

# (RE)CONSIDERING THE INDEPENDENT SECTOR

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## **Introduction**

Richard Cornuelle's *Reclaiming the American Dream: The Role of Private Individuals and Voluntary Associations* has been subjected to numerous interpretations in the more than half a century since its original publication in 1965. For many readers familiar with the book, *Reclaiming the American Dream* may now seem old news—nearly sixty years have passed since its first printing, it references current events from the Kennedy and Johnson years long since past, and it seems, at first glance, to be merely a forerunner argument for more recent, up-to-date formulations of the American nonprofit sector. Nonetheless, with Cornuelle's death in 2011, it is essential that we remind ourselves of the importance of this most enduring idea and ideal.

The independent sector Cornuelle sought to articulate way back then is easily assumed to have become the national statistical and organizational reality others call “the nonprofit sector” or the “nongovernment sector.” Today the features and character of the nonprofit and nongovernment sectors are widely studied and written about, and there is even a national trade association named Independent Sector, headquartered (where else?) in Washington, D.C. This group is not alone in attempting to use Cornuelle's evocative phrase for its own purposes. Alternatively, for those who choose to read Cornuelle's message as supporting pro-market, anti-state politics, “conservative” or “libertarian” positions, *Reclaiming the American Dream* is sometimes read as a political manifesto that reinforces those beliefs. None of these interpretations, however, captures the real essence of Cornuelle's argument or embraces the full value of his contribution to a contemporary understanding of American culture in a global context.

Those who reread Cornuelle's book, particularly the 1993 Transaction Books edition with its very useful introduction by Frank Annunziata and an afterword by the

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Lohmann, Roger A. 2013-14. (Re)Considering the Independent Sector. *Conversations on Philanthropy X*: 49-62. ISSN 1552-9592 ©The Philanthropic Enterprise.

author, will encounter an enlightening, thought-provoking argument that ultimately undermines and subverts many of the things that have been said and believed about the book, and it makes clear why the author spent so much time, energy, and money in the last years of his life supporting efforts like the conference that led to the essays in this volume. Philanthropy is an outstanding example of independent, individual, and collective action of the type discussed by Cornuelle. *Reclaiming the American Dream* is not really many of the things that are said about it. It is not out of date, having been realized in the conception of an “independent” third or nonprofit sector (and absorbed, much to Cornuelle’s dismay, in the trade association-cum-national private-governmental collaborative named Independent Sector). Nor is the book’s enduring value primarily as a conservative or libertarian anti-state manifesto (except among a small circle of adherents who can read it only that way).

*Reclaiming the American Dream* is instead a work of novelty and freshness which continues to enshrine a distinct vision of the important role of independent action by private individuals and voluntary associations in American life.<sup>1</sup> Not since Alexis de Tocqueville, 120 years before, has this idea had such a coherent defender. The book is, first and foremost, a reaffirmation of continuing American faith in the power of people in their daily lives to act together outside of politics and without the leadership of government (or, I would add, that other great behemoth, the price system) to effect change in their life-worlds. Independent action is quite apart from—one might say, regardless of—the machinations of the major economic and political institutions of government and markets. This is a message that transcends day-to-day politics—particularly the tawdry, red-blue politics of the present era—and goes to the heart of who we are as a people and a culture.

One purpose of this paper is to affirm the continuing importance of the independent sphere or sector as Richard Cornuelle first constructed it in 1965. The other is to clear up, as he tried to do at various times throughout his life, a few misunderstandings about what Cornuelle actually wrote and later said he intended, and to extend his basic vision of independent action in some additional directions with implications for our evolving understanding of philanthropy.

It is very easy to misread Cornuelle’s book as part of the attempted paradigm shift that Peter Dobkin Hall called “inventing the nonprofit sector” (1992; see also Zunz 2011). But Cornuelle’s independent sector should not be seen as a kind of precursor of later, more detailed, models of the nonprofit sector from Weisbrod (1986), Powell (1987), or any of the multiple publications of Lester Salamon (e.g., 1999).<sup>2</sup>

Such a misreading is grounded in part in confusion over Cornuelle’s use of the

term “sector.” Although most of those cited use the term today in the macroeconomic sense of a statistical aggregate of industries, Cornuelle’s use was far more metaphorical. The independent sector as Cornuelle first articulated it is, by its very nature, different and distinct from the statistically tabulated national nonprofit sectors of tax-exempt corporations, as that idea has become known among economists, organization researchers, and others and enshrined in the annual ARNOVA conferences. In the subtitle as in the text of his book, Cornuelle calls attention specifically and exclusively to the role—that is, the sector, or sphere—of private individuals and voluntary associations. By contrast, adherents of the nonprofit sector model focus first and foremost on measuring the quantitative impact of tax-exempt corporations and display little interest in either individual persons or voluntary associations.<sup>3</sup>

In Cornuelle’s text, independent sector institutions are—first and foremost—*independent*: active, engaged individuals, associations, and foundations acting outside of government and the markets. There is a fundamental point of psychology and sociology at issue here. The book makes little mention of corporations, tax-exempt or otherwise, or of organizations other than voluntary associations and foundations. Thus it is safe to assume (albeit in somewhat sociological language) that Cornuelle offered us his vision of the independent sector as the domain of the distinct form of interpersonal relations identified traditionally as voluntary association, and an extended form of interaction by private individuals that in the current vernacular is often termed “networking.” This is, first and foremost, a matter of differing units of analysis: whereas those working with the nonprofit sector concept are primarily concerned with the macroeconomic impact of corporations aggregated together into a statistical category called the nonprofit sector, Cornuelle’s concerns are more clearly directed at the face-to-face or micro-level of living individuals engaged with one another.

This approach, combined with Cornuelle’s enduring libertarian individualism, which is evident throughout the main text and restated in the introduction and the afterword, makes it safe to assume that in considering the domain of the independent sector Cornuelle had something in mind in his use of the term other than the kind of national-level clustering of tax-exempt corporations interwoven with government that Salamon (1999), the World Bank, and others project as the nonprofit, or nongovernmental, sector. Cornuelle’s use of the adjective *independent* is a further important sign of his intent. Lest there be any mistake on this point, Annunziata quotes Cornuelle’s characterization of a nonprofit sector cooperating with government as “short-sighted, self-defeating and almost totally mistaken.”

The independent sector, in Cornuelle's view, is "not an instrument of the state but ...an essential alternative to the state" (1993 [1965], xxi).

All of this raises numerous further questions, such as what Cornuelle really meant by the term *independent sector*; whether such a thing existed in 1965 or exists today, or is something he envisioned for some far-off, future libertarian utopia; and why this six-decade old conception may still be important to us today.

### ***The Independent Sector Is***

A sector of independent action by individuals and voluntary associations, as envisioned in *Reclaiming the American Dream*, is (and was, in 1965) not some far-off, future ideal state or utopia. An important sphere of independent action by individuals and associations existed in 1965, as it had earlier in American history. We know now that the concern of the time that the sector might be usurped by government was premature, as we know also that Cornuelle and libertarians were not the only ones concerned with this question. In the social-work management literature also, there was a body of articles at the time and later about the threat to the autonomy of the "voluntary sector" posed by federal grants. Yet, independent action outside of government continues to exist today much as Cornuelle characterized it: "society" (that is, social relations) "both free and humane" (1993 [1965], xxxiv) in which "we meet public needs outside government," not through "grand designs and bold decisions" but rather through "millions and millions of small acts of caring" (1983, 196). The fundamental problem today, as in 1965 and throughout American history, is not whether such independent action will exist, but of proper recognition and acknowledgement of this sphere, which Cornuelle later also called the "good society," as discussed below. As critics of federal funding over several decades and at least one reviewer of this manuscript have noted, there is an important question of whether federally subsidized nonprofits will crowd out independent action through barriers to entry and regulation.

An independent sector defined by such acts of caring—or what McCully (2008) describes as action that expresses "what it means to be human"—is a continuing reality in American life and now throughout much of the contemporary world, although whether such acts are increasing or decreasing in frequency at any given moment is something none of us can say for sure.

We should not allow ourselves to be distracted from the continuing importance of such independent action by placing undue emphasis on the book's proposed plan for *retention* and *expansion* (not establishment) of independent

action. Cornuelle's independent sector exists, as it did in 1965, although the issue of recognition remains with us. The core of this problem is that these "habits of the heart" (Bellah, et. al. 1985 attributes the phrase to Alexis de Tocqueville) are so intuitive, personal, and deeply ingrained that it is genuinely difficult to find their proper expression in theory and culture. They are, in short, too much taken for granted to see clearly, and for some, too threatening to acknowledge openly.

Cornuelle's argument, however, was not merely intended to stake a claim of recognition. A major part was a claim for widespread expansion of the independent sector—particularly in domains such as traditional charity and philanthropy, where, at the time, governmental action appeared to be expanding rapidly, too rapidly for comfort. This was—and is—a clearly polemical element of Cornuelle's argument in *Reclaiming the American Dream*. It is also the basis of his proposed broad strategy of meeting "most" public needs through independent action rather than through government. Whether the sphere of independent action is believed to be small, medium, large, or enormous, and whether it is viewed in isolation or (as Cornuelle envisioned it in Chapter 11 and elsewhere) as a sector suitable for competition with government, however, is secondary to the simple recognition of the enduring reality and future possibilities of such independent action. Cornuelle is quite correct in stating that some advocates at the time (and since) saw the independent sector in purely residual terms, eventually to be replaced by more permanent governmental action. Wilensky and LeBeaux (1965) for example, explicitly discussed some of these arguments for independent action as purely residual. What no one could have known at the time, however, was how widespread and durable the support for a permanent independent sector of charity and philanthropy as one element of a broad range of solutions would be. Such pluralism has reinforced Cornuelle's argument for a "relative advantage" approach rather than an either-or. The issue isn't government *or* the independent sector; it is which one can do the job better?

### ***The Good Society***

In such a context of plural approaches, each with competing claims of relative advantage, it is important—though controversial—also to keep in mind Cornuelle's emphasis on the apolitical nature of his strategy, as opposed to the highly partisan cloaks worn by those arguing for or against the welfare state. There is a profound irony at work here: the question of whether independent action is always apolitical is, itself, subject to partisan or political analysis. Even so, Cornuelle was clear on his view.

In two early chapters (1993 [1965]), Cornuelle rejects both a liberal strategy of big government (chapter 2) and its conservative antithesis (chapter 3), before interweaving his own solution (an independent sector competing with government) tightly with his own libertarian beliefs. We need not deal with the details of his critiques of liberalism and conservatism. We can infer from the text that for Cornuelle the independent sector consisted of three equally important strands:

1. action by private individuals and voluntary associations,
2. action in competition with government programs and services, and
3. apolitical action.

Perhaps the most immediate question this raises is what, exactly, Cornuelle meant by apolitical action? Is this the same as what others more closely aligned with the progressive tradition have meant by “nonpartisan” or civic action? (See, for example, the numerous publications of the Kettering Foundation.) Another important question is whether independent action that is genuinely private, competitive, and apolitical can continue to appeal broadly beyond the book’s core constituency (for example, among non-libertarians), or whether the concept of the independent sector will remain, despite its author’s intent, political. My own answer to this is that apolitical independent action that seeks to coordinate community resources non-coercively without rent-seeking is just what Cornuelle said it is.

An equally important question is whether apolitical independent action, apart from its partisan political appeal, will still be valued by those libertarians and conservatives who currently find its anti-governmental message most appealing. There is nothing inherent in the idea of an independent sector or in the strategy of independent action competing with government that should cause non-libertarians to dismiss these as not being useful endeavors. It does, however, introduce an instructive caveat. If independent action can outcompete government on such dimensions as cost, quality, and effectiveness, so much the better. Now, more than half a century later, it is clear that Cornuelle (1993 [1965])—like many advocates of program evaluation before and since—may have been overly optimistic on that point. Even if or when voluntary action outperforms government, this will not necessarily result in any “ceasing and desisting” of government action in the short run and may not in the long run.

The basic trio of ideas composing an independent sector has received too little attention since Cornuelle first wrote, and in at least one instance it was reinterpreted to suit other purposes. A group of that now-seemingly extinct political species in American public life known as liberal (or “Eastern establishment”) Republicans closely associated with John D. Rockefeller III, at assorted national foundations, Yale

University, and the Filer Commission, created and supported the Independent Sector organization. In its current guise, this entity represents something close to an oxymoron. Located as it is in Washington, D.C., the organization named Independent Sector seems far more committed to collaboration with government and a Herbert Hoover-style “association government” strategy than to Cornuelle’s independent, competitive, apolitical strategy.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Can Anything Remain Permanently Apolitical?***

In *Reclaiming the American Dream*, Cornuelle appears to suggest that an apolitical stance should be sufficient to render matters permanently and completely nonpolitical. In the afterword, he characterizes his work as “a non-political, even anti-political approach to public policy” (1993 [1965], 178). In this he is in accord with a long line of Americans concerned with philanthropy and voluntary association who have sought to draw a permanent and definitive line between the political and the apolitical, civic and civil. Alexis de Tocqueville made this same distinction, in *Democracy in America*, in differentiating between what he termed political associations and civil associations. Although this distinction is of no particular importance to architects of the nonprofit sector apart from the effort to resolve the incoherence of tax policy on this issue,<sup>5</sup> it is of critical importance in understanding the most difficult and complex aspect of Cornuelle’s independent sector. Issues and concerns have a way of being politicized, which threatens to put the independent sector in a sort of permanent residual status: that which is civil until it is politicized. It does not appear to be possible to inoculate any issue, group, person, or topic from this. However, what can be politicized can also be depoliticized. However, a very real question is whether depoliticizing issues associated with the independent sector will occur in the context of current levels of governmental/voluntary sector involvement or only at much reduced levels as Cornuelle and many readers of this journal would prefer.

Thus in the absence of a fixed, permanent demarcation between the realms of the political and the civic (or apolitical) in civil life, it would be helpful to better understand the nature of this particular transition. The political philosopher Benjamin Barber offers a potential key here (and there may be others who should be identified here as well), with his notion that the realm of the political is contingent and residual (1988). Something can become political, Barber suggests, when it is a matter of uncertainty and of public concern or attention. By this approach, things are not inherently political or apolitical, but can be politicized and depoliticized in many different ways.

### ***How Cornuelle's Independent Sector Was Politicized***

In his introduction to the Transaction Books edition of *Reclaiming the American Dream*, Annunziata relates the circumstances that led to the politicizing of the apolitical concept of the independent sector. *Look* magazine, for example, in an early review in 1965 termed the book “the New Conservative Manifesto” (1993 [1965], xiii.). That this was not Cornuelle’s intent is clear. “[I]n this way,” Cornuelle wrote in the afterword to the 1993 edition, “a movement that was not conservative came to be called conservative, and a non-political, even antipolitical approach to public policy came to be seen as a new and promising political strategy” (178).

In his introduction, Annunziata notes (xiii-xv) that the reaction to the book was fashioned more by Frank Meyer of *National Review* and Charles Murray, in the preface to Marvin Olasky’s *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, than by anything Cornuelle actually wrote. Thus we have the emergence of that familiar pattern of politicization in American life: once the book was published, the author lost control and its reception was defined by others. This set off a further familiar dynamic: if conservative critics and groups claim a work as their own, others seem to feel obligated to oppose it, regardless of what the author himself wrote or says he intended. Such activities, ironically, are fundamentally antithetical to the concept of independent action as Cornuelle outlined it.

There is plenty of blame to be assigned on all sides here. Ultimately, all appear to have chosen to ignore or reject Cornuelle’s plea for community in *Reclaiming the American Dream* and *Healing America*: “In the end a good society is not so much the result of grand designs and bold decisions, but of millions upon millions of small caring acts, repeated day after day, until direct mutual action becomes second nature and to see a problem is to begin to wonder how to best act on it” (1983, 196).

Understanding the importance of the independent sector and American philanthropy is not dependent on allegiance to any political viewpoint or grand theory, or of any particular understanding of states or markets, but rather a matter of placing primary focus on the significance of those millions of small caring acts. This is, as we shall see below, a form of moral solidarity, and it is the key to Cornuelle’s apolitical stance. If “small” is read in the above quotation not as inconsequential but as a synonym for individual and small-group action, Cornuelle’s notion of millions of small, caring acts in communities serves, in fact, as a tolerably good definition of philanthropy as well as the independent sector.

We should also believe Cornuelle’s explicit declaration that his purpose was



“to start, rather than finish a search for better understanding of this tradition” (1983, 22-23). Cornuelle and I almost certainly did not agree on all aspects of our politics, but I am (and have been) in complete agreement with him about the fundamental importance of independent action since I first encountered this idea decades ago. I would go much further than Cornuelle was comfortable with in suggesting that the independent sector is not, as Frank Meyer, Charles Murray, and others assert, dependent upon vaporizing some or all of the welfare state first. Independent action exists whether we acknowledge it or not, and it exists primarily at the community, not the national, level.

In the remainder of this paper I note four major instances of independent action by individuals and voluntary associations that have assumed importance in recent years, under the headings of charity organization, disaster relief, social networking technology, and international nongovernmental organizations.

### ***Charity Organization***

Because it is a large, complex, and highly politicized domain, it may not be evident at first that a bona fide independent sector of millions of caring acts by individuals and voluntary associations has been successfully functioning in most American communities for much of American (and those communities’) history. It generally gets less attention, and it often has fewer resources than the governmental and government-supported charities, and it certainly receives less attention than the partisan blustering over government welfare measures, but its independence from both government and the market is very real and continuing.

For some partisan readers of Cornuelle, the “Reagan Revolution” of the early 1980s is still seen as an attempted beginning of a movement toward a truly independent sector in charity, replacing the state with voluntary action. Among equally partisan supporters of the “community action” programs of the 1960s, those programs had been seen in very similar terms (cf. Marris & Rein, 1967). Cornuelle offers a strikingly different interpretation of the Reagan-era events in “New Work for Invisible Hands: A Future for Libertarian Thought” (1991) as quoted in Annunziata’s introduction to *Reclaiming the American Dream*:

The so-called Reagan revolution was bogus—a disguised tax revolt. It was not an effort to repeal the service state but to preserve it—and to substitute debt or inflation for taxation as a way of paying its politically irreducible costs. But the illusion that gave the Reagan programme its ephemeral plausibility has already faded, and

America's social democracy is caught in a contradiction from which there is no convenient exit. The status quo is impossible to defend and impossible to change. The American policy is reaching a dead end, and libertarian thought, in its present state of development, doesn't help (1993 [1965], xxiii).

Other Presidents, it should be noted, have used this same strategy to finance other state projects. The service state—which some have derided as the nanny state—remains still largely intact, although Cornuelle might have added that individual nonprofits are now a good deal more adapted to a competitive environment than they were in the 1980s. Often this involves leveraging private funds for larger government contracts. Nonetheless, important features of the contemporary service system—including numerous services for homelessness, HIV-AIDS, hunger, and other ills—fall partly or completely outside the governmental-private nexus of the contract state and directly in the domain of independent action.

### ***Disaster Relief***

One area of charity in which independent action by individuals and associations has always been vitally important is disaster relief. Emily Chamlee-Wright's publications on the post-Katrina disaster relief efforts (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2010, Chamlee-Wright 2010) highlight processes that those who have participated in local community recovery efforts will recognize, such as the very healthy and at times highly competitive relations between governmental and nongovernmental relief efforts. The cooperative, competitive, and combative relations of government and the government-related nonprofits are often quite complex and difficult to sort out. In the wake of disasters large and small, local start-up voluntary associations typically supplement not only the public Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and state and local government efforts including police, fire, and EMS "first responders," but also established quasi-public entities (such as the Red Cross) and nonprofits like the Salvation Army. One of the things that has been most evident in every disaster situation has been the more-or-less spontaneous rising up of independent action by individuals and voluntary associations determined to help themselves and their neighbors.

### ***Social Networking Technology***

Cornuelle could not possibly have envisioned recent developments in computer technology back in 1965 when he criticized the independent sector for

its failures to embrace available technology in chapter 7 (1993 [1965]). In that chapter he wrote, “because it has not adopted modern technology, as industry and government have, the independent sector seems backward and unreliable” (This quotation annotates the title in the Table of Contents of this edition.).

This now appears to be partly a matter of awaiting the right technology. In response to disasters around the world (as in Haiti, the Gulf Coast, China, Japan, and elsewhere), in the Arab Street uprisings of 2011 and 2012, and in many other instances we have seen the countless ways in which individuals armed with cell phones, computers, websites, and other communications technologies have used these means to “hook up”—to form voluntary associations—and engage in amazing feats of independent action. One can increasingly sense, as Cornuelle was prescient in observing, that the full implications of this form of independent action have yet to be realized.

### ***International Nongovernmental Organizations***

The most complex and remote (from most of our daily lives) yet perhaps most important element of Cornuelle’s model of independent action has been the rise of a genuine independent sector internationally. When Cornuelle wrote *Reclaiming the American Dream* in 1965, “international relations” were still the clear and exclusive monopoly of government agencies such as the U.S. State Department, the president’s office, and assorted congressional committees such as the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In the ensuing decades, however, something that fits well into Cornuelle’s vision of independent sector competition with government appears to have developed in this area, and in at least some instances independent action has gotten the upper hand.

For those not familiar with these developments, Olivier Zunz’s Chapter 9 of “American Philanthropy and the World’s Communities,” tells a major part of this story, starting with the French organization *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) in the Ethiopian famine of 1984 (2011, 250-276). Since then, literally hundreds of international nongovernmental organizations, voluntary associations, foundations, celebrities, and private individuals—such as George Soros, Bill and Melinda Gates, Bono, Willy Nelson, and Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt—have gotten into the act.

Again, the long-term implications of these developments are unclear. But it is evident that in at least some instances, private individuals and voluntary associations can do things that government agencies cannot, and the world is a better place for their efforts.

## **Conclusion**

Cornuelle's conception of an independent sector offered in 1965, and continues to offer today, a clear alternative—a genuine “third way,” if you will—not only to public action by government but also to the price system. Cornuelle was a fairly young man when he wrote this important book, and now he is no longer with us. But his important idea lives on, and as the examples in this essay clearly show, it is continually being amplified by the work of others.

“In seeking to solve our problems through individual opportunity,” the sociologist Robert Bellah wrote in a 1999 essay, “we have come up with two master strategies. We will provide opportunity through the market or through the state” (Etzioni 1999, 17). *Reclaiming the American Dream* clearly offers a third way in the form of competition with either or both.

Bellah continues:

On this issue we imagine a radical polarity between conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat. What we often do not see is that this is a very tame polarity, because the opponents agree so deeply on most of the terms of the problem. . . . Whatever their opponents say, those who support a strong government seldom believe in government as such. They simply see it as the most effective provider of opportunities that will allow individuals a fair chance of making something of themselves. Those who believe in the market believe free competition is the best context for individual self-realization.

Both positions are essentially technocratic. They do not imply much about substantive values other than freedom and opportunity. They would solve our problems through economic or political mechanisms, not moral solidarity” (17).

In the end, the greatest contribution of *Reclaiming the American Dream* is the reopening of an old pathway through the partisan thickets and dense forests of politics and pointing the way toward the need for, and the possibilities of, moral solidarity through independent action in communities.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, two distinct meanings of the term “sector” are used and distinguished. In a narrow, technical sense, a sector as used primarily by economists and others interested in national income measurement; e.g., the nonprofit sector is a statistical category reducing large, complex realities to a

few numbers or indices. In the more alliterative, literary sense used by Cornuelle and others, a sector is a space or domain of recognizable social life. Both uses are legitimate, but they must be distinguished from each other.

<sup>2</sup> Cornuelle's "independent sector" is more consistent with the work of scholars of voluntary action, such as David Horton Smith (2000), Jon Van Til (2000), and Lohmann (1992).

<sup>3</sup> The language here is problematic. The continuing furor over the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the *Citizens United* case has revitalized old issues of the relation of individual and collective behavior that run deep into medieval legal origins. Although legal scholars may continue to discuss whether and in what sense corporations are "individuals," or persons, it seems clear from the terms Cornuelle chose, as from the discussion in the text itself and his use of the adjective *private* before the word *individuals*, that Cornuelle did not intend to include corporations-as-individuals in his discussion.

<sup>4</sup> For the best available brief discussion of Hooverism and "association government," see Chapter 4 of Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America: A History* (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Zunz (2011) has a very interesting analysis on this issue in Chapter 3.

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