

UCSD Professor Richard Madsen and co-authors produce new sequel to "Habits of the Heart" in "The Good Society"

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UCSD PROFESSOR RICHARD MADSEN AND COAUTHORS PROPOSE NEW RESPONSE TO AMERICA'S GROWING SOCIAL ILLS IN "THE GOOD SOCIETY"

The authors of the widely praised and bestselling book "Habits of the Heart", a ground-breaking work which redefined the debate about individualism and commitment in America, have produced a thought-provoking sequel which proposes a new response to our country's growing social ills.

"The Good Society," published this month by Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, was written by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, coauthors of the Pulitzer Prize-nominated 1985 book "Habits of the Heart." Richard Madsen, a professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, is a respected authority on political culture and Chinese society.

"While 'Habits of the Heart' examined the way ordinary people thought about the meaning and purpose of their lives," said Madsen, "'The Good Society' takes a much broader perspective, analyzing the social, economic and political institutions that exist in this country."

In the book, the authors acknowledge that we all live in and through institutions -- family, school, community, corporation, church, state, and nation -- they attempt to show how we can understand these institutions, take responsibility within them, and ultimately transform them.

Madsen and his co-authors hope that the discussions in "The Good Society" will spark debate about the current problems plaguing American institutions. Political apathy, rampant drug abuse, an increasing high school drop-out rate, the homeless

epidemic and growing economic inequality, all indicate, according to Madsen, that the major political, cultural and economic institutions in this country no longer meet our needs as a society.

"Many of our institutions date from the 18th Century, when the United States was a small country with a large agricultural economy. Other American institutions date from the postwar years when the United States was embarking on a gigantic militant effort to save the 'free world' from Communist oppression," said Madsen.

The American reverence for individual freedom, for example, goes back to the days of the "Wild West". English philosopher John Locke's theories about the sanctity of individual freedom and private property rights form the very basis of the U.S. Constitution. Unfortunately, this individualism has been taken to extremes in an increasingly complex and interdependent society that John Locke, or any other 18th Century thinker could never have imagined. This "radical individualism", Madsen and his co-authors say, is what has led to the moral unraveling of some of our most fundamental institutions.

The damage that extreme individualism and economic competitiveness have done to our society manifests itself most clearly in the cultural tradition of the family. Increasing economic pressures and competitiveness have placed unrealistic demands on workers who in turn sacrifice a stable, supportive home life for their family to maintain an unrealistic standard of living. A standard of living that, for most people, was probably only realistic in the 1950s.

"In the 1950s, the U.S. was at its height of power in the world, and the country was experiencing rapid economic expansion, fueled by military spending to ward off the Communist threat. Members of the middle class now feel a sense of decline, and lament the fact that this generation of parents won't be able to afford homes like their parents," according to Madsen. "What this leads to is both parents working to try to attain the '50s dream, and the family suffers because of it."

Madsen describes this as the implosion of capitalism, with economic values encroaching into more and more realms of life, including the family, and the replacement of a family culture with a job culture.

To a great extent, Madsen believes our institutional dilemmas are also moral dilemmas, and he and his co-authors have attempted "to find a moral language that will transcend...radical individualism."

If our institutions no longer work for us as a society," says Madsen, "it is partly because we have allowed them to become obsolete by not taking responsibility for them. There is a dangerous perception of America as a country that provides its citizens with the freedom to get involved and participate in society or not. Ironically, many of our institutional problems are due to the fact that many Americans have exercised this perceived option and have not participated."

The vision "The Good Society" attempts to express is that the good society will not evolve through a technocratic revolution, through a cadre of experts figuring out how to solve all our problems, Madsen explains.

"The good society has to be one that evolves from a great deal of democratic participation at all levels. In our book, we try to provide a focus for a number of public conversations among a broad cross section of people from different kinds of institutions."

"The Good Society" will be the subject of a PBS series by Bill Moyers in 1992.

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