

In The Land of Voluntarism

An interview with Claude S. Fischer

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In *Made in America*, sociologist Claude S. Fischer develops the idea that voluntarism, not individualism, is the key feature to describe social ties in America and that this notion of voluntarism best helps us understand what makes America exceptional among other Western societies.

Claude Serge Fischer is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He recently published *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (2010), a sweeping re-reading of some of the major theses on what makes America specific among Western countries. Older works include: *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (1992), *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (1996), and, with Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* (2006).

The Social history of American Culture and Character

Books and Ideas: How did you come to develop an interest in American social history? Could you help us understand what aspects in your previous work, which is very diverse (covering, among others, social ties, the social history of techniques, urban life and responses to the neoconservative ideology) led you to the narrative of *Made in America*?

Claude S. Fischer: There is an intellectual answer and a personal answer. The personal answer to your question is that I have long found the detailed studies of social historians—work much inspired by the *Annales* school—fascinating and enjoyable reading. Writing *Made in America* allowed me to indulge and justify this intellectual pleasure.

Intellectually, much of my work has dealt in some manner with what I consider the foundational question in sociology and much of the social sciences: How do we understand the rise and implications of the great modernization that occurred in Western societies in the mid-18th through early 20th centuries? And, in particular, what consequences did this modernization have in the personal realm—for *mentalités*, social relations, community? These questions are what the great founders of sociology focused on, notably Durkheim in *Division of Labour* and *Suicide*. Modernization entailed, among other things, urbanization and technological change. I therefore studied for many years the social psychology of urban life and for some other years the personal aspects of new technologies. *Made in America* is motivated by the same concerns but addresses the history of what has long been considered the most modern society, America. The book asks: How did American society and culture change? And how did Americans' experiences and mind-sets change as the nation underwent modernization?

Books and Ideas: What methods have you used to conduct this social history of American culture and character? What kind of relation have you had with the books that tried to address this issue before you did (I have Tocqueville but also Seymour Martin Lipset and Robert Bellah in mind) and maybe with other sociological works that address the issue of modernity and modernization?

Claude S. Fischer: You allude to two important and connected lines of writing. One line asks whether and how American society differs from the Western European societies from which it arose. Tocqueville is the classic European writer on this question, of course, and Lipset was the major contemporary American writer. (He was, I should note for some of your readers, a great American sociologist of the twentieth century. Among his many works was a series of studies on “American exceptionalism,” including one focused on U.S.-Canadian differences. He was also one of my professors.) Over the centuries, even before Tocqueville and after Lipset, many scholars, journalists, and travellers have tried to explain what might be special about the U.S. I have drawn a lot of ideas from this body of works—for example, from Hervé Varenne.¹ Strikingly, much of what was described as distinctive about America’s character in its early history remains so today—for instance, Americans’ great religiosity and their suspicion of government.

The other, related, line of writing largely asks whether and how American society, especially its solidarity, has changed over the years. The 1985 classic, *Habits of the Heart*, written by a team of scholars (led by my Berkeley colleague, Robert Bellah and including my Berkeley colleague and wife, Ann Swidler), argues that since the founding of the nation, individualism has grown stronger and communal bonds have grown weaker, which has brought modern Americans to a deep social isolation. *Habits of the Heart* provides the most sophisticated version of what is a long series of such analyses—going back to the 17th century, in fact. I try, in *Made in America*, to learn from, and absorb, the contributions of such studies and writings. Ultimately, however, the conclusions I draw challenge the claims that there has been a “decline in community” or a growing isolation over the course of American history.

My method, to the extent that there was a systematic one, was to read as widely and deeply as I could in the literature of American social history (See References below), to accumulate the empirical observations presented by historians, and, applying a sociologist’s set of questions and concepts, to tell a coherent story of what happened over the last three-plus

¹ Hervé Varenne, *Americans Together, Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town*, New York, Teachers’ College Press, 1977.

centuries. Historians of America have themselves given up on telling the large, *longue durée* story (I explain why in chapter 1 of the book). Some explicitly say so, pointing out that the field of social history has become so fragmented with detailed, particular studies that making sense of the whole could not be done. With an outsider's *chutzpah*, I tried to do just that.

Even Children Now Have Legally Guaranteed Rights

Books and Ideas: You develop the idea that voluntarism, not individualism, is the key feature to describe social ties in America and that this notion of voluntarism best helps us understand what makes America exceptional among other Western societies. Could you tell us in a few words what this voluntarism consists in, what its main historical roots are and how you see it evolve in the centuries your study is dealing with?

Claude S. Fischer: I use the concept of “voluntarism” partly to challenge the general description that American culture is exceptionally individualistic. I have not invented this concept but have expanded on ideas of other writers, such as Varenne and Swidler, whom I mentioned before.

The first core assumption of voluntarism is that each person is a sovereign individual: unique, independent, self-reliant, self-governing, and ultimately self-responsible. The second core assumption is that individuals succeed through fellowship—not in egoistic isolation, but in supportive, freely-chosen communities. The archetypal form of such a community is the grass-roots Protestant church. People voluntarily form, join, or leave it as they wish; but while people are members of the church, they are deeply committed to it. Many traits that observers have for generations described as particularly American—such as self-absorption, “can-do” confidence, egalitarianism, conformism, and status-striving—derive from a voluntaristic culture. Importantly, this is not a culture of selfishness or isolation; it is a culture of voluntary community—a community not of birth or fate as in the Old World tribes, clans, or estates, but a community of choice.

Voluntarism was seeded in America by the dissident Protestant sects, which settled the Northern colonies in the 16th-18th centuries. These sects had a model for their church: it was

comprised of believers who had individually found God and chose willingly to come together in holy fellowship (in sharp contrast to the mandatory and authoritarian churches of Europe). Distinctive conditions in America helped this model flourish and spread into other realms of life, such as politics and the household; the absence of a local aristocracy; the availability of so much land that most white men could be independent farmers; high levels of geographical mobility; and considerable cultural heterogeneity among the settlers.

Voluntarism was in place by 1800 as the dominant cultural theme in America. But, at that time, relatively few inhabitants of America fully participated in that culture; few had the necessary independence. These few were white men of property. Indians, slaves, servants, women, children, and the poor were unable to fully participate, and they were culturally defined as ineligible, because they were dependents. Over the course of American history, a broader circle of Americans acquired the means and the right to participate. That is why in a few places in the book I write that “more Americans became more American.”

Thus, we see a wider array of Americans exercise autonomy and choice. More women were empowered to delay, avoid, or leave marriages as they wished; to have greater voice in their marriages; to pursue options in the world outside the home. Industrial workers, who once lived with and were the subjects of their employers (as in the *atelier*), gained independent lives and voices. Even children now have legally guaranteed rights and culturally encouraged demands (something French observers have often found irritating). All this widening choice expands the power of American voluntarist ideology and our system of diffused authority. It probably makes collective action at the national level more difficult.

The Parallel Development of Voluntarism and Government

Books and Ideas: Let us shift to the contemporary issues at stake in your work. At the beginning of your book,² you show that America developed a certain amount of myths about itself and you are critical of these (false) representations. You even created a blog ([madeinamericathebook](#)) in

² Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, University of Chicago Press, 2010, 528 p.

order not only to prolong this activity but also to enlighten the public thanks to the data collected through both quantitative and social history methods. Where do you think the gap between what the data show and how America is representing itself is the widest?

Claude S. Fischer: Many of the misunderstandings Americans have of their culture arise from both a limited sense of history and a limited sense of the world beyond America. (We are a remarkably self-absorbed people.) I will take two examples.

One is the chronic sense of decline or loss Americans have, the feeling that we have descended from a better state, especially from a better moral state. Such nostalgia is not unique to America, but I think it is acute here. It dates from an early period, even before the nation was born. And it romanticizes aspects of the past, notably village life, that Europeans, I suspect, do not. This historical story has been a chronic part of American intellectual and popular discourse with only occasional exceptions—one perhaps immediately after World War II, but that did not last. The perception goes back to the days of the Puritan fathers in the late 1600s and forward to today's political arguments. (Note how many presidential campaign slogans and speeches argue that the candidate will restore some lost and better past.) Although nostalgia appears in other cultures, too, this worldview may resonate especially well in America because it harmonizes with the Christian theme of a lost Eden. There are historical periods, to be sure, of actual regression (see below). But the long story in American history is more of ascent than descent. A concrete example is today's worries about native-immigrant clashes and violence. Today's conflict over immigrants is vastly tamer and bloodless compared to the 19th century. But few Americans understand that.

Another arena of mythology is Americans' understanding of government. Americans are especially hostile to government, mostly to the national state. Among the sources of this dislike are the emphasis on self-reliance, the history of a revolution against a monarchy, and ideology of the so-called free market. Americans are thus insufficiently aware not only of the critical role that government plays in today's society—managing the economy, reducing the risks of life, for example—but also of how important it was in the early history of the nation. And they are, of

course, largely uninformed about the role of governments in Europe, being oceans away and linguistically apart.

Books and Ideas: You demonstrate that there is a great continuity of American culture over the last two centuries. However, it seems that America is dramatically fragmenting on the basis of class with a widening gap between a small, very educated elite best described by its tendency towards homogamy and self-segregation, and the rest of the population. Some (like Murray in *Coming Apart*)³ say that the diverging trends between this higher class and the lower-class in relation to the core values of America are leading to a dual society, a society where only the wealthiest are secure enough to apply the values that constitute American identity. It is not surprising that Murray forgets that the welfare state has given Americans the possibility to feel secure for a while, as you usefully remind us in your book. But what do you reply to those who see American culture as fragmenting and narrowing where your own narrative is highlighting the continuing development of voluntarism over time? How do you include these elements in your thesis?

Claude S. Fischer: I do credit much of the expansion of voluntarism to the expansion of economic and physical security over American history. Logically, then, as security decreases, so does the ability to fully participate. This is one way to think about the sorts of developments Murray points to, such as declining social participation of poorly-educated men. (The crisis of the working class is, by the way, not new, despite Murray's recent book. It has long been discussed by many scholars, for example, by Michael Hout and me in *Century of Difference*,⁴ 2006.) Working-class men's insecurity and the insecurity of the women whom they might marry form the most pressing social danger in the United States. It is a stagnation or reversal in the last 40 years of what had been a positive trend for most of the last 300 years. History need not and does not march in only one direction. And nothing in *Made in America* should imply that the past trends I describe will necessarily continue. The current era is atypical. I have an essay connected to these topics and Murray's thesis soon to appear in the *Boston Review*.

³ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, Crown Forum, 2012, 416 p.

⁴ Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Year*, Russell Sage Foundation, 2006, 411 p.

Inequality per se, a topic that I wrote about with several colleagues in *Inequality by Design* (1996),⁵ has been a new trend since about the 1970s. Over the course of American history, financial inequality grew or shrank in different periods in response to different sorts of economic growth, expanding, for example, during the opening of markets before the Civil War, and narrowing in the boom years after World War II. Over the long haul, the dramatic elevation of living standards at the bottom has meant a general leveling. A critical example is lifespans: the once huge variation in how long people lived has shrunken greatly. Similarly, the basic necessities of modern life such as decent housing have become more common. Yet, it remains true that the United States is the most unequal society among the economically advanced nations, both financially and in terms of basic living conditions, such as health care. And it is becoming much more so than other nations (except perhaps the UK).

The Breakdown of the Working-class Family

Books and Ideas: The transformation of family patterns between the different classes is an exception in the enlarging trend of voluntarism. You say that there is a historical watershed marked by the declining stability of marriage and cohabitation among the lower classes. On what empirical evidence do you rely to elaborate this diagnosis? Is the growing economic insecurity a cause of this reversal of a trend that began in the 1970s? Is it relevant to talk about an urban underclass as a lot of authors did in previous decades to describe these populations?

Claude S. Fischer: The growing strain on working-class families is a relatively recent development. For most of American history, we see a stabilization of working-class family life and the expansion, albeit later than among the bourgeoisie, of more intimate and egalitarian styles of family life. But the recent era has been problematic.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Americans worried about the “breakdown” of the family. Now we see that it is really the breakdown of the working-class family, because families of the

⁵ Claude S. Fischer, Michael Hout, Martín Sánchez Jankowski, Samuel R. Lucas, Ann Swidler, Kim Voss, *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth*, Princeton University Press, 1996, 324 p.

college-educated remain pretty strong. The economic strains on working-class families—particularly, the stagnant or declining wages for less-educated men and the need for their wives to work—are critical sources of recent problems. At the same time, wider changes in women’s roles have changed American families generally. Women have become more independent, able to delay marriage, to be choosier about spouses, and freer to leave marriages than they could be fifty years ago. The college-educated have managed to deal with the gender revolution largely by redefining marriages toward greater equality; the less-educated have increasingly struggled. As to the term, “underclass,” if it is at all useful, it is to describe a much smaller, much more troubled group than the working class—largely those who failed to graduate high school, who are chronically poor, and lead unstable lives.

Fewer Dinners at Home, but As Many Friends

Books and Ideas: Your last book, *Still Connected*,⁶ addresses a very important theme in your career. You question the developments in friendship and social networks since 1970. How would you describe what changed the most between this period? How, in particular, do you see the influence of new technologies on social ties?

Claude S. Fischer: For *Still Connected*, I tried to look at every American survey that repeated the same questions, over a number of years, about respondents’ relationships with family and friends. I concluded that, for the most part, Americans’ social ties were remarkably consistent over the last four decades: People tended to be about as involved with and as supported by their family and friends in the 2000s as they had been in the 1970s. There were some changes, to be sure. In particular, Americans less often staged social activities at home, such as having dinner together as an entire family or inviting friends over for an evening. Instead, they tended to eat out and see friends outside the home. The most important factor here is probably that far more American women worked outside their homes and worked longer hours in the 2000s than in the 1970s. Another change seemed to be that Americans today communicate more often with family and friends, which is probably attributable to the declining cost of telephone calls and to the rise

⁶ Claude S. Fischer, *Still Connected: Family and Friends in America Since 1970*, Russell Sage Foundation, 2011, 176 p.

of electronic communication since 1970. Recall that personal computers did not arrive until the 1980s. Even Minitel service started only in 1982.

As far as technology and social ties go, this is a topic I researched in my 1992 book on the social history of the telephone, *America Calling*.⁷ I concluded that the introduction of the telephone in its first roughly fifty years largely enabled people to facilitate the sort of social life they had been conducting and were going to engage in anyway. I have not myself studied the effects of the latest technologies, but the research literature⁸ points to a roughly similar conclusion: Although some shy people use the internet to hide from social contact, most people use it to expand their social contacts, typically with people whom they see face-to-face as well. These, like the old telephone, like the early automobile, appear to be “technologies of sociability:” whatever the producers of the technology might have thought, users adapt them to sociability. With the internet, the developers imagined they were creating a tool for the military and for academic researchers; perhaps a few imagined commercial uses. But users have made the social dimension central.

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⁷ Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940*, University of California Press, 1994, 424 p.

⁸ One recent book is Harrison Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2012. Some of the articles include Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman, “Long Distance Community in the Network Society: Contact and Support Beyond Netville,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 45(3) (2001), p. 476-95; John H. Bargh and Katelyn Y. A. McKenna, “The Internet and Social Life,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 55 (2004), p. 573-90; Hua Wang and Barry Wellman, “Social Connectivity in America: Changes in Adult Friendship Network Size from 2002 to 2007,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (2010), p. 1148-70; Irina Shklovski, Robert Kraut, and Lee Rainie, “The Internet and Social Participation: Contrasting Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Analyses,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10(1) (2006): Published online June 23 2006.

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