

David Brooks, “The Elites Don’t Get It” –from *The New York Times*,
November 16, 2017

John Bowlby is the father of attachment theory, which explains how humans are formed by relationships early in life, and are given the tools to go out and lead their lives. The most famous Bowlby sentence is this one: “All of us, from cradle to grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures.”

Attachment theory nicely distinguishes between the attachments that form you and the things you then do for yourself. The relationships that form you are mostly things you didn’t choose: your family, hometown, ethnic group, religion, nation and genes. The things you do with your life are mostly chosen: your job, spouse and hobbies.

Through most of American history, our society was built on this same sort of unchosen/chosen distinction. At our foundation, we were a society with strong covenantal attachments — to family, community, creed and faith. Then on top of them we built democracy and capitalism that celebrated liberty and individual rights.

The deep covenantal institutions gave people the capacity to use their freedom well. The liberal institutions gave them that freedom.

This delicate balance — liberal institutions built atop illiberal ones — is now giving way. The big social movements of the past half century were about maximizing freedom of choice. Right-wingers wanted to maximize economic choice and left-wingers lifestyle choice. Anything that smacked of restraint came to seem like a bad thing to be eliminated.

We’ll call this worldview — which is all freedom and no covenant — naked liberalism (liberalism in the classic Lockean sense, not the modern progressive sense). The problem with naked liberalism is that it relies on individuals it cannot create.

This is the point Yuval Levin made in a [brilliant essay](#) published in *First Things* back in 2014. Naked liberals of right and left assume that if you give people freedom they will use it to care for their neighbors, to have civil conversations, to form opinions after examining the evidence. But if you weaken family, faith, community and any sense of national obligation, where is that social, emotional and moral formation supposed to come from? How will the virtuous habits form?

Naked liberalism has made our society an unsteady tree. The branches of individual rights are sprawling, but the roots of common obligation are withering away.

Freedom without covenant becomes selfishness. And that's what we see at the top of society, in our politics and the financial crisis. Freedom without connection becomes alienation. And that's what we see at the bottom of society — frayed communities, broken families, opiate addiction. Freedom without a unifying national narrative becomes distrust, polarization and permanent political war.

People can endure a lot if they have a secure base, but if you take away covenantal attachments they become fragile. Moreover, if you rob people of their good covenantal attachments, they will grab bad ones. First, they will identify themselves according to race. They will become the racial essentialists you see on left and right: The only people who can really know me are in my race. Life is a zero-sum contest between my race and your race, so get out.

Then they resort to tribalism. This is what Donald Trump provides. As [Mark S. Weiner writes](#) on the Niskanen Center's blog, Trump is constantly making friend/enemy distinctions, exploiting liberalism's thin conception of community and creating toxic communities based on in-group/out-group rivalry.

Trump offers people cultural solutions to their alienation problem. As history clearly demonstrates, people will prefer fascism to isolation, authoritarianism to moral anarchy.

If we are going to have a decent society we're going to have to save liberalism from itself. We're going to have to restore and re-enchant the covenantal relationships that are the foundation for the whole deal. The crucial battleground is cultural and prepolitical.

In my experience, most people under 40 get this. They sense the social and moral void at the core and that change has to come at the communal, emotional and moral level. They understand that populism is a broad social movement, including but stretching far beyond just policy. To address it, we're going to need to confront it with another broad social movement.

Many people my age and above seem clueless. Our elected leaders were raised in the heyday of naked liberalism and still talk as if it were 1994. Many public intellectuals were trained in the social sciences and take the choosing individual as their mental starting point. They have trouble thinking about our shared social and moral formative institutions and how such institutions could be reconstituted.

Congressional Republicans think a successful tax bill will thwart populism. Mainstream Democrats think the alienation problem will go away if we redistribute the crumbs a bit more widely. Washington policy wonks build technocratic sand castles that keep getting swept away in the cultural tides.

History is full of examples of nations that built new national narratives, revived family life, restored community bonds and shared moral culture: Britain in the early 19th century, Germany after World War II, America in the Progressive Era. The first step in launching our own revival is understanding that the problem is down in the roots.