What is the American system like? To our dismay we search in vain for one reliable book, or even one set of books, that describes the system within which we are now living, under whose workings we freely write and freely meet in public. (In most systems on earth scholars may not and do not work as we do.) There is no one book to place in the hands of a foreign friend and say: "Here is an accurate description of the way our nation works." There is no one book to place in the hands of a graduate student—a student disaffected, perhaps, from "the system." We have no Manifesto. We have no current Tocqueville. We lack a text that expresses our operative ideals and catches the meaning of our practices.

Even to approach that task it seems necessary to proceed in three stages. First, we must confront the extraordinary biases that prevent a nation of 900,000 professors, not to mention other thinkers and writers, from having a clear idea of the actual structures within which we live and move and have our being. Then we can turn to two other fundamentals: the transcendental roots of social policy and the ideal of community that lies behind social policy. I would call my approach to these ideas "liberal." Others might call them, improperly I think, "neo-conservative." It is not the name that is important, but the ideas.

The biases of conventional wisdom at any one time rule out certain insights as irrelevant or unimportant and, on the other hand, make certain illusions seem so powerful as to appear to be real and even beyond discussion. That our society is weak in theory—that we have no single text setting forth our social vision—is the most stunning single deficiency of our conventional wisdom. How can this extraordinary gap be explained?

Several factors contribute. First, our national genius lies in the practical order. We are better doers than we are thinkers. My father-in-law, a lawyer in Iowa, used to say to me: "Michael, if you can't do it—teach it." Our corporate executives, our political leaders, and even our journalists and policy planners, tend to be rewarded for doing rather than for thinking, for practical success rather than for theory.

Secondly, the specific complexity of our system has escaped notice. It is—to use a theological word—trinitarian, three systems in one, each system distinct but separate: a political system, an economic system, and a cultural system. Daniel Bell diagnoses this complexity in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), but his insight has not been adequately explored. No one can understand the United States unless he grasps the individual workings of each of these three systems and also the ways in which each depends upon, modifies, meshes with, and balances the others. If any one of the three is weakened, the others are weakened. If one gets out of balance, the others suffer distortion.

This trinitarian character helps to explain the third factor. While political scientists have given us a rather adequate view of the democratic political system, and economists have given us a rather adequate view of the economic system, neither of these disciplines naturally produces a study that does justice to the system as a whole. Above all, the humanists have been deficient in presenting an adequate vision of the cultural system—the system of symbols, values, ideas, rituals, practices and institutions that define the attitudes and daily operations of our people, and that give substance and meaning to their political and economic activities. One triad in the picture is almost entirely missing.

There are three strong biases in the cultural sphere that work against the development of an adequate theory: The traditions of the humanities owe a great deal to aristocratic traditions in which strong currents of resentment against a commercial and bourgeois culture are still vigorous; second, the traditions of the social sciences carry a veiled presupposition that, if only our social theory were more precise, then experts would be able better to manage the system, and thus the experts would displace the forms of free market economics and interest-group democracy that now characterize our actual life; third, the emergence of a very large class of relatively affluent, university-educated, and high-status citizens, who draw their money and status from the public sector and whose ambitions depend upon an increasingly enlarged public sector, provides a strong vested interest in "change"—that is, in debunking our system as it exists and reordering its politics, culture, and morality.

From all these sources, and perhaps from others as
Americans are materialistic, greedy, prisoners of consumerism, racist, competitive, alienated, and conformist—but we do not mean to say that we are, or our families, or our friends. This neat magical trick prevents us from seeing America straight. It also prevents us from grasping two of the foundations of social policy: transcendence and community.

The roots of transcendence in Western thought lie in the nature of the Jewish and Christian religions, but they are capable of secular expression. Judaism and Christianity (and Islam) are distinguished from other world religions because they instruct a whole culture to seek the meaning of life in the shaping of history. Other religions teach that the meaning of life lies in nature, or in escape from nature into a spiritual state of one sort or another. The one true God of Judaism, by contrast, was the Lord of history, leading his people upon a pilgrimage through time. "The Lord's Prayer" taught by Jesus instructs millions to hope for "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." It is not mere coincidence, then, that the very conception of "making history," of working for "progress," and of social policy itself—that is, the directing of social life to higher purposes—found congenial nourishment in Judeo-Christian societies. As Alfred North Whitehead observed, the emergence of science as an honored enterprise in the West is not conceivable apart from a three thousand-year tutelage in three notions: that God is truth; that there is one God, through whom and in whom every phenomenon, no matter how insignificant, is intelligibly connected to every other; and that, in the plan of God, history moves forward, full of change and surprises and creative possibilities. Having assumed such notions, even Westerners who become secular could pursue the truth, investigate random phenomena in their experience, and dream of building a better world.

The historical foundations of social economics, of course, lie in the secular Aristotle and even in Plato. But there was a certain consonance between Greek thought and Judeo-Christian thought that led to a quite natural marriage. Like Jews and Christians, the Greeks too believed in the One from whom all multiplicity flowed. They believed in intelligence and in its validity in uncovering truth. And they believed—or at least Aristotle believed—that by raising questions about all the existing social economies in the world of his time, and by collecting the constitutions of every state they encountered, wise men might discern better ways of conducting social policy. Human beings, in other words, are not merely victims. We are not merely passive sufferers. Through the use of our own capacity for raising questions, we can seize responsibility for shaping at least some small part of our own destiny.

This capacity for raising questions is the transcendental root of social policy. There are several interesting features about this capacity to raise questions. First, it is unlimited. There is no point at which we cannot raise further questions, until everything about everything is known. Even then, we would exercise this capacity in attending to one thing after
another, eyeing everything quizzically and with alertness. Second, the capacity to raise questions extends beyond the task of questioning propositions. We can also raise questions about our own perspective, our present sense of reality, the symbolic field within which our thinking takes place, and our own standards of judgment and present criteria. In other words, the capacity to question has a dimension of depth. And third, the capacity to raise questions grounds (or gives rise to) the “experience of nothingness”; that is, it leads us so to question our sense of reality that we come to see the radical questionables of every aspect of our world and of our lives.

Both the drive to raise questions and the (more or less common) experience of nothingness have great importance for social policy. They have importance because they give human beings a base of intellectual operations outside the certitudes of their own culture. Whatever our culture tells us is true, beautiful, or good we are able to question. This radical freedom of the human being, achieved through the exercise of his or her capacity to raise questions, establishes the possibility of imagining alternatives. The drive to raise questions establishes the possibility of social policy.

A further note may be in order. A term frequently used by social scientists for the last hundred years is “alienation.” This word now functions more as a symbol than as a precise concept. The unlimited drive to raise questions necessarily carries with it, when it is fully exercised the uncomfortable experiences that the term “alienation” points to. The drive to raise questions makes us uncomfortable with the familiar world of our experience. There is in us a drive that goes beyond the limits of any possible world of experience. About any such world we can raise disturbing questions. Thus, there is in the structure of our own intelligence a guarantee of feelings of alienation. One might even argue that in a society that fully develops in its members the capacity to raise questions, the experience of alienation (or “the experience of nothingness”) will be a frequent occurrence. Alienation may, in that case, be the sign of a healthy society.

In this respect socialism may offer too shallow an interpretation of human experience. On the one hand socialism tends to attribute experiences of alienation to a feature of the capitalist economic system. Empirically, such experiences seem to be equally frequent under socialist economic systems. On the other hand socialist theoreticians seem to be exercising a form of nostalgia when they try to image a society free of alienation—they seem to be imagining a society of happy peasants and artisans, closely involved in the fruits of their own labor. Creative artists in every age, however, experience notoriously powerful experiences of alienation. Close involvement in a creative labor is no guarantee of escape from alienation. The roots of the experience of alienation, in other words, do not lie in productive relations but in the capacity of human beings to raise questions about any world, however idyllic, in which they might find themselves.

It is an advantage for those concerned about social enterprises—the capacity to raise questions—is also the root of inevitable, and potentially creative, experiences of alienation. In a nation of immigrants and mobile individuals, alienation is as American as apple pie. It is a sign accompanying any intellectually highly developed society. Alienation is no vice. It is a sign of fidelity to part of our own nature.

The second foundation of all thinking about social policy is a theory of community. Since most Americans have in their family history vivid experiences of the rupture of community—when migrants pulled up roots, abandoned their native communities and often even their own families—Americans, when they talk about communities, tend to be somewhat sentimental and attracted to theories about emotional states. We hear many expressions about “sensitive, caring persons in loving, warm communities.” The world used to imagine Americans as bold individuals who were concerned about acting and doing—lonely cowboys, tough gangsters, individualists set upon lonely existentialist quests like the heroes of so many youth-cult films like Easy Rider, Bonnie and Clyde, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Annie Hall, and the rest. Today the world might more exactly describe the character of our cultural heroes as warm, loving, caring, sensitive kids, seeking someone to cuddle them. There is an enormous bias against institutions in our culture. Institutions, one is led to imagine, imprison us, control us, manipulate us, treat us impersonally, deaden us, desensitize us, corrupt us, and oppress us. The myth of the good life seems to demand emigration from institutions, in pursuit of idyllic, noninstitutional loveliness.

For this reason it is wiser to speak of community, not as a locus of emotional fulfillment, but as a locus of hard, demanding, toughening, and eventually liberating responsibilities and obligations. We would like to think—the immature kid within each of us would like to think—that liberation comes from throwing off our responsibilities as lovers, parents, family members, students, workers, and citizens. We would like to escape from responsibilities. Indeed, it would be lovely to remain kids forever. The ideal of eternal kidship is powerful in our midst. We each look ten years younger than we are (compared to photographs of other generations at our age), dress at least ten years younger than we are, and often act at least ten years younger than we are.

But alas, the real work of civilizing us and making tolerable adults out of us comes not from evading but through embracing responsibilities and hardships. Our liberty is slowly acquired, not through flight from institutions, but through internalizing the disciplines, skills, methods, and insights carried along by institutions. Institutions are not our enemy. They are the instruments by which we learn gradually to transcend our earlier forms of development. They incite us, teach us, correct us, probe us, pierce our illusions about ourselves, stretch us, inhibit us, shape us. Language, for example, per-
One can illustrate the intellectual power of the ideal of community as institution through the issue of human rights. Some seem to believe that a campaign for human rights means exhorting leaders of nations to become more sensitive and caring about individuals within their states. But to exhort the leaders of the USSR to be nice, to be more moral, to dissidents like Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, or Scharansky is to spit in the wind. Like the U.S., the USSR has a written constitution commanding respect for human rights. But human rights are not given institutional meaning either through warm, sensitive, caring individuals or through written constitutions. Even in the United States, if we had to depend upon warm feelings or upon words written on parchment, we would have no real protection of our rights, as James Madison clearly foresaw. Unlike the Soviet Union, the United States does have a set of institutions, and a set of powerfully organized communities with access to these institutions. The result is that competing interest can be set against competing interest in a public forum. Justice is not always done in the United States. Human rights are not always adequately defended. But to the extent that they are so defended, human rights have standing in the American community because certain institutions grant power to interested communities to make the case for those rights. Fine sentiments do not make human rights real, nor do words written on a piece of paper in Philadelphia. The community of human rights is established by institutions; the jury system, the adversary system, the practices of due process, the power of the press, and the power of a plurality of communities independent of the state apparatus.

In other words, to speak of human rights is not to speak of moral ideals, moral sentiments, or written constitutions. It is to speak of a set of practicing institutions that empower communities of interest both to express and to fight for what they perceive to be their legitimate claims, according to public standards of presentation. To speak of human rights to the Soviet Union is not to urge Premier Brezhnev to be nice, but to demand that the Soviet Union develop institutions like those that function elsewhere in historically proven ways. It is to precipitate changes of institutional social policy within the Soviet Union. It is to concentrate, not upon men and their motives, but upon institutions and laws.

The actual, working ideal of community most useful to thinkers in the field of social policy, I repeat, is not the ideal of the emotional, caring community, but the ideal of impersonal institutions that probe and test and measure the individuals who function within them. In sum, we sorely need in the United States a more accurate social theory about the actual workings of our trinitarian system. Certain profound biases in the intellectual community at present have so far prevented the emergence of such a theory. Two of the foundations of social policy may help us to break free from these biases. They are the radical, unlimited drive to raise questions, and the ideal of community as a set of impersonal institutions making demands upon individuals who must struggle to be worthy of them—and to improve them. By exploring these foundations more fully, we might find the means to replace inadequate theories about the nature of the American system with theories that are more accurate; that is to say, with theories that agree with our daily experience of life in America.