

[America 3.0, Reviewed by Tanner Greer, June 9, 2013](#)

What a Political Tract Should Be

It is unusual for me to read a book aimed at popular conservative audiences. I am something of a disaffected conservative. Crony capitalism and government overreach have proved to be bipartisan endeavors, and I have long lost faith that the Republican party can ever be more than an organ of America's governing elite. Outside of the beltway the broader currents of mainstream conservatism are so full of angry sound and righteous fury (and nothing else) that I have long stopped paying close attention them. The movement is in desperate need of a clearer vision and more compelling purpose.

America 3.0 is the book to provide it.

James Bennet and Michael Lotus get everything right that all of the other popular commentators get wrong. In contrast to pundits incessantly focused on the character flaws of the opposition and controversies of the hour, these authors focus on the broad political principles and broad political context - "centuries into the past and decades into the future" (xxv). Where most popular political creeds are shallow, filled more with hype and platitudes than meaningful evidence, America 3.0 is both respectful in tone and deeply researched (and none the less readable for it!). Few popular political works have any real historical grounding; America 3.0 possesses this in spades. Even more impressively, the authors manage to convey both their sense of history and their firm belief in American exceptionalism without any of the reflexive chest-pounding sometimes mistaken as patriotism in conservative corners. (As they write in the introduction, "We are attempting to avoid setinmentality in this book, and look at the record in a cold light. As we write things are not good in America. Being realistic is a matter of urgency (xxiv).") Most impressive of all is the political platform they lay out. In age where conservatives are too often defined by what they are against, America 3.0 paints a compelling picture of what they should be *for*.

All in all, a breath of fresh air.

The basic argument of America 3.0 is that the United States is in the midst of a epochal demographic, political, and economic transition. This has happened before. The world of the early American colonists, revolutionaries, and antebellum pioneers was vastly different from our own. Their America (named America 1.0 in the book) was a nation of independent farmers; men did not have "jobs" working for corporations and businesses as we now think of them, but survived off what they could harvest, craft, and sell. Government was mostly a local affair; larger government structures existed, of course, but their impact on daily life was negligible. In comparison to today's society, there was hardly any government at all. This society was not fated to last. A whole host of factors - urbanization, industrialization, changes in communication technology - made old political and economic structures obsolete. The transition to new forms was dirty and painful, but by the early 20th century the United States was reborn into America 2.0, land of big business, big government, big labor, - in short, big everything. In this America economies of scale, a rigid system of hierarchy and meritocracy, and mass production was the path to success. This was the America that defeated totalitarianism during the Second World War, became the center of world wide technological innovation and scientific advancement, and transformed into the largest and strongest economy of humanity's history.

But that is changing. The economic and demographic underpinnings of America 2.0 are eroding away. The coming order is what the authors call "America 3.0."

The authors chart the course of the future carefully. Their care is seen in the structure of the book itself; though the work is devoted to the future, six of its nine chapters are devoted to the past. They suggest that in order to understand the future (and by extension, the policies we must adopt to succeed in it), we must first understand the past.

The authors goes back very far in their search for understanding America's unique institutions and attitudes, beginning their search with the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain c. 550 AD. I was delighted to find that much of this analysis rests of the work of the French anthropologist Emmanuel Todd. (I came across Mr. Todd's work ([The Explanation of Ideology: Family Structure and Social Systems \(Family, Sexuality and Social Relations in Past Times\)](#)) a few months ago, and concluded immediately that he is the most under-rated "big idea" thinker in the field of world history. Todd's focus is family structure; the observation that drives his work is that family life is vastly different from one region and culture to another. His big idea is that all of this matters. Family structure is the foundation of cultural attitudes and expectations, and by logical extension the world's different political and economic structures closely mirror the families inside them.)

Americans live in "Absolute Nuclear Families." In these families, children are expected to pack up and leave when they become adults. Parents have no legal control of who their children marry, and their children have no legal obligations to care for them. Parents can choose to give what they will to whom they will; while inheritance may be split up among children equally, it is not required by law or social custom. You do not marry your cousins. This all seems very normal to Americans but on the global scale it is actually quite rare. There are only a few other countries - Australia, England, Holland - whose families are structured similarly. (Think: to most of the world, the phrase "empty nester" makes no sense!) Interestingly, the countries with this type of family structure are consistently found to be the most individualistic on the Earth. This is the "deep structure" of American exceptionalism. In comparison to other countries and cultures, Americans are far more mobile, competitive, non-egalitarian, individualistic, selfish, enterprising, and dedicated to religion and volunteer work. Family structure does not explain all of this (the authors devote a chapter to the way England's medieval and enlightenment institutions - such as common law - shape American practices to this day), but it is an undeniable part of the bedrock upon which American culture rests. These roots run deep. They persist from generation to generation. They pose a practical limit to the type of political system America can adopt. This is why European style social democracy could never catch on in America (it is also why Americans have had such difficulty exporting 'American style' democracy to countries like Afghanistan, whose society is built around the clan).

Luckily for us, the authors claim, the economic, demographic, and political trends of our time are leading to a world where the autonomous, enterprising, and individualistic features of American society will be a competitive asset. This transition is inevitable. The 2.0 model is broken. Labor unions are gone. Public programs are supported with a debt the government cannot possibly hope to pay back. Federal regulations and taxation are too complex to understand and rigged by the wealthy and powerful for their own advantage. Big business cannot offer the job security they once did. The executive branch is oversized, the military industrial complex out of control, and the legislative branch is closer to K-street lobbyists than the people who elected them. America has the largest prison population in the world but bails out and excuses criminals on Wall Street. The whole thing is a plutocratic mess of chilling proportions. But the system is not sustainable. What cannot go on, will not. Americans trying to shore up unions, the welfare state, or stable corporate monopolies like the kind we had in the 1940s and 50s are doomed to fail, having no more hope of bringing back America 2.0 than William Jennings Bryant did

of restoring America 1.0 in his day. The future is coming. The proposals in this book "are meant to reduce the difficulty of the transition (187)."

I will not summarize the predictions the authors make for the new America at great length - they do that themselves in an entertaining chapter devoted to visiting "America in 2040." It is enough to say that in many ways the new America will be closer in image to America 1.0 than 2.0. As with America 1.0, "the entire concept of 'job' is going to away" (187), as more and more Americans work from home in a manner not too different from their Colonial forefathers. 3-D printing and additive manufacturing will make any home a factory; production of goods will be as decentralized as production of software is today. American political structures will follow suit, and the authors go so far as to suggest that states like California, Texas, and New York may split into more manageable units. I found this section of immense interest; the urgent need for political decentralization is a common theme of my writings. The authors agree with this sentiment, but go much further than I have, suggesting a series of reforms that move talk of decentralization from the realm of abstract political principle to concrete action. The book is worth reading for these twenty pages on decentralization alone. Key to the program is the goal to "push as many contentious issues as possible to the most basic local level as possible, and then reducing the transaction costs as low as possible (229)." In other words, let each community decide its own policy on social issues but make it as easy as possible for people to switch from one community to another. If state senators in Connecticut want to ban the ownership of assault rifles - let them! If a small town in Utah wants to require every teacher to carry a gun with them to school - let them! If you do not like the policies in your community, move to somewhere new. The end result will be drastic ideological sorting, as people move to the communities who have the laws and services they want their government to have.

Mr. Lotus and Bennett expect the shift from America 2.0 to 3.0 to be long and difficult. Indeed, implementing the reforms needed to make America 3.0 succeed will be "hellishly difficult (234)." Nevertheless, the authors are "betting on the positive scenario (22)" that the reform will happen without any systematic collapse. I am less sanguine. My pessimism reflects something the book seems to pass over: the drastic decline in American "social capital," or the social networks and friendships that allow people to work together.

Robert Putnam's [Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#) is the classic account of American social capital and its precipitous decline in the latter half of the 20th century. Since "the greatest generation" that fought in WWII, each generation of Americans that has followed has been less likely to vote, to participate in community groups like the PTA, Boy Scouts, or even neighborhood bowling leagues, to give charitable service, attend Church, have dinner parties, or trust strangers than the generation before it. Socially isolated Americans of this type will have trouble doing anything "hellishly difficult" for social capital is what effective political movements are built upon. Putnam includes a wonderful chapter in his book on the progressive movement, which was the movement that engineered America's transition to the 2.0 model. Putnam points out that the progressive movement was one of the few true "grass roots" political movements in American history. Central to their success in the 1900s and 1910s was the dense network of reading groups, charity clubs, churches, and political committees they created or joined during the 1880s and 1890s. (Most of America's famous civic groups today - Big Brothers, Sierra Club, NAACP, the Red Cross, the PTA, Rotary, and many more - were founded in the thirty years between 1890 and 1910). Putnam argues convincingly that the progressive movement could not have happened without this explosion in civic activism. The progressives did not just found the political order of America 2.0 - they founded the civic associations and institutions of American 2.0 as well. Lotus and Bennett place the high point of America 2.0 at 1960 - this is too was the high water mark for American civic engagement. The civic organizations (and the lifestyle they

promoted) lasted the duration of America 2.0, and have fallen into decline with it.

Given the excellent treatment of the of America's economic and political insitutions, the precious little the authors had to say about America's religious and civic institutions was disappointing. More importantly, they have little to say about how to rekindle America's civic spirit or what forms America 3.0's civic associations might take. This is a critical omission. If past American political experience is anything to go by, then bottom-up reforms cannot and will not happen without the kind of social capital that conquers hellish tasks.

My hope is that those who read this book will have their own ideas on how to bring a civic renewal to America 3.0. The ideas in the book - particularly the parts about decentralization - are worth organizing for.

But enough on that theme. America 3.0 is an excellent book. It is an example of a historically grounded and thoroughly researched book designed to reach popular audiences - in other words, what all political tracts should be like. Even those who disagree with the authors will the style and substance of this work admirable. 5 stars.

NOTE: America 3.0 has a 28 page bibliographic essay and a 29 page index. It does not include charts, maps or a chronology.

[This essay is a slightly condensed version of the review the author wrote for the blog The Scholar's Stage.]