructive for exploring the production of this minimal subject further. Among the most noticeable aspects of the advice offered on such shows is how unremarkable it often is. One caller to a local program, for instance, who was concerned with "poor neighborhood spirit" and an "absence of Christ" in her area, was advised to start paying house calls "in Christ, but without mentioning Him," lest it make people suspicious. Another caller, asking about computer security, was advised to install standard anti-virus protection and firewall in terms of "doing God's work." Trivial things, functional and effective with or without God's grace, one might think. Yet perhaps this is precisely the point. Doing trivial things "in Christ" realizes for the doer an understanding of the human figure as essentially short-sighted and self-serving.

To a degree, such truisms might be understood in relation to what has sometimes been described a as the mundanity or "this-worldliness" of American religiosity (e.g., Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967, 1990; Weber 2001[1930]). According to Luckman, for instance, the exceptionality of American Christianity—the comparatively high levels of church attendance, the continued public prevalence of religious motives, etcetera—is partly explained by its "internal secularization." "[T]oday the secular ideas of the American Dream pervade church religion" (Luckmann 1967: 36). It is not, this suggests, that Americans are more attuned to the transcendent, but rather that they, to a comparatively high degree, tend to think of mundane things in terms of religion.[81]

But what is the reference point for comparison in this context? What the minimal subject of evangelical transformation narratives suggests is that we must also ask what, more precisely, it is that is being transcended? A human subject essentially devoid of solidarity, altruism or even foresight is "transcendable" in a specific way. It is the particular constellation of subject and its surpassing that primarily needs to be understood. This needs to be done, I would suggest, at the intersection of Christianity and capitalism. For what is striking is that the minimal subject is approachable both from the Christian tradition, as a species of Fallen Man, and from classical economics, as Homo Economicus. UCLA Law Professor Stephen Bainbridge, in a Christian "apologia" for the "Law and Economics" approach to legal theory, presents an interesting way of understanding this intersection.[82]

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[81] Karel Dobbelaere has usefully pointed out that if "one deployed a substantive definition of religion," Luckman's observation might be said to disqualify certain phenomena as non-religious, more than anything else (1998: 455).

[82] According to *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics Online Edition,* the "[e]conomic analysis of law seeks to identify the effects of legal rules on the behaviour of relevant actors and to determine whether these effects are socially desirable. The approach employed is that of economic analysis generally: the behaviour of individuals and firms is described on the assumption that they are forward looking and rational, and the framework of welfare economics is adopted to assess the social desirability of outcomes" (Polinsky and Shavell, 2008).

> Christianity is not a utopian faith but rather is quite realistic about human be-
> ings. In particular, our central doctrine of the Fall of Man tells a coherent sto-
> ry about the nature and origins of human preferences in an unredeemed world.
> In my view, the assumptions about human behavior made by economists are
> largely congruent with the fallen state of man. If Economic Man is a fair de-
> scription of Adam after the Fall, the rational-choice model used in economics
> is not a bad model for predicting the behavior of fallen men […] To be sure,
> Christians are called to a higher standard of behavior than that of Fallen Man.
> [H]owever, can we assume Christian behavior by the masses of a secular and
> Godless society? […] A realistic social order must […] be designed around
> principles that fall short of Christian ideals. (Bainbridge 2001: 222)

Bainbridge identifies—in the name of a "realism" of a strikingly cynical variety[83]—a basic congruence between capitalism and Christianity. This provides him with a normative basis for the ideal ordering of society. Instead, I suggest we read it the other way around: as a description of the implications of conceiving of the human subject solely in the terms provided by the economist.

More specifically, the "basic congruence" between Economic and Fallen Man as perceived by Bainbridge helps us better understand the indifference that I often encountered in Lima displayed toward questions regarding the relationship between capitalism and faith or morality (see page 128). If Economic and Fallen Man are one and the same it is indeed, as I was told, "beside the point," if "capitalist greed […] is the chief threat to our morality," as Bellah (1983) put it. At the level of political subjectivity, to recall Wendy Brown's (2006) formulation, the logically contradictory may well coexist in partial symbiosis. It is not necessarily the case that Christian values are understood by conservatives to be supported by neoliberal capitalism, but rather that they function as a supplement to its decontextualized subject, taken as fact. Capitalism is cast simply as the economic system proper to this minimal human nature. Everything above or apart from it is impossible to sustain without reference to the transcendent. In a certain sense, Marx's characterization of capitalism—that in its wake "[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Marx and Engels, 1998 [1948]: 38–9)—may, even for the conservative, very well be true. But this only brings the moral matter to a head, and forces the fundamental choice: God or nihilism.

In this context, we might for instance reconsider Pastor Frank's comment about atheists and morals (see Chapter 3)—that they "*might* have it but, really: why? It might be more of a conventional thing, I guess, but if you'd sit down and ask them, there would be no real *reason* for it." Frank would happily concede that this conventional morality—which is not, then, a morality

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[83] For an interesting intra-Christian critique of Bainbridge's "cynicism," see Sargent (2005).

after all—is unable to withstand the pressures mounted by capitalism. In the long run, there is no moral middle ground; no place for an intuitive sense of right and wrong. All morality must be a morality of first principles and based in the explicit language of the Bible. Thus Frank could ask: "Was Hitler a bad man?" "Yes." "OK, but why? Who are we to impose our cultural values?" More generally, this clarifies the stakes of the debate around religious values: if indeed all those forms of action and experience that "secular humanists" might spontaneously think of in terms of compassion, empathy, planning, love, responsibility, and ethics are here somehow only available through the language of faith—then denouncing faith or undermining its social conditions of existence, indeed must seem tantamount to attacking the foundations of society.

The Problem of Certainty

This leads to the second point that I raised in relation to Frank's e-mail—the problem of certainty. The wager, Frank wrote in his e-mail, meshes well with "the evidence." While Frank and his study group spent much time telling and co-constructing stories attesting to God's agency in an almost phenomenological manner, they were also deeply concerned with "evidence" of a more decisive kind. Frank, for instance, was particularly taken with an evangelical writer by the name Joslin McDowell and his treatment of the historical accuracy of Scripture, and took every opportunity, sermons included, to pass it along. The Bible, according to Frank's elaboration on McDowell, is trustworthy first and foremost because of its exceptional status as a historical document—the large number of existing manuscripts and their relative concurrence being the most commonly quoted indicators of this. In a similarly "evidentialist" vein James could quote the second law of thermodynamics—in his rendition "everything tends to chaos"[84]—as evidence of the young earth theory. In addition to such positive evident, the literal truth of the Bible, James further suggested, could also be approached by way of a kind of double negation: "No one," he asserted, "wants to search for the truth anymore […] because it is more convenient to believe a lie, because then you don't have to change." Or, in relation to politics "the problem is that politicians cannot deal in absolutes; they are governed by greed and guilt." The mere difficulty of asserting something in this way becomes an index of its truth.

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[84] The second law of thermodynamics in fact states that: "A cyclic transformation whose only final result is to transform heat extracted from a source which is at the same temperature throughout into work is impossible. A cyclic transformation whose only final result is to transfer heat from a body at a given temperature to a body at a higher temperature is impossible."

Frank's expression "the science of faith" captures perfectly the gist of this concern with "evidence." The Bible is simply true, and the manner in which one knows this is not qualitatively different from the manner in which one knows something about history or the natural world. Yet as the Bible study session on the wager also suggested, my presence could sometimes function as catalyst for discussions about evidence and certainty in which these things appeared more problematic. This was true even in the case of Frank. While he clearly preferred to pose as a positivist confronted with the abundant proof of God's reality, the task of converting an unbeliever could push him beyond the crudest form of evidentialism and literalism. Becoming a Christian, he would then emphasize, involves a certain amount of "work." He spoke in this context of "opening oneself up," "letting go of doubt," and "listening to the word of God," by which he meant, studying your Bible, trying to find in it lessons applicable to everyday life and thus letting "Christ work in it." As long as a person has not gone through this process, his atheism signals for Frank only an "active resistance to truth"—as good a definition of the work of the devil as any. The catch, of course, is that the only way of really knowing that you have managed to open yourself up and truly listen would be completed conversion. Nonetheless, this emphasis on work suggested that coming to certainty was perhaps not as straightforward a process as his monologues on McDowell seemed to suggest.

James and Susan struggled with the problem of certainty in a similar way during one of their improvised church sessions in Susan's kitchen. Almost before I had come through the door, James, who was seated at the kitchen table while Susan was making coffee, set the terms for what was to follow by underscoring my status as a potential convert: "At the beginning of the process of conversion," he explained, "someone has enough reasons, *whatever they may be*, to keep going. And so far you seem to want to keep going—which is good." Once seated, Susan offered an opening prayer, asking God to help me, and to help them help me, to "come to understanding." When I had asked Susan if I could join them that particular Sunday, I had specifically asked her not to mind my presence—that I simply wanted to see what they were up to, and perhaps ask a few questions at the end. But as the opening had hinted at, the proceedings were almost exclusively organized around my presence. Throughout the session, my queries were reconfigured, in their replies, as pleads for spiritual guidance. When I asked Susan to tell me more about the experience of being "born again" for instance, her reply began: "Well, what you need to do is…" This underscored what I had gradually come to realize—that "church" is not observable in any simple sense, perhaps because "neutrality" does not make sense from the standpoint of faith.

An hour or so into the conversation, James tackled the problem of certainty head on: "To be certain," he declared, "at some point you have to ask God 'are you behind all of this?'" Some things, he elaborated, we can know or

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have good reason to believe—that the Bible is a "remarkable historical document" and that "human history has in fact followed a pattern around Christianity," for instance. Yet in term of certainty, at some point

> we have to… paint ourselves into a corner so that the only last piece to paint is when you are lifted up, by God, so what can be painted is under your feet. Everything else makes sense, but you need God to give you the confirmation that he is real. It's like how you love your wife. There is no hard evidence, but you will still *know*, once you hear and believe and want to accept God, you have to want to be forgiven, you have to want to receive God. But you won't know it until you want to be forgiven, and you want to receive God into your life. You don't have to be a hundred percent sure in order to make this statement, because this statement implies you believe he is a hundred percent real. This is the statement that locks you in—that opens the way for God to come into your life. But it is natural to wait for this until you're completely satisfied, because you're an intellectual person, so you need to think of the things that would keep you from making this statement.

At the beginning of the session, Susan had underscored that "we, me and James, we believe the Bible is the truth, it is the literal word of God himself." Having outlined the process of coming to certainty, James reconnected his points to Susan's earlier formulation:

> This book says you need nothing more to rebuke, to talk, to teach, to help people to grow, to get to the inner self. It is meant to do it all. And this book in the hands of a scholar does nothing. It is only because they are of God, that it does something. That's the only reason. Otherwise, it's just a bunch of words. The power behind the words only comes when God is in the picture. Otherwise they mean nothing; there is no power in these words. It's only power if you want to… accept them, as the right way, and now God gives you the power to make that happen. And that's just the way it is.

Again, the kitchen church session captures, I think, this ongoing preoccupation with certainty as a problem. This is interesting in its own right, given the fact that Susan and James are self-prescribed "literalists," for whom certainty, at least in theory, would not be a problem. But in James's dense remarks in particular, literalism is reconfigured as a kind of epistemological stance—to know the truth you have to *want* to know it. If you come to it with the critical eyes of a scholar it "does nothing." The image of painting oneself into a corner strikes me as particularly suggestive of what this epistemology implies. Certainty, it indicates, does not simply precede acceptance, or the other way around—they are of the same movement.

What this ultimately suggests, I think, is that it would be inadequate to see "fundamentalism" or "literalism"—terms variously used by Frank, Susan, Sharon, and Mike, among several others to characterize their faith—merely as anachronism, as a naïve expression of "old certainties," as both critics and followers, interestingly, have tended to do. Instead, literalism must be under-

stood in an essentially contemporary context of radical uncertainty. It is marked by choice and as such by the moment of uncertainty preceding it. It is because humans are essentially amoral, and because no intuitive moral ground is to be found, that religion becomes charged with the task of establishing unambiguous first principles. This is because positive change, for a nominal subject located in a world of dissolving certainties, can only be imagined as coming from some absolute exterior. It always involves a moment of subjection to an external logic that one does not fully control or understand. In a sense, God must be given space to do his work, or, in Frank's words "you won't find God by trying to second-guess him." The idea of interpretation or metaphor would seem to threaten this space.

Faith in a Secular Age

As Frank's e-mail about the wager intimated, "secularism" and "secularists" are key reference points in this ongoing preoccupation with the problem of certainty. In his e-mail, Frank described secularism as a naïve form of belief that does not know itself as such. This was in fact one of his pet notions. Addressing the Bible Study one Sunday morning, he put the matter more bluntly: "Secular humanism is just another religion," he told us, because by necessity "everyone believes in something." Yet this was merely an approximate formulation of his frustration with secularism. The secularist, he also complained, has "a card up his sleeve": the cunning ability to undercut every positive claim in the name of "tolerance," short-circuiting proper dialogue about "the fundamentals" of social and individual life. In the church lobby, after the meeting, he told me about the "extensive personal experience" he had of the dynamics of this "fixed game." As a college student finding his feet as "born again," he had been under more or less constant exposure to secular logic, and in his work as a pastor he had to grabble with it on an almost daily basis. He recalled one particularly distressing example, a televised debate about homosexual rights that he had participated in a few years back. "You can't talk to these people," he said. "No matter how good your argument is, 'you shall not judge,' 'nobody is perfect' and you 'should not impose your views.' These phrases, you know, all they are supposed to do is to shut down the discussion. Everyone knows they're true in some ways, but what does that really mean? What are they used *for*?" "Christians," he further noted in relation to this, "are not supposed to judge outside the church, but judge one another in the church. Today, we have become so confused with words in this culture. 'To judge' means to help each other stay on path in life."

James, sternly gazing at me from across the narrow table at a local Bob Evans restaurant, phrased the matter somewhat differently: "Erik, everything you do gives birth to a God."True to habit, he addressed me as one does an

attentive student—declarative syntax and slow melodic intonation, generously interspersed with lengthy rhetorical pauses, probably, it struck me, to facilitate my note taking. "Whether he admits it or not, every individual, every civilization has their own set of absolutes," he continued, "and when they crumble, everything crumbles." We—well, mostly James—had been talking for a couple of hours, his illustrations on the piece of paper in front of him growing more opaque by the minute. He moved on to specify what sets his God apart from others: "The difference, the only difference that matters, period, is that if you believe in Jesus Christ, love comes into the picture." "Love," he explained, "is impossible to explain; it is not of human power, it doesn't make sense in human terms." Love, in its incomprehensibility, in its radical otherness, in James's mind is what singles Christianity out from other religions. Thus while everyone, even unbeknownst and despite themselves, believes in *something*, there is also a requirement specific to Christianity to really *believe* in something—to faithfully participate in a specific form of incomprehensibility. It was toward this subtlety, no more than a shift in emphasis it seemed, that James was directing me—the potential convert looking back at him from across the table.

Along these lines, Christian conservatives tend to see simultaneously "too much" and "too little" faith in their secular antagonists. The secularist emerges from conservative discourse simultaneously as a cynical master of suspicion *and* a naïve believer in his or her own powers of perception. Conversely, as we saw above, Christian conservative self-understanding often turns on a dual sense of religious certainty as "just another form of knowledge," *and* as a wager on the truth of Christ's saving grace. During fieldwork, these ambiguities would often appear to me as instances of logical incoherence, ideological immaturity, or argumentative "flip-flopping." But even though, in the individual case, any or all of those things may very well be true, that spontaneous conclusion misses a crucial point. Ambiguity is also, to some extent, an unavoidable feature of every conception of human limitation. Every such conception, in the last instance, becomes answerable before itself: if human knowledge is imperfect, then how does one know that?

At this point, I find it useful to recall Charles Taylor's (2007) basic conceptual move in *A Secular Age*. Taylor suggests that we think of secularity not primarily in terms of declining numbers of believers, or an absence of religion from the public sphere, but rather as a state of social existence in which religion has lost its force of inevitability. He writes:

> [T]he change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. […] Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. […] An age

or society would then be secular or not, in virtue of the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual. (Taylor: 2007: 3)

The process of secularization, in this sense, does not merely redistribute or shift the balance between belief and unbelief throughout society, but transforms the conditions for both equally. In Taylor's vocabulary the complex process of secularization produces "an immanent frame" (539 ff) that allows for "two equally possible spins" (550)—one which is closed and one which remains open to the transcendent—or alternatively a "culture of immanence" (600) which does not foreclose the issue of belief.

Under these conditions, the opening of a space for God's work would seem dependent on the subject's readiness to make an ungrounded, primal decision. There is nothing self-evident about such a secular faith, and so faith has to be actively constituted against the possibility of its opposite. As Frank emphasized above, becoming a Christian involves work: "opening oneself up," "letting go of doubt," and studying your Bible, trying to find in it lessons applicable to everyday life and thus letting "Christ work in it." Even more to the point, there was this moment at the end of Frank's e-mail when the interchangeability of all world views seemed to threaten: "Every world view," Frank wrote, "could be fit to this... so how people act and live is based on belief sustained by confidence in something... the question is... Is what your confidence is based on going to prove true. People challenge Jesus Christ but rarely will they challenge other more secular beliefs. I hope you get what I mean." I find this striking not only for the acknowledgement of uncertainty, but also for the way in which the "secular enemy" comes to Frank's rescue in a sense—it is the fact that people habitually challenge Jesus Christ but not secular values or truths, that is taken as a basis for doing the opposite. Secularism is what stabilizes Frank's ponderings and suggests a way forward.

To render this dynamic intelligible, I suggest we might benefit from seeing it through the prism of philosophical hermeneutics, and more specifically the conceptual framework of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In particular, I am interested in what Gadamer calls the "anticipation of perfection" [Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit] (1989: 293–4) and the way it is linked to the "fusion of horizons" and ultimately to "truth processes" more generally. Arguing against the view of cultural artifacts, professed by Dilthey and others, as primarily expressive of a particular life form, Gadamer suggested that the object of hermeneutic inquiry always must be understood in its claim to universal truth. It is only taken seriously as such that it has the capacity to draw the interpreter from his or her particular historical and cultural context toward some higher level of understanding. This is because the unfamiliar is always in some sense irreducibly opaque. Its internal coherence may not be immediately clear to us. Furthermore, we cannot assume to be even perceptible to what it could reveal for us, because to the extent that it relates to

something lacking in our own conception of the world, we may be constitutively blind to its very possibility.

In order to retain an openness to the transformative power of that which we cannot understand, Gadamer's discussion suggests, we need to assume it has more authority, more coherence, and more truth, than we can presently substantiate with reference to what is known to us. That is, we need to anticipate the perfection of whatever it is that we are encountering: to approach it from the standpoint of positive prejudice. Only then may we, with time and labor, arduously tracing the hermeneutic circle, accomplish a (transitive and imperfect) "fusion of horizons." Implicated in this shift of perspective, then, is a positive reevaluation of the role of authority, prejudice, and trust in the hermeneutical process. Prejudice here receives a doubly positive meaning. It is both necessary in the sense sketched above, but also in the sense that we must allow ourselves to let the unfamiliar speak to our own situation and context, that is to take it seriously as a claim to truth transcending its specific context of emergence. The attempt to prematurely establish for oneself a "neutral" ground is always antithetical to truth as process.

For Gadamer, it is the transformational power of hermeneutics that is at stake in the confrontation between what Paul Ricoeur (1970, 1981) referred to as "the hermeneutics of suspicion" and the "hermeneutics of faith." Against Gadamer, and with the hermeneuticians of suspicion, we might say that the anticipation of perfection blinds the interpreter to the omissions, misrepresentations, and manipulations of the text. But while this, no doubt, is true, it does not, in a certain sense, necessarily undermine the initial point—at least that is what I want to argue. *If* we are interested in the text in its capacity to objectify our own limitations and potentially transform our viewpoint, *then* gullibility might be the price we have to pay (and vice versa). Regardless of whether we come down on the side of suspicion or trust—and perhaps different situations call for different measures—Gadamer's reformulation of the hermeneutical project alerts us to the fact that there is something prejudicial at work in the process of interpretation, something that cannot be settled from within the act of interpretation itself, but which always precedes it. Trust and suspicion, as divergent anticipatory modes, represent different possibilities and problems, none of which are accessible from the other side, as it were. Trust enables certain insights, suspicion others.

This helps clarify what is at stake for biblical literalism in "a secular age," as understood by Charles Taylor. Without, of course, implying any substantive link between twentieth century hermeneutics and contemporary Christian fundamentalism, I think it is helpful to see the latter as a crude and aggressive form of "anticipating the perfection" of Scripture. Rephrasing Taylor's central insight, we might say that secularization means precisely the absence or even negation of the anticipation of perfection in relation to religion and religious ideas. A secular subject (again, in Taylor's terms) reading the Bi-

ble, looking to it as a force of transformation, for a mechanism of transcendence, is therefore directly confronted with the opposition of trust and suspicion as such. What this means is that if the possibility of transcendence—which, as we have seen, may come to index nothing less than the possibility of love, solidarity, forethought, transformation, in short, of humanity—is to be kept open, then positive prejudice must be rebuilt from the ground up. Literalism, in other words, is not just an anachronistic form of epistemological naïveté, as for instance Vincent Crapanzano (2001) seems to suggest, but a distinctly contemporary response to the present.

This helps account for conservative Christians' preoccupation with atheists and secularists; faith can never be a private matter, because it pertains to socially transmitted structures of anticipation. It also helps us understand why evangelical Christianity adopts a version of belief so obviously resonant with the stereotypes of the opposition, in which religion is primarily a set of poorly substantiated theories competing with the teachings of science. It is, in a sense, because believers are already too secular themselves that they must grasp for pseudo-science as a productive beginning.

By contrast, a more habitual religiosity, that is, a religiosity of the kind that is typically left behind in the process of being "born again," may well afford a less rigid style of reading, inscribed as it is in a sort of socially generalized "anticipation of perfection." It is to the extent that such traditional forms of certainty wither away, that the question of trust is posed anew. This is how the tension between a literal and a processual faith, between proof and performance, becomes a productive and perhaps even an essential one. Under conditions of secularity, it is in some sense only by thinking and acting as if Scripture is literally true, that God might become real. The secular subject has to accept the absolute authority of the text in order for something to be set into motion.

Trust Heuristics

In conclusion, I want to relate a more personal experience that I think casts additional light on the social functionality of the kind of public morality Christian conservatives seek to ground in the Bible. Before leaving Lima in December 2006, I needed to sell the car I had bought a year earlier. It so happened that Sharon—whom I had first met at a Republican Party event just a month or so earlier—was looking to buy a new car. The only problem was that she did not have the money at the moment. Sharon's husband had been unemployed for several years, and Sharon was working multiple jobs to make ends meet. However, they were just putting their house on the market to buy a more affordable mobile home instead, and she could send me the money as soon as they had closed the deal. Without giving it much thought, I agreed to leave the car with Sharon.

Later that same week I talked to someone back home who questioned my judgment: Did I *really* know that I would even get my money? How could I trust someone I had just known for a month or two? I assured my concerned friend that I felt confident in the deal, but as I hung up the phone I was left with a nagging worry. At that moment an utterly unfamiliar, yet strangely comforting thought occurred to me: "It will be fine, she is after all a committed Christian." It was as if this thought had "come over me," or entered me from the outside; all I could do was to watch it slowly sail through my mind. Gradually, however, I was able to reinterpret it, in a voice more familiar to me: "Well, at least I am pretty sure *she* believes she will burn in hell if she does not pay me—that has got to count for something." Still, that reinterpretation seemed to miss something crucial about the initial thought, which had left me slightly disoriented, even alienated from myself. A couple of days later, perhaps sensing my concern, Sharon played "the faith card" herself, but not, as I had imagined, with reference to the prospects of her own eternal soul, but rather to the "work" that she and her daughter had put into "saving" mine: if she did not pay, that work, she said, "would have been in vain. It would have undermined everything we have shared with you."

Susan Harding (2000), in her book about Jerry Falwell and his congregation in Lynchburg, Virginia, relates an experience of striking similarity. At dusk, Harding is leaving Falwell's church by car, somewhat dazed after long and intense interview with one of Falwell's co-pastors. At an intersection she is nearly hit by a speeding car. She recalls:

> I slammed on the breaks, sat stunned for a split second, and asked myself 'What is God trying to tell me?' It was my voice, but not my language. I had been inhabited by the fundamental Baptist tongue I was investigating. As the Reverend Campbell might have put it, the Holy Spirit was dealing with me, speaking to my heart, bringing me under conviction. (Harding 2000: 33–34)

Harding takes this experience as suggestive of something important about conversion, which can productively be seen, she argues, "as a process of acquiring a specific religious language or dialect" (34). This enables Harding to distance herself from two equally problematic strands in the existing scholarship on religious conversion: one that works from the premise that converters must be distinguished from non-converters by some preexisting trait or disposition, and a second that assumes that conversion implies a dramatic transformation of world view or a kind of brainwashing. This, Harding continues,

> overlooks how persuasive in a quite unsensational way the recruiting rhetoric is. It overlooks the extent to which the language of conversion *as such* "divides" the mind and contributes to bringing about conversion. (2000: 35, emphasis added)

The language of conversion, then, mounts a kind of almost impersonal power that works on the listener quite regardless of his or her dispositions or worldview. Harding also notes that religions conversion, in this sense, is not set apart from other social situations involving influence and change—to an extent the mechanics of conversation is at work in all kinds of social situations.[85] Something like this was clearly at work in my experience with selling the car, too—specifically what Harding describes here as a "dividing of the mind." Much in the way that the tonalities, vocabularies or phrases of people that one frequently encounters in everyday interaction rubs off on you, religious language has a way of doing so too. During the time in question I had of course been heavily exposed to literalist discourse for months on end; I, or at least something in me, had picked up on the "religious dialect."

Yet this seems to be only part of the picture. Equally important, it seems to me, is the specificity of the issue—as formulated by my friend from home—that effectively awoke this dialect in this specific case. At centre here is the issue of trust. *Why* would I trust Sharon? That is a valid question, no doubt, but one whose specificity also conceals its inscription in a universal problematic. For is it not also true that trust, as such, is intrinsically and necessarily connected to a scarcity of evidence? Trust would otherwise be superfluous. To ask why one trusts is strictly speaking to ask the impossible. It seems significant that it was in attempting to reply to that impossible question that my mind, thoroughly saturated with biblical language at this late stage of fieldwork, reached for the distinction between believers and unbelievers. The explicit morality of Bible language, this suggests, becomes useful particularly in situations of uncertainty and scarcity of evidence, in which the grounds for trust, forgiveness, altruism and so on are lacking or unperceivable.

Perhaps this tells us something not only about conversion, but also about the logic of the "evangelical vote"? Above, in Chapter 2, I suggested that the electoral usefulness of literalism may be understood through the opportunities that it offers conservative voters and candidates to mediate the demands that a particular understanding of democracy—their "metapolitics"—puts on the idea of political representation. This led me to ask to what extent the "fundamentalist" or "literalist" is potentially a moderately conservative figure at heart, but one enticed, to ask him- or herself the rigged political question of who best represents "our values." The car episode seems to offer an opportunity to expand upon these remarks. If American democracy, to a

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[85] In this general sense, experiences of the kind reported by Harding and by myself are exemplary of something that (ideally) occurs in all fieldwork. Evans-Pritchard's (1976) sighting of a witch, and Maurice Bloch's non-linguistic acquisition of the ability to evaluate "good swidden" (1998: 16) are prominent examples that come to mind. Once a certain "level of participation has been reached," Bloch interestingly notes in relation to this, introspection becomes a possible route to anthropological knowledge.

relatively high degree, asks voters to *trust* in their representatives, then part of literalism's political appeal, might lie in the fact that it represents a morality that, at least in theory, can be understood, explicated and communicated in full—this was the point made, recurrently, above, by Pastor Frank among others. The religious question can function as a "trust heuristic," a kind of moral shorthand, in a situation that is marked by suspicion and scarcity of evidence.

On a side note, the money for the car did eventually end up in my bank account, but only after a substantial delay. In early 2007 the local house market seemed to be slowing down and Sharon and her husband managed to sell their house only after considerable and repeated price adjustments. The car, however, is no more. Shortly after the last payment Sharon's daughter had an accident, which she fortunately walked away from without permanent injury, and the car ended up at the junk yard.

Concluding Remarks: Coexistence

To conclude, I want to return to something that has remained present, implicitly at least, throughout this chapter, namely the question of coexistence. What makes hawkish foreign policy, neoliberal economics, and evangelical Christianity gravitate toward one another? Or more specifically, recalling Wendy Brown's formulation, how do ideas that are, at least in some sense, logically contradictory, become "partially and unsystematically symbiotic at the level of political subjectivity" (2006: 693). While this chapter cannot offer a definite answer, it provides some empirical insight into the unsystematic symbiosis characteristic of contemporary conservatism.

Thinking and speaking of things as disparate as war, the free market, or God, conservatives are very much circling around a more or less constant set of anxieties and issues: the tenuous relationship between critical thinking and action, the insufficiency of positive knowledge, the difficulty of keeping faith under conditions we might conceptualize as "secular" in an expanded sense. In each case transformative action is seen as preconditioned on a kind of provisional suspension of critical judgment—on acting as if the president knows what he is doing, as if the market will take care of everything, or as if Scripture provides us with unambiguous first principles. In each case there is also the clarifying presence of the liberal "enemy," to speak with Chairman Keith Cheney, as both a tangible figure and as stand-in for the general zeitgeist.

5. Conclusion: To Believe (in Something)

Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us.

—Hans-George Gadamer[86]

Some things must be believed to be seen.

—Lima bumper sticker

This study has been concerned with what I have referred to as forms of political attachment or, more specifically, with the "stickiness" of contemporary conservative politics. Arguing that the political force of contemporary conservatism in the United States cannot be fully understood simply in terms of interests or conventional political identities, it has explored the ways in which specific people are actually drawn into its circuits. Drawing, as the study has done, on the experiences, views and activities of quite a small group of people—typical, perhaps, for conservative mobilization but not representative in any stricter sense—it cannot construct its conclusions by way of generalization. What it can do instead, and in my view this is no less important, is to add descriptive depth or breadth to our understanding of conservative politics. One way of framing the contribution that the study makes, I think, is to say that it broadens the basis upon which commitment to conservative politics can be understood. It does so by identifying, describing and analyzing modes of attachment through which conservative politics function.

I have emphasized, in this vein, the importance of attending to the existential usefulness of conservative politics. Through the autobiographical narratives of Frank, Jen, Katie and Susan, for instance, conservative political themes emerge as devices for creating spaces for agency or for reframing tensions of personal experience. I have also sought to contextualize the literal content of conservative politics by showing how it is shaped in dialogue with the "liberal enemy," real or imagined. Further, I have tried to recover

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[86] Gadamer (1976: 9).

some of the problems, worries or tensions that conservative politics implicitly address. All this, I have argued, pertains to how conservative ideas become true for people.

Being Opinionated

Contemporary conservatism does not just comprise a set of abstract political and theological positions. As I believe I have demonstrated, it is also organized around a kind of existential or epistemological sensibility, or perhaps better, a set of strategies for coping with epistemological problems tied to social reflexivity, liberal democracy and secularity. A basic intuition at work in the politics I have been tracing is that to be able to act, or to make something real, one must "believe in *something*," as expressed by James and Frank. Belief must be accomplished, and society is making this increasingly difficult. This means that it becomes necessary to bracket certain kinds of knowledge, and to take an active stance toward "beliefs" and "values." From this point of view, it is, in a sense, reasonable not to be fully reasonable. Tied into this intuition is also a particular kind of certainty, one which conflates doubt and conviction in a specific way. As Pastor Frank once formulated the matter: "Everyone is biased—but my bias is better!"

Frank's slogan highlights something essential that has run through both ethnography and analysis from the outset. Whatever my interlocutors have been up to, and whatever topic they have been concerned with, they have simultaneously also been self-consciously preoccupied with "having beliefs," "holding convictions" and "being opinionated." That is to say, their politics have been marked by, even subordinated to, a sense that the circumstances call for convictional steadfastness. At the outset, I introduced Lima, a small city in northwestern Ohio, a place heavily marked by decades of de-industrialization, in which "remaining" typically was matter of conjuring up a sort of faithfulness *despite all*. Chapter 2, which centered on the "metapolitics" of conservative voters and activists in and around the Allen County Republican Party, demonstrated how the political infrastructure of American democracy, with its emphasis on mediating social and political plurality, becomes conducive to a sort of withdrawal into geographically coded identities and values. The democratic contract implicit in contemporary conservative politics, I suggested, is one of a "postponed compromise," which is temporally and geographically displaced from the here and now. Chapter 3 set out to trace how this metapolitical attitude shapes the positive content of conservative ideas and practices. It suggested that the presence, real or imagined, of radically different political others endows the Lima conservatives with an ideological carte blanche of sorts—"at least you cannot think like that!"—that allows them both to take particular stances to and to mediate internal conflict.

This also implied an analytical challenge passed on to Chapter 4. In order to better understand the convictional force of contemporary conservatism, I suggested, one must understand how energies that are in some sense politically homeless become drawn in to this bipolar structure. Chapter 4 undertook this challenge in relation to three central themes of contemporary conservative politics: war, the "free market," and God. Each of these themes, I argued, is animated by more general concerns—problems, irritations, tension, and contradictions that prompt belief in something. In relation to these general worries, specific beliefs are merely approximations and unfinished attempts of response. It is only in relation to these problems and tensions, that we may understand the "speaking" quality of platitudes of "less government," "supporting the troops," or "traditional marriage." It is in their ability to evoke broader and deeper problem that political ideas attach themselves to people.

This perpetual preoccupation with "having beliefs" and with "being opinionated," I suggest, sets up a dependency of sorts between the awareness of plurality, uncertainty and doubt on the one hand, and the production of identity, certainty, and belief on the other. It is not despite the fact that everything is relative and that everyone is biased, that conservatives can rest assured in their beliefs—it is somehow rather because of it. Contemporary conservatism, despite the purported wisdoms of its critics and proponents alike, is not an alternative to (post)modern uncertainty. Rather, its convictional force, its stickiness, is predicated on uncertainty in one way or another. The "relativist," conversely, cannot be someone endowed with a specific knowledge about historical or cultural contingency or relativity of human existence that is lost on the conservative. That knowledge, we should rather say, represents the common experiential background of contemporary politics. It is, on some level, as Frank had it in the previous chapter, what "everybody knows." The difference between conservatives and their adversaries, lies instead in how this common awareness is put to use or is dealt with. At each instance of the preceding analysis, the certitude at work in contemporary conservatism has emerged, not as a self-enclosed state of interiority but rather as a modulation, a particular way of inhabiting uncertainty: "Everyone is biased—but my bias is better."

The Unconditionality of Belief

I find this kind of formulation interesting because it seems to capture contemporary conservative politics at its most accessible. This is because the question or problem it encircles is perceivable from the outside; the relationship between certainty, trust or faith and contemporary forms of reflexivity

and relativity is genuinely unclear.[87] To recognize this is of course not to say that the conservative response is adequate. But if the aim is to understand the force of that response one at least needs to take the question seriously. It is necessary, in other words, to remain open to the possibility that contemporary conservatism is not just a form of ideological reproduction, but that it is also expressive of political thought—no matter how inarticulate—about genuine problems or difficulties.

It may be useful, therefore, to briefly lift the gaze from the immediate context of American conservatism. To say that one has to believe in something is to point toward an essential lack or limit to human certainty. It is to point out that political life, or human experience more generally, is shot through with tensions, contradictions, paradoxes and problems which no positive knowledge can solve for us. Still, and perhaps this is the ultimate contradiction, this negative formulation will not do either. At some point, for the sake of survival if for nothing else, one must get on with things, and in doing so, at the very least act *as if* some things are simply true and others are not.[88] In this sense, awareness of the limits of certainty has very little practical significance.

I suggest we may think of this as the "axiomatic" dimension of the political—at some point something will have to be assumed.[89] As noted earlier, the smooth functioning of social life is often dependent precisely on such assumptions. I have already mentioned Bourdieu's notion of "misrecognition" as functionally internal to reciprocity (p. 132), as well as Barnes's understanding of agency as something of a "necessary illusion" (p. 131ff). For an additional example, we may look to Alfred Schutz's observation that communication hinges on what he called "the idealization of reciprocity" (1962: 3–47). In order for two persons to successfully engage in communication, Schutz suggested, they must first accomplish a mutual idealization of each other's linguistic competencies under the assumption of an "interchangeability of standpoints." These examples suggest that in descriptive sense everyone in fact believes in something.

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[87] On this point, see for instance Slavoj Žižek's discussion of the "demise of symbolic efficiency" (e.g., 1999: 322) in postmodernity.

[88] Contemplating what the failure or refusal to act as if some things are true would imply, one might take the body of anecdotes regarding the lifestyle and demeanor of the ancient Skeptic Pyrrho of Elis as a point of departure. In accordance with his conviction that "reality is indeterminable," Pyrrho reportedly would take no precautions whatsoever facing precipices, vicious dogs, or oncoming wagons. Consequently, he had to be followed around by a protective friend (Bett 2010) wherever he went. It has been noted that many of these reports are probably best understood as polemical caricatures authored by Pyrrho's philosophical antagonists (Bett 2000: 63–84). Nonetheless, the caricature remains an interesting and thought provoking "ideal figure."

[89] By "axiom," I intend something that is stipulated rather than proven. See below for an elaboration on this usage.

Necessary belief is also a classical philosophical theme, as Mark Lilla's (2007) historical expose of the interface of religion and politics demonstrates. In Kant, for instance—the founder of modern epistemology—the necessity of belief emerges from the tension between our limited faculties and our unlimited thirst for knowledge. Working to delineate the preconditions of human experience, Kant found himself forced to abandon agnosticism for what Lilla usefully terms "liberal theology"—i.e. to postulate God as a sort of limit concept, functionally necessary for philosophical thought to get on with what it actually can come to know something about (2007: 136–143).[90] What is particularly interesting in Lilla's account is the way that it links this emergence, in Enlightenment philosophy, of a new sort of Christian apologetics, to later instances of theological political excess. Thus while, "Kant's political philosophy respected the principles of the Great Separation [between politics and religion], his religious thought opened for the possibility of bridging it in some way," (2007: 162) and "[s]ubtly, perhaps unwittingly, [he] laid the foundations for a new, and thoroughly modern, political theology" (2007: 140). Once we have come to think of God as necessary, Lilla's story seems to suggest, the reference point for any modesty disappears. There exists, in other words, a historical link, a sort of hidden path, between epistemological modesty and theological certainty.

A related conclusion can also be drawn from the Gadamer quote, with which I began this chapter. In full, the passage from which it is taken reads as follows:

> It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of our linguistic usage by the French and the English Enlightenment. It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something — whereby what we encounter says something to us. (Gadamer 1976: 9)

Gadamer's basic insight, that something prejudicial always is at work in human understanding, is hardly surprising or controversial—"everyone is biased." But what comes into particular focus with his eloquent formulation, it seems to me, is the deeply ambiguous nature of that insight. Prejudices, Gadamer says, are intimately connected to our "openness to the world." On the one hand, that should put to rest any hope of absolute transcendence. To be unprejudiced would be to the dead, in some sense. But on the other hand,

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[90] "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith," as Kant himself famously put it (Kant quoted in Lilla 2007: 138).

how can any specific "prejudice" or perspective thrive under these conditions? In relation to any specific historical or cultural perspective, transcendence becomes in a sense simultaneously necessary and meaningless.

This helps clarify the terms of what I spoke of above as a complicity or mutual parasitism between doubt and certainty. Each attitude only makes sense as the negation of the other. This is why taking conservatives' self-description as "true believers" at face value—for instance by "deconstructing" their beliefs—is misleading. Conversely, this is also why a certain kind of critique of secularism as "another form of belief" becomes vacuous. The "secularist," as an ideal figure as least, is not someone who has managed once and for all to rid him- or herself of all prejudice, but rather a subject of eternal flight. In this sense, the critic who points out a lingering attachment is above all an accomplice of secular logic. At each particular moment, it is true, the secularist might be a hypocrite, who of course believes in something, but what really defines secularism is the temporal trajectory on which it travels.

Perhaps we can say that contemporary social and cultural conditions, particularly in relation to "social reflexivity," accentuate and intensify an epistemological ambiguity or difficulty to which conservatism provides one particular "solution." Niklas Luhmann, speaking of contemporary culture's reflexive awareness about cultural variation and plurality, points out that "[e]ven if—and especially if—this variety exists, one might as well stick to one's own" (Luhmann 2000: 85). Furthermore,

> [i]f this is an accurate diagnosis, it becomes clear why fundamentalisms of every kind develop under [contemporary] conditions of communication. One can step up and say: this is my world, this is what we think is right. The resistance encountered in the process of doing this is, if anything, a motive for intensification; it can have a radicalizing effect without leading to doubts about reality. […] It is sufficient to weld together one's own view of reality with one's own identity and to assert it as a projection. Because reality is no longer subject to consensus anyway. (2000: 94)

Conservative mobilization in Lima, Ohio, seems to be perfectly congruent with this formulation. When Frank says that "my bias is better," he is perhaps making this uncharacteristically clear. My contention, however, is that Frank's momentary reflexivity, probably in part instigated by my presence, merely makes a general tendency explicit. This kind of "reflexive dogmatism" is not entirely dependent on the existence of a critical mass of reflexive dogmatists, capable giving an account along the lines of Frank's "my bias is better." My point is rather that there exists a sort of conservative impulse or incentive in the practical experience of prejudices as such, that is in relation to other prejudices. As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3 particularly, the political process is itself a site where this experience is mobilized and dramatized though the medialization of "the other" through maps, anecdotes and frag-

ments of election data. To believe in something and to distance oneself from the demands of knowledge appears as one way of handling this experience.

Politics, Fidelity, Truth

It is also with this sense of "being opinionated" that conservatives accomplish their self-description as the only "properly political" alternative, the only actor with the confidence to posit "real political differences" and clearly name its "enemy," to recall formulations cited above (see page 86). Such formulations, I argue, should be understood in relation to what I referred to above as the "axiomatic dimension of politics." The conceptual framework of French philosopher Alain Badiou is useful for expanding on this point. In Badiou's vocabulary, a properly political initiative, contrary, perhaps, to conventional wisdom, is always dedicated to what he terms an "event"—an occurrence that is external to ontology and cannot be properly discerned from the known coordinates of the present situation. Religious conversion, for instance, might be such an occurrence. In this sense, politics always involves "deciding upon the undecidable."

> An event is linked to the notion of the *undecidable*. Take the statement: 'This event belongs to the situation.' If it is possible to decide, using the rules of established knowledge, whether this statement is true or false, then the so-called event is not an event. [...] Nothing would permit us to say: here begins a truth. On the basis of the undecidability of the event's belonging to a situation a *wager* has to be made. This is why a truth begins with an axiom of truth. It begins with a groundless decision—the decision to *say* that the event has taken place. (Badiou 2005: 46, emphasis in original)[91]

This does not mean that whatever is decided upon retroactively "becomes true," only that the matter of truth or falsity cannot be settled with reference to any prior knowledge, and that the conditions of possibility for assessment

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[91] As the attentive reader may have noticed, the term "axiom" here plays an entirely different role in than it does in Taylor's understanding of the secular (see page 111). To recall, Taylor's point was that "[b]elief in God is no longer axiomatic" (2007: 3), meaning that God's existence is no longer self-evidently and undisputedly true, the way it once was. Here, on the contrary, the "axiom of truth" is essentially "a groundless decision." Interestingly, both these meanings are in fact contained within the concept of axiom. In traditional philosophy, an axiom is a proposition or claim that is understood as true beyond suspicion. In contemporary mathematics, it is more typically a starting point, a premise or rule in a game of sorts—"[a] statement used in the premises of arguments and assumed to be true without proof [...] The axioms and the rules of inference jointly provide a basis for proving all other theorems. As different sets of axioms may generate the same set of theorems, there may be many alternative axiomatizations of the formal system" (Nelson, 2003: 21). Badiou's reliance on the latter sense is also exemplary of his reliance on mathematical concepts more generally (see Hallward 2003, p. 49–78 in particular).

emerge only with the consequences of the decision itself (e.g., Badiou 2005: 129–130. The temporal structure of the axiomatic is determined by what Badiou calls "fidelity to the event." The political "subject" or agent—who becomes a subject precisely through this process—must remain in a state of faithful uncertainty for the political sequence to persist, and for the very possibility of a truth to eventually emerge to remain open. This also implies that, for Badiou, the terms "politics" and "the political" must both be abandoned. All there is, Badiou suggests, is *a* politics in the singular—a particular sequence of experimental decision, fidelity to that decision and subject formation through which a universal truth retroactively may or may not emerge. For my purposes here, this definitional issue needs not be pursued to the end; it suffices to note that Badiou's work points toward a dimension of political life that tends to fall away from conventional definitions of politics.

I find Badiou's conceptual apparatus helpful in at least two ways. First, it helps us conceive of an important aspect of the convictional force of conservative politics at its most general. "Believing in something" simply articulates the internal structure of *a* politics. In this capacity it draws strength from any sign of ambiguity or convictional weakness of the opposition, or indeed from the fact that uncertainty and relativity is "what everybody knows." By casting themselves as a "true believers;" by referring to themselves as "fundamentalists," "psycho-conservatives," or "nutcases," and by explicitly referring to their convictions in the language of faith and bracketing the demands of knowledge, conservatives are in the last instance underlining and dramatizing the axiomatic character of contemporary politics. To do so, they do not need to present conclusive or adequate proof. Instead, part of the stickiness of contemporary conservatism seems to lie in its ability to articulate the necessity to believe in *something* in such a way that someone attuned to it might be tempted to get with the conservative program. The apparent weakness of contemporary conservatism as seen from the outside— its tendency to simply make assumptions—is thus, in fact, part of its strength. It enables its followers to experience the axiomatic nature of politics itself with particular intensity. It accomplishes this by fetishizing a set of "known unknowns" best kept out of the searchlight of critical reasoning.[92]

To concretize, we have encountered conservatives of Lima preoccupied with varied themes and projects: with realizing individual success or subjective transformation of some form, with contemplating possibility of collective action—specifically war—in an age of media spectacle and political polling, or more generally with the realization of the grand American "ex-

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[92] It is perhaps in this connection one should read Žižek's provocation that "it is only right-wing populism which today displays the authentic *political* passion of accepting the *struggle*, of openly admitting that, precisely insofar as one claims to speak from a universal standpoint, one does not aim to please everybody, but is ready to introduce a division of 'Us' versus 'Them'" (Žižek 1999: 210, italics in original).

periment." The ideas and practices involved in these projects have been diverse, manifold and sometimes contradictory amongst themselves. A common denominator, however, has been the notion that advancement demands a belief in *something*—that the American dream is, precisely, a wager and that the future depends on the fidelity one can muster up. A bootstrap theory, for sure, but one whose political power can only be perceived if one puts the negative connotations of that formulation aside. Badiou's conceptual apparatus seems to offer an opportunity for doing precisely that. I take the identification and analysis of this dimension of conservative politics to be the primary contribution of this study.

By way of contextualizing this conclusion, I also want to briefly return to the theoretical debate about American conservatism. As detailed in Chapter 1, scholars have argued about whether, to what extent, and in what particular sense the concept of "conservatism" might be useful in the context of U.S. politics. What do the conclusions I have advanced above mean in relation to these longstanding and ongoing debates? Corey Robin's work, in particular, offers a useful reference point for contextualizing the contribution of the present study. To recall, Robin suggests that the ideological unity of conservatism is grounded in its commitment to the principle of hierarchy. What unites conservatives across geographical, temporal and, not infrequently, logical fault lines, in Robin's account, is a dedication to authority as such. This dedication is typically animated by self-interest, well-grounded or not, but potentially also by appreciation of the "distinction that power brings to the world" (2011a: 16). This insight, Robin suggests, renders logical the unlikely coalition of contemporary American conservatism.

To a certain extent, my ethnography substantiates Robin's analysis. Recalling a few examples from the preceding chapter helps illustrate this. When Keith declared his paradoxical loyalty for a president who strikes him as "as scary, scary cowboy;" when Paul spoke of the American dream as naïve but functional; or when Susan looked to the Bible for the means to transform her life, they were indeed articulating a demand for authority as such. The key question, however, is what this concern with authority consists in. Robin identifies several different registers in which this foundational attachment to authority operates: simple, naked self-interest, misguided self-interest or "false consciousness," interest guided by an essentially adequate, while limited, consciousness (what Robin terms "democratic feudalism").

What I have tried to do is to approach the question of attachment from a different angle. By paying close attention to how conservatives speak and act politically, I have tried to show that conservative politics have epistemological or existential stakes that cannot simply be written off as "legitimizations." But to say that conservative attachment to authority is animated by existential or epistemological concerns is of course not to say that it is not also animated by interest. It is rather to broaden the basis on which conservative dedication to authority can be conceived, and thus to improve our ability

to understand how a conservative coalition built around authority could emerge and sustain itself. It seems to me that it is precisely the blurring and cross-fertilization of different modes of attachment to authority that renders the present conservative coalition functional.

Conceptualizing "authoritarianism" in these broader terms also helps cast some additional light on the interaction between conservatism and liberalism on American right. What the preceding discussion suggests, I think, is that the former in a certain sense finds fuel in the aporias and problems raised by the latter. Again, the three examples recalled above are illustrative. In each of them authority emerges as a provisional response to a kind of lack in what is essentially a liberal vision. Liberal projects, contemporary conservatism suggests, are dependent on a kind of surplus of authority, belief, or certainty. The liberal idea of democratic compromise, for instance, may itself become conducive to a drive to bring something more stubborn, less uncommitted and more authoritative to the table than "mere opinion" (Chapter 2). Analogously, for the American dream of equal opportunity to be functional its subjects may need to have more faith in their chances than is actually reasonable. The possibility of collective action, in much the same way, might be preconditioned on a willingness, on the part of the citizenry, to approach their representatives from a standpoint of positive prejudice. Along these lines conservatism can perhaps even be said to reveal something important about the limits of liberalism.

Fidelity as an Anthropological Problem

One of the basic assumptions of this study has been that one cannot begin to understand American conservatism anthropologically without understanding its status as an object of anthropological analysis. Some of the concrete methodological and analytical challenges that this involves have already been touched upon. Now, given what has emerged from the preceding discussion, it seems that contemporary conservatism also offers an opportunity to re-think some of the premises of political anthropology in a more general way.

One of the essential conditions of political anthropology, it seems to me, is that its object or interlocutor largely shares its orientation toward society or the social, but comes to it with an entirely different agenda: one of prescription rather than description. To the extent that such prescriptions are constituted by institutionalized practices and habits on the one hand, and by worldviews, ideologies, or beliefs on the other, politics remains anthropologically describable in a relatively straightforward manner. What the preceding discussion has highlighted, in addition, is that politics also involves, at least potentially or occasionally, "axiomatic" figures of thought and action that depart from and work through postulates that are subject to necessary deci-

sion. This, I suggest, constitutes the particular challenge of politics as an object of description and analysis: What does the requirement, immanent to political practice, to assume *something*, not perhaps simply because it appears to be true, but because it will, might or ought to be true, mean for anthropological analysis?

Again, I find Badiou's terminology clarifying. It presents us with the means for re-appraising the depth or distance separating the position of a subject of a particular fidelity from any position external to it, be it that of the enemy, the critic or the analyst. While this formulation may instantly recall, for the anthropologist at least, classical debates about cultural insiders and outsiders, I submit that it is not reducible to those concerns. The rift between a fidelity and its outside is not exclusively a matter of an asymmetry of knowledge, cultural assumption, or belief. At stake here is precisely not socialization or its absence. The certainty of the "insider" is unavailable, because it is infused with the potentiality of a forthcoming truth.[93]

In light of this, it seems to me justifiable to ask if the specificity of politics, not to mention the specificity of *a* politics, can be discerned or done justice from a standpoint of methodological relativism. Moreover, is fidelity—as a temporal bridge between what is indiscernible and unknowable in the present and the eventual coming of a universal truth—even generally describable from the outside in? Perhaps not, perhaps a politics is describable only to the extent that precisely that which makes it political remains implicit. Even if that is the case, however, there must be different ways of coping with this apparent impossibility.

Genuine Problems and Conversational Analytics

Throughout this study, it has been clear that contemporary U.S. conservatism, because of its stark sense of friends and enemies, and not least because social scientists tend to fall into the latter category, actualizes with specific urgency the sort of representational problems analyzed above. As I mentioned in the Introduction, that was indeed one of the things that attracted my

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[93] Joel Robbins (2010) has recently made the related point that Badiou's "carefully conceptualized model of change as radical discontinuity and event" (p. 636) could help improve anthropological understandings of change. This is applies to political anthropology and the problem of the axiom as well. However, becoming more attentive to radical change, and mining Badiou for sociological insight into its ontological status, seems to me futile without also considering his even more "anthropologically inconvenient" notion of truth. In relation to anthropological common sense, it seems to me even more urgent to consider the possibility that subjective fidelity does not merely depend on the fact that reality might be variously constructed. It is also tied up the fact that truth, in the full sense of the word, is potentially forthcoming, but in a circular manner so that this potential is itself dependent on what is made of it. If one subtracts truth from Badiou's formula it amounts to little.

interest in the first place. While I do not see any stable solutions to these problems emerging from the study, it nonetheless seems to me that I have developed during the course of this work, to some extent unwittingly, precisely "strategies for coping." In closing, I want to say a few words about those strategies.

At the center of my approach has been a particular usage of the concept of "problem," or alternatively "paradox" or "tension." I have used these terms not in the Foucauldian sense of "problematization," as a particular way of constructing a problem, but rather to hint at something that is not reducible to any given construction. "Behind" or "inside" political slogans and phrases, designed, in part, to be alienating to the outsider, I have suggested that one might in fact find "problems," "tensions" or "worries" that are at least partially recognizable to outsiders, too. If one wants to understand the force of a certain politics, I have argued, whether for analytical or strategic political reasons, one must first allow it to speak to problems that one recognizes as real. It does not suffice to uncover the constructedness of their constructs. In a certain sense, I want to suggest, one must provisionally accept the position of potential converter to the cause, because it encourages listening not just for "what they think" or "how they experience their world" but for what they could tell us about conditions we all face in thinking about political issues.

Again, Gadamer's work on the epistemology of the historical sciences provides a useful reference point.[94] One of the key questions that Gadamer confronts in *Truth and Method* is what to make of the emergence of "historical consciousness," that is, the insight that every form of human expression and activity is conditioned by its historical context. The paradigmatic response of Gadamer's immediate predecessors, "historicism," held that this conferred on the historical sciences the task of unprejudiced observation—of reconstructing the meanings and intentions of earlier times without passing judgment, putting aside, as it were, their claims to truth. Gadamer's problem with this formula is that it inadvertently violates the basic insight of histori-

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[94] I am aware that employing Gadamer alongside Badiou amounts to something of an invitation to contradiction; Badiou has repeatedly denounced basic aspects of Gadamer's philosophy and of hermeneutics in general (see for instance Badiou 2005: 31 or Hallward 2008: 153, 161). One can only assume that the antipathy would have been mutual. Since I am no philosopher, however, and since I employ philosophical themes only in their capacity to inform social description and analysis, I think it is reasonable to assume that insights won on variable, sometimes contradictory terms, can legitimately coexist. In the absence of any Grand Unified Theory of the Social Sciences, anthropologist and sociologist seem condemned to ontological opportunism in one form or another. Thus in this particular context, Badiou has something interesting to say about the difficulty of describing "a politics" from the outside in, while Gadamer, working with very different assumptions about the nature of human diversity, has useful things to say about how and why historical attempts to deal with diversity have failed. I see no principal reason why these respective insights could not be considered together if it furthers the argument one is making.

cal consciousness itself. For in the course of "unbiased description," histori-
cism implicitly poses itself as a point outside of history, whether it intends to
or not.

Gadamer's discussion strikes me as highly relevant to anthropology too.
More specifically, it seems usefully for considering the parallel emergence
of "cultural consciousness" and its repercussions in the social sciences. For
does not the position from which one describes and compares "cultures" or
other social phenomena similarly tend to become an unmarked space from
which the weight of the social, ironically, becomes unperceivable? Argua-
bly, that difficulty is inscribed already in the experience of fieldwork. As
sociologist Egon Bittner has noted

> the fieldworker […] forever confronts 'someone's reality.' And even when he
> dwells on the fact that this reality is to 'them' incontrovertibly real in just the
> way 'they' perceive it, he knows that to some 'others' it may seem altogether
> different, and that, in fact, the most impressive features of the social world is
> colourful plurality. Indeed, the more seriously he takes this observation, the
> more he relies on his sensitivities as an observer who has seen firsthand how
> variously things can be perceived, the less likely he is to perceive those traits
> of depth, stability and necessity that people recognise as inherent in the cir-
> cumstances of their existence (Bittner 1967: 123, quoted in Sharrock and An-
> derson 1991).

In a very practical sense, then, the position of the participant observer might
be said to reproduce a dilemma analogous to that presented by historicism.
Something similar might also be said of much of anthropological theory.
Paul Rabinow's (1983) take on the theoretical history of (American cultural)
anthropology in his contribution to *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*, pro-
vides an interesting complement to Bittner's methodological observation.
Rabinow reads the theoretical development of the discipline as largely dom-
inated by "two major steps"—"despite their intent"— in the direction of "a
form of nihilism" (1983: 52–53).

The first of those steps was taken with the emergence of the Boasian con-
cept of culture. Rabinow's contention is that "[t]he price Boas and his stu-
dents paid for the construction of cultural relativism was the bracketing of
truth" (1983: 53). The Boasian position, as explicated by Rabinow, starts
with a set of basic conditions for human life which all human beings are
compelled to make sense of. Sense, however, can be made in a myriad of
ways, thus we get cultural variation. Nothing in this picture can ground eval-
uation or discrimination between different interpretations—as long as they
work, all is well. Rabinow takes Herskovits's work as paradigmatic for the
Boasian approach, quoting his dedication to seeing "the validity of every set
of norms for the people who are guided by them, and the values they repre-
sent" (Herskovits 1947: 76). That sentence, Rabinow pointedly notes, "was
written after the Nazi experience without any qualification added" (1983:

58). "Of course," he continues, "each of the cultures that the anthropologist studies thinks that its way of being human is the best way. This is their only mistake. The anthropologist, seeing that any way is only one possibility among others, brackets the truth of their claim" (1983: 59).

The second step in the direction of nihilism, according to Rabinow, was taken by symbolic anthropology as epitomized by Clifford Geertz work. In Geertz's conception, anthropology is less an enterprise of comparison than of conversation, ultimately geared toward the "enlargement of the universe of human discourse" (Geertz 1973: 13–14).[95] In Geertz's conception, as outlined by Rabinow, the primary role of the anthropologist is

> to imaginatively translate their frames of meaning into our frames of meaning. By so doing, the anthropologist enters into a fictive conversation with the other culture. The only price to be paid is the bracketing of the seriousness of the speech acts of the Other. (1983: 53)

With Rabinow's remarks in mind we might return to Gadamer's critique of historicism. To recapitulate, Gadamer suggested that historicism, by emphasizing unprejudiced description and comparison, becomes self-contradictory. With Bittner and Rabinow, it is possible to extend that diagnosis to anthropology. Anthropologists, much like historians, can embark on the project of unprejudiced observation and universal comparison, à la Boas, only by exempting the point from which that project is undertaken. And when the conceit of that position is replaced with Geertzian epistemological modesty, nothing remains but a play of different perspectives.

A key term here is "conversation." If Rabinow is correct, it is precisely in the course of turning anthropology into a "conversational enterprise" that Geertz is led to bracket truth and seriousness. What is interesting, however, is that Gadamer, in working through the occlusion of truth in the historical sciences, ends up with a prescription deceptively similar to that of Geertz. With the exhaustion of historicism, Gadamer argues, historians must turn away from a descriptive model of understanding toward one that has more in common with, precisely, a *conversation*. Gadamer's argument about conversation, however, has an altogether different edge than that of Geertz. A conversation, for Gadamer,

> is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is a characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he

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[95] To recall, Geertz famously wrote that anthropologists (ideally) "are seeking, in the widest sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them [the natives], a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized […] Looked at in this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse" (Geertz 1973: 13–14).

says. The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on a subject. (Gadamer 1979: 385)

In a footnote, Gadamer adds to this that "[i]f one transposes oneself into the position of another with the intent of understanding *not the truth of what he is saying, but him*, the questions asked in such a conversation are marked by [inauthenticity]" (Gadamer 1979: 385, emphasis added). Truth and, we might add, seriousness thus do not appear as foreign to Gadamer's conversational ideal, to the contrary. Gadamer establishes this by way of an historical route. Earlier forms—forms preceding historicism, that is—of hermeneutics, Gadamer notes, always came to its object with a specific mission, hoping to elicit truth or wisdom from the perceptions of earlier times. With historicism, however, the question of truth becomes irrelevant, pure description being, by default, the self-given goal. This development must now, according to Gadamer, undergo a sort of reversal. The proper way to cope with the realization that both object and subject of study works from contingent premises, or axioms, is to activate both in relation to each other. As historically, culturally and politically conditioned beings, we must allow what we encounter to speak to a reality that is already infused with our own prejudices—that is to take it seriously in its claim to truth. On the one hand, this means, as we saw above (see page 148), to grant them more relevance than what we might be able to substantiate in the present. On the other hand, we must not take this as an argument for simply "respecting" the otherness of the other. The mode of inquiry Gadamer has in mind is precisely not disinterested, but one that confronts both its objects and its own limitations within a horizon of truth.

While I do not presume to have realized such an ideal in the present work, it nonetheless seems to me a useful way of describing the analytical drive at work in it. In particular, I think that my use of the concept of problem can be legitimized along these lines. For to think in terms of problems, in the sense that I have suggested, seems to me precisely a way moving beyond some of the limiting aspects of the analytics of the "native point of view," and toward a mode of inquiry that is more concerned with understanding contemporary conditions of sociality and politics as such, by taking divergent claims made about those conditions seriously.

By way of additional clarification, this approach might be contrasted with the alternative strategy of substituting the aspiration for unbiased description with "ethics." In the present context, the work of William Connolly (2008) offers a striking example of this strategy. For Connolly, the realization that the mechanisms of what he calls the "capitalist-evangelical resonance machine" are unavailable to unbiased observation or standard causal reasoning implies that it must be analyzed from the standpoint of an alternative normative agenda. This legitimizes Connolly's partisan diagnosis: the existential

attitude animating the Republican "resonance machine" is "ressentiment." As outsiders, we can rest assured. Conservatism is an affliction that we have nothing to do with. In this sense, Connolly's analysis, filled with valuable insights as it is, threatens to turn into a sophisticated version of Thomas Frank's false consciousness (see Chapter 1). The question of what makes it stick is, in the final analysis, obverted. Moreover, one may ask if the "ethical approach" does not in fact remain locked into the very logic characterizing of the resonance machine itself. It simply facilitates an alternative "weld[ing] together [of] one's own view of reality with one's own identity," to recall Niklas Luhmann's formulation.

I have tried instead to approach contemporary conservatism with what I have called a "conversational" attitude, arguing that one has to take seriously the problems it is oriented toward in order to understand its lasting impact. Such an approach, I would argue, is not in opposition to criticism; on the contrary, effective critique must be grounded in understanding.

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