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The Crisis of American Self-Government

Harvey Mansfield, Harvard's 'pet dissenter,' on the 2012 election, the real cost of entitlements, and why he sees reason for hope.

By SOHRAB AHMARI

Cambridge, Mass.

'We have now an American political party and a European one. Not all Americans who vote for the European party want to become Europeans. But it doesn't matter because that's what they're voting for. They're voting for dependency, for lack of ambition, and for insolvency.'

Few have thought as hard, or as much, about how democracies can preserve individual liberty and national virtue as the eminent political scientist Harvey Mansfield. When it comes to assessing the state of the American experiment in self-government today, his diagnosis is grim, and he has never been one to mince words.

Mr. Mansfield sat for an interview on Thursday at the Harvard Faculty Club. This year marks his 50th as a teacher at the university. It isn't easy being the most visible conservative intellectual at an institution that has drifted ever further to the left for a half-century. "I live in a one-party state and very much more so a one-party university," says the 80-year-old professor with a sigh. "It's disgusting. I get along very well because everybody thinks the fact that I'm here means the things I say about Harvard can't be true. I am a kind of pet—a pet dissenter."

Partly his isolation on campus has to do with the nature of Mr. Mansfield's scholarship. At a time when his colleagues are obsessed with trendy quantitative methods and even trendier "identity studies," Mr. Mansfield holds steadfast to an older tradition that looks to the Western canon as the best guide to human affairs. For him, Greek philosophy and the works of thinkers such as Machiavelli and Tocqueville aren't historical curiosities; Mr. Mansfield sees writers grappling heroically with political and moral problems that are timeless and universally relevant.

"All modern social science deals with perceptions," he says, "but that is a misnomer because it neglects to distinguish between perceptions and misperceptions."



Zina Saunders

Consider voting. "You can count voters and votes," Mr. Mansfield says. "And political science does that a lot, and that's very useful because votes are in fact countable. One counts for one. But if we get serious about what it means to vote, we immediately go to the notion of an informed voter. And if you get serious about that, you go all the way to voting as a wise choice. That would be a true voter. The others are all lesser voters, or even not voting at all. They're just indicating a belief, or a whim, but not making a wise choice. That's probably because they're not wise."

By that measure, the electorate that granted [Barack Obama](#) a second term was unwise—the president achieved "a sneaky victory," Mr. Mansfield says. "The Democrats said nothing about their plans for the future. All they did was attack the other side. Obama's campaign consisted entirely of saying 'I'm on your side' to the American people, to those in the middle. No matter what comes next, this silence about the future is ominous."

At one level Mr. Obama's silence reveals the exhaustion of the progressive agenda, of which his presidency is the spiritual culmination, Mr. Mansfield says. That movement "depends on the idea that things will get better and better and progress will be made in the actualization of equality." It is telling, then, that during the 2012 campaign progressives were "confined to defending what they've already achieved or making small improvements—student loans, free condoms. The Democrats are the party of free condoms. That's typical for them."

But Democrats' refusal to address the future in positive terms, he adds, also reveals the party's intent to create "an entitlement or welfare state that takes issues off the bargaining table and renders them above politics." The end goal, Mr. Mansfield worries, is to sideline the American constitutional tradition in favor of "a practical constitution consisting of progressive measures the left has passed that cannot be revoked. And that is what would be fixed in our political system—not the Constitution."

It is a project begun at the turn of the previous century by "an alliance of experts and victims," Mr. Mansfield says. "Social scientists and political scientists were very much involved in the foundation of the progressive movement. What those experts did was find ways to improve the well-being of the poor, the incompetent, all those who have the right to vote but can't quite govern their own lives. And still to this day we see in the Democratic Party the alliance between Ph.D.s and victims."

The Obama campaign's dissection of the public into subsets of race, sex and class resentments is a case in point. "Victims come in different kinds," says Mr. Mansfield, "so they're treated differently. You push different buttons to get them to react."

The threat to self-government is clear. "The American founders wanted people to live under the Constitution," Mr. Mansfield says. "But the progressives want the Constitution to live under the American people."

Harvey Mansfield Jr. was born in 1932 in New Haven, Conn. His parents were staunch New Dealers, and while an undergraduate at Harvard Mr. Mansfield counted himself a liberal Democrat.

Next came a Fulbright year in London and a two-year stint in the Army. "I was never in combat," he says. "In fact I ended up in France for a year, pulling what in the Army they call 'good duty' at Orléans, which is in easy reach of Paris. So even though I was an enlisted man I lived the life of Riley."

A return to the academy and a Harvard doctorate were perhaps inevitable but Mr. Mansfield also underwent a decisive political transformation. "I broke with the liberals over the communist issue," he says. "My initiating forces were anticommunism and my perception that Democrats were soft on communism, to use a rather unpleasant phrase from the time—unpleasant but true." He also began to question the progressive project at home: "I saw the frailties of big government exposed, one after another. Everything they tried didn't work and in fact made us worse off by making us dependent on an engine that was getting weaker and weaker."

His first teaching post came in 1960 at the University of California, Berkeley. In California, he came to know the German-American philosopher Leo Strauss, who at the time was working at Stanford University. "Strauss was a factor in my becoming conservative," he says. "That was a whole change of outlook rather than a mere question of party allegiance."

Strauss had studied ancient Greek texts, which emphasized among other things that "within democracy there is good and bad, free and slave," and that "democracy can produce a slavish mind and a slavish country." The political task before every generation, Mr. Mansfield understood, is to "defend the good kind of democracy. And to do that you have to be aware of human differences and inequalities, especially intellectual inequalities."

American elites today prefer to dismiss the "unchangeable, undemocratic facts" about human inequality, he says. Progressives go further: "They think that the main use of liberty is to create more equality. They don't see that there is such a thing as too much equality. They don't see limits to democratic equalizing"—how, say, wealth redistribution can not only bankrupt the public fisc but corrupt the national soul.

"Americans take inequality for granted," Mr. Mansfield says. The American people frequently "protect inequalities by voting not to destroy or deprive the rich of their riches. They don't vote for all measures of equalization, for which they get condemned as suffering from false consciousness. But that's true consciousness because the American people want to make democracy work, and so do conservatives. Liberals on the other hand just want to make democracy more democratic."

Equality untempered by liberty invites disaster, he says. "There is a difference between making a form of government more like itself," Mr. Mansfield says, "and making it viable." Pushed to its extremes, democracy can lead to "mass rule by an ignorant, or uncaring, government."

Consider the entitlements crisis. "Entitlements are an attack on the common good," Mr. Mansfield says. "Entitlements say that 'I get mine no matter what the state of the country is when I get it.' So it's like a bond or an annuity. What the entitlement does is give the government

version of a private security, which is better because the government provides a better guarantee than a private company can."

That is, until the government goes broke, as has occurred across Europe.

"The Republicans should want to recover the notion of the common good," Mr. Mansfield says. "One way to do that is to show that we can't afford the entitlements as they are—that we've always underestimated the cost. 'Cost' is just an economic word for the common good. And if Republicans can get entitlements to be understood no longer as irrevocable but as open to negotiation and to political dispute and to reform, then I think they can accomplish something."

The welfare state's size isn't what makes it so stifling, Mr. Mansfield says. "What makes government dangerous to the common good is guaranteed entitlements, so that you can never question what expenses have been or will be incurred." Less important at this moment are spending and tax rates. "I don't think you can detect the presence or absence of good government," he says, "simply by looking at the percentage of GDP that government uses up. That's not an irrelevant figure but it's not decisive. The decisive thing is whether it's possible to reform, whether reform is a political possibility."

Then there is the matter of conservative political practice. "Conservatives should be the party of judgment, not just of principles," he says. "Of course there are conservative principles—free markets, family values, a strong national defense—but those principles must be defended with the use of good judgment. Conservatives need to be intelligent, and they shouldn't use their principles as substitutes for intelligence. Principles need to be there so judgment can be distinguished from opportunism. But just because you give ground on principle doesn't mean you're an opportunist."

Nor should flexibility mean abandoning major components of the conservative agenda—including cultural values—in response to a momentary electoral defeat. "Democrats have their cultural argument, which is the attack on the rich and the uncaring," Mr. Mansfield says. "So Republicans need their cultural arguments to oppose the Democrats', to say that goodness or justice in our country is not merely the transfer of resources to the poor and vulnerable. We have to take measures to teach the poor and vulnerable to become a little more independent and to prize independence, and not just live for a government check. That means self-government within each self, and where are you going to get that except with morality, responsibility and religion?"

So is it still possible to pull back from the brink of America's Europeanization? Mr. Mansfield is optimistic. "The material for recovery is there," he says. "Ambition, for one thing. I teach at a university where all the students are ambitious. They all want to do something with their lives." That is in contrast to students he has met in Europe, where "it was depressing to see young people with small ambitions, very cultivated and intelligent people so stunted." He adds with a smile: "Our other main resource is the Constitution."

Mr. Ahmari is an assistant books editor at the Journal.

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