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A UNIVERSE TWO STORIES DEEP:  
Social Criticism and Masculinity in Postwar America  
by  
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A Dissertation submitted to the  
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Universe Two Stories Deep

by MATTHEW REED

Dissertation Director:

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"A Universe Two Stories Deep" addresses themes of political mobilization and the social construction of masculinity in the postwar United States. It argues that cultural phenomena that arose from the distinctive postwar economy gave rise to a particular set of political concerns, and that those concerns have changed as the economy has changed.

Substantively, the dissertation addresses the work of the social critics David Riesman, Christopher Lasch, and Richard Sennett. In Riesman's work it locates a concern with "conformism" characteristic of its time; it notes also the compensatory function of a fantasy-projection of autonomous masculinity. In Lasch's work it notes the decline of the independent producer and the rise of the therapeutic state, with its attendant dislocations of gender roles. In Sennett's work it limns both the temptations and the dangers of urban cosmopolitanism, and suggests the political limits of "sympathy."

It concludes with a turn to the distinctive conditions

of the 1990's. It suggests that the rise of institutional investors and the decline of management and professional autonomy have constricted the life-options available to the current generation, and attributes the pervasiveness of an ethic of hyper-aggressiveness to this lack of options. It concludes with a call for a new set of self-sustaining institutions that operate by a non-market logic, to allow other cultural options space to flourish.

## PREFACE

"...neither Bunyan nor Tolstoy could become what we have called healthy-minded. They had drunk too deeply of the cup of bitterness ever to forget its taste, and their redemption is into a universe two stories deep. Each of them has realized a good which broke the effective edge of his sadness; yet the sadness was preserved as a minor ingredient in the heart of the faith by which it was overcome."

-- William James,  
*The Varieties of Religious Experience*

"The inner life is frequently stupid."

-- Annie Dillard,  
*An American Childhood*

This dissertation is located somewhere between the two. As autobiographical as much of it is, though, I would be seriously remiss if I didn't pay some thanks.

Success has many parents, it is said, but failure is an orphan. In that light, it seems to me, acknowledgements are as much hubris or hope as humility.

First thanks have to go to my long-suffering chair, Professor Carey McWilliams. Carey's supervision has been a process of discovery for both of us; what started as a coolly professional relationship has matured into a genuine, and sometimes surprising, friendship. He has indulged my conceptual wanderlust and endured my, well, contrarianism; for both of these I am immensely grateful.

Professor Stephen Bronner has been an indispensable ally throughout the trials of graduate school, even when he inflicted some of them. While I know that he envisioned this project differently, I never stopped learning from (and arguing with) his fierce intelligence. Professor Dennis

Bathory was there when I needed him, and provided encouragement to the last.

Thanks are due as well to friends and colleagues.

Jonathan McFall, Ben Peck, Sandra Marshall, Laurie Naranch, Farid Abdel Nour, Lori Messinger, Manfred Steger, Michael Forman, Judithanne Scourfield, and Anne Manuel have all, in their ways, helped make graduate school a little easier, and helped keep me within spitting distance of sanity. Their presence and support, as well as their critiques and nudges, have been invaluable. Carolyn Kehoe provided needed perspective and seemingly endless patience, and a reminder that, habit notwithstanding, there is more to the world than academics. Melina Patterson single-handedly changed the ways I look at gender and politics. Her astonishing insight and undeniable stage presence shook my post-adolescent certainties, and left me both more confused and more confident. Showing me that the two are not mutually exclusive was her contribution.

Bernie Tamas has been the kind of friend and colleague every academic dreams of finding. His support has been unflagging and his critical stamina awe-inspiring; I can't even begin to count the number of hours we've spent dissecting popular culture, critical theory, landlords, the New York Mets, the quirks of the academy, and the politics of everyday life. Even from his current outpost in Hungary, he has been a provocative and stimulating critic and a prolific correspondent. His "parties" book will kick butt -

you heard it here first.

Finally, there is Susan Craig. We've been through the wars together, and I don't know anybody I'd rather have on my side. My descriptive powers aren't up to the task of listing her contributions as friend, colleague, confidant. No, Susan, you the man.

My parents made the whole thing possible. My father, Bill Reed, established early the centrality of education in my life, and put a human face on an intimidating process. My mother, Kay Ford, did everything short of toting barges and lifting bales to help me through; her example has alternately impressed and goaded me, and I simply could not have made it without her help.

Of course, the influence of all these people was all to the good, and any failings (failings? failings?) in the text are strictly my own; the inner life is, after all, frequently stupid. Thanks, everyone.

**DEDICATION**

For Norman Ford

*Ol' Buddy*

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## INTRODUCTION

This project isn't what it started out to be. In that sense, it fits its subject perfectly.

In the beginning, this project was about the decline of intermediate institutions, especially political ones, in postwar America. It was an attempt to answer Sombart's famous query -- why is there no socialism in the United States? -- by looking at the cultural preconditions for political participation. Simply put, I was all set to argue that the individuating, isolating, destabilizing forces of late capitalism made effective, sustained oppositional organizing all but impossible. More radically, they constructed a daily life-world in which capitalism reproduced itself without even bothering to justify itself.

I still believe that thesis, and it will crop up repeatedly in this study as a sort of intellectual wallpaper, a silent backdrop. But, in elaborating the thesis through the work of the social critics I examined -- David Riesman, Christopher Lasch, and Richard Sennett, along with their various influences -- I realized I was writing about something else.

Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's protagonist in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, I started to see dim shadows against the wallpaper. Looking closer, the shadows started to look like people; I had to figure out who they were. Why were they there? What did they mean? And what were they trying to

say?

First, the background itself.

My focus on these men was in an effort to explain a paradox. Why, as liberalism and capitalism proceed apace, does political mobilization become more difficult?

Logically, it should get easier. Liberalism, especially as it has evolved over the last fifty years, has carved out a lot of room for activists to organize without state suppression. It is true that the state does not always live up to the law, but it takes a vivid imagination to argue that the state is more suppressive now than it was during the socialist movements of the teens. Capitalism, especially as it has evolved over the last twenty years, has provided plenty of ammunition for activists to use. Income stratification has increased, real wages for working people have been declining, job security is fading, the work week is getting longer for those lucky enough to have work, and the increasing mobility of capital enables owners to finagle confiscatory tax breaks from supplicant cities; by all rights, the workers of the world (or at least of the West) should have united by now. Liberalism provides the opportunity, capitalism the motive.

#### American Exceptionalism

Since the publication of Werner Sombart's classic *Why is There No Socialism in the United States?* in 1906, it has

been a commonplace of social scientific analyses that America is different -- immune, somehow, to the stratification and ideological politics of its various mother countries.<sup>1</sup> Louis Hartz went so far as to claim that America was 'born liberal,' and would presumably grow old liberal and die liberal.<sup>2</sup> Sombart's and Hartz' analyses, while they have been subjected to a storm of minor attacks, have formed the basis for most serious subsequent work on the absence of socialism here.

Hartz' great contribution was his historical frame. He noted, correctly, that the United States never had a landed aristocracy that could be seriously compared to Europe's; in the absence of such a marked elite, class resentment never reached a steady boil. The one arguable instance of a landed aristocracy, the plantation class of the antebellum South, significantly gave birth to the one body of non-liberal political thought in America; Hartz located in John C. Calhoun and Edward Fitzhugh a real, if brief and somewhat bizarre, conservatism.

Land also figured prominently in the famous 'frontier thesis' of the Progressive historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner noted the function of the frontier in American thought; by his account, it worked as a sort of

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<sup>1</sup>Werner Sombart, *Why is There No Socialism in the United States?* New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1976, orig. 1906

<sup>2</sup>Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*. New York: Harvest, 1991, orig. 1955.

safety valve for social pressure. In Europe, most of the good land was already taken. If you were stuck in peasant farming, then, you could resign yourself to your fate, you could move to the city, or you could join a Party. In America, though, the frontier promised good land to the industrious; rather than fighting it out, you lit out for the territories.<sup>3</sup> Through a process Richard Slotkin later termed "regeneration through violence," white Americans could re-enact foundings on new land every generation; the blood they spilled en route sacralized the new order.<sup>4</sup>

### American Exceptionalism, Part II

Whatever the merits of these explanations for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, they clearly fail to apply to the postwar era. Turner worried that we had run out of frontier by the Colombian Exposition of 1893; without a safety valve, we would have to confront the social tensions we had avoided for so long. We haven't picked up an aristocratic heritage retroactively, of course, but the landed aristocracy has not been a potent political

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<sup>3</sup>The phrase is Twain's, from *Huckleberry Finn*.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. It may be worth noting here that the American West provided unparalleled opportunities for what Hannah Arendt termed 'natality,' or the genuinely political act of creation. Notice, however, that Arendt's logic makes the paradox of quietism in America even worse; why would such a supremely political people create such an impoverished politics?

force in Europe since the rise of industrial capitalism. By the end of the Second World War, the New Deal and the new "military-industrial complex" combined to create an unmistakably advanced industrial economy, complete with structural unemployment, class stratification, and a (briefly) burgeoning labor movement.

It is the effect of these conditions that forms the background of my puzzle. Given the exhaustion of the frontier, rapid advances in literacy, communications, and unionization, and the wild increases in productivity characteristic of the time, why didn't class politics emerge as a viable force?

The standard explanations for this take two forms. The first, which is popular on what passes for the American left, stresses McCarthyism and the Red Scare of the early 1950's, and a residual anti-communism that polluted public discourse through the 1980's. By this account, no class-based left could emerge because it was unfairly squelched. The second, which is popular on the American right, denies the premise of the question. Of course the masses never revolted, the conservatives argue -- they didn't need to! *Embourgeoisement*, or the upward class identification that many Americans have of themselves, siphoned off class resentment or, at worst, converted it into self-doubt. Given the openness of a liberal democratic polity, your failure to get rich must reflect your own personal limits; beyond guaranteeing a certain procedural openness, there is

no role for collective action.<sup>5</sup>

These explanations hold some water, but they leave much unanswered. The McCarthyism thesis essentially begs the question. Yes, leftists were singled out for persecution by Roy Cohn and J. Edgar Hoover, but Cohn and Hoover had considerable popular backing. The Red Scare was not simply imposed on unwitting innocents by a bad man from Wisconsin; whatever else may be true of McCarthy, the man was popular enough to cow Eisenhower. The *embourgeoisement* thesis is intuitively more appealing, but it is too vague to be analytically useful. It is certainly far from true that success necessarily breeds complacency; the 'revolution of rising expectations' is a commonplace of comparative political science for a reason. If a particular kind of success breeds complacency, then we need to specify what kind, and how, and why.

#### The Organization Men

David Riesman's early work, of which *The Lonely Crowd* is the most famous and important example, provides a thoughtful and provocative explication of the cultural and

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<sup>5</sup>Of course, as the left never tires of pointing out, corporations are almost pure cases of collective action. By linguistic and legalistic fiat, however, they are considered 'individuals,' with the rights and prerogatives of same; unions have never been accorded the same courtesy. For a solid legal history of the corporation in America, see Scott Bowman, *The Modern Corporation and American Political Thought*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1996.

political fallout of postwar prosperity.<sup>6</sup> It was the first in a series of works, both fiction and nonfiction, written in the 1950's on themes of 'conformism' and the stultifying effects of suburbia.<sup>7</sup> Unlike its frequently banal successors, however, *The Lonely Crowd* grew out of a serious tradition of social thought and bore with it the echoes of an earlier radicalism.

The most famous contribution of *The Lonely Crowd* was its typology of 'social character:' people were tradition-directed, inner-directed, or other-directed. The categories took on lives of their own in popular discourse, often in remarkably shallow ways; Arthur Schlesinger Jr. famously referred to Richard Nixon as 'other-directed' in the 1960 Presidential campaign, in a largely vain effort to draw a meaningful distinction between Nixon and Kennedy. But Riesman's work went beyond a personality quiz.

Riesman assimilated the Marxian psychology of his mentor, Erich Fromm, into an American idiom. In *Escape from Freedom* and *Man for Himself*, Fromm elaborated a philosophical anthropology based on the effects of work on character.<sup>8</sup> For Fromm, character types were divided into

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<sup>6</sup>David Riesman et. al., *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969, orig. 1949.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*. New York: Anchor Books, 1957.

<sup>8</sup>Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon, 1969, orig. 1941; *Man for Himself*. New York: Henry Holt, 1990, orig. 1947.

'productive' and 'unproductive' orientations. Productive types were types favorable to the flourishing of human excellence; unproductive types favored human decline. Most of human history, sadly, had been the tale of the development and renewal of various unproductive types. The task for a progressive social analyst was to specify the changes necessary to allow for the flourishing of human excellences, which Fromm attempted to do in his 1955 book *The Sane Society*.<sup>9</sup>

Riesman adapted Fromm's framework to liberal capitalism by accentuating its individualistic side. He did not completely neglect larger social issues -- he was active in the disarmament movement during the early stages of the cold war -- but the brunt of his work was directed toward sketching a vision of a masculine character type that would transcend the (inevitable) banalities of monopoly capital. Particularly as his career went on, Riesman moved farther away from Fromm's socialism and closer to a theory of history and society that, I will contend, closely parallels Ortega y Gasset's in *The Revolt of the Masses*.<sup>10</sup> Riesman's vision of an 'autonomous' man strikingly resembled Ortega's vision of the aristocratic character; importantly, both assumed that the preferred type could never be more than an

<sup>9</sup>Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*. New York: Henry Holt, 1990, orig. 1955.

<sup>10</sup>Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: Norton, 1993, orig. 1932.

influential minority, a "saving remnant."

Riesman's vision of postwar American masculinity was trenchant and provocative, but ultimately tragic. The autonomous character, as Fromm's work illustrated, needed a particular set of background conditions that modernity was slowly ripping apart. Riesman was wedded to the very conditions that made his ideal impossible; his eventual solution was to retreat to the rarefied air of the academy.

### Men at Work

Christopher Lasch's work followed through on Fromm and Riesman's emphases on autonomy, but from a different angle. From his 1965 *The New Radicalism in America* to his 1995 *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch consistently excoriated groups that he saw as getting away from the ties of community and work.<sup>11</sup> His most famous book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, adapted Freudian terms to his argument, but without significant change.<sup>12</sup> Whether he used Freud or not, he consistently argued that social and political fragmentation in America was rooted, at least in part, in the shift from production to consumption. Consumption gives free reign to the infantile narcissism and dependence that factory

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<sup>11</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*. New York: Norton, 1986, orig. 1965; Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*. New York: Norton, 1995.

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton, 1991, orig. 1979.

discipline (or, better, agricultural discipline) used to beat out of people. Work that is divorced from production, or income that is divorced from work, allows the consumerist tendencies of late capitalism to go unchecked.

In Lasch's work, this theme takes a number of (sometimes strange) variations. He repeatedly attacked feminism, for example, for inadvertently furthering the processes of capitalist 'rationalization.' The 'helping professions' (psychology, sociology, social work) tried to subject more and more functions of the family to outside surveillance and control; the evacuation of the hearth by women aided and abetted the social scientists.<sup>13</sup> In the process, the educative process of parenting was cut short, and parental authority with it. As parental authority came to seem more arbitrary (and, paradoxically, more isolated -- the rise of the suburbs forced greater burdens for intimacy on the family), the left came to attack the family as patriarchal and oppressive. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch applied a conservative reading of Freud to the family to explain the psychic fallout of the demographic shift. By his account, children filled the parental void with idealized images of parents that bore little resemblance to

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<sup>13</sup>Similar arguments came from historians usually identified with other political positions. Michel Foucault, for example, who has been widely identified as a "postmodern" historian, made arguments similar to Lasch's about the "panoptical" tendencies of the new social sciences and helping professions. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* New York: Vintage, 1977; *The History of Sexuality, Part I* New York: Vintage, 1979.

real people. These idealized images, constructed out of infantile fantasy and powered by the excess libidinal energy loosed by the absence of responsibility, were horrific and frequently disabling; unlike real parents, psychic projections are omnipresent and unforgiving. The new age-group segregation of children only exacerbated the perverse idealization of parents; deprived of real adults to observe, children fed each other's fantasies. For Lasch, however, the left attacks on the family simply made a bad problem worse; yes, the family was an empty shell of what it could have been, and perhaps should have been, but it was all the more necessary for that. Without the family, the dynamics of capitalist narcissism would be unimpeded.

Lasch's cultural conservatism coexisted with his economic leftism (which grew more muted in the early 90s) because they shared a root in producerism (or what Lasch, late in life, called 'populism'). Lasch rooted people in communities and in work; parents drew their authority from the practices of parenting and lost their authority when those practices were usurped; industrial workers lost their political autonomy as they lost their workplace autonomy; childhood narcissism continued into adulthood as adults were denied adult responsibilities. The left movements of the sixties reflected the new realities; where previous left movements had at least some tie to the work process, the New Left grew largely out of the universities. His answer, to the extent he had one, was to try to revivify arenas in

which people could engage in meaningful, educative work (such as the alternative town councils he proposed in *The Agony of the American Left*), but even these suggestions dropped out by the seventies.<sup>14</sup>

Lasch's masculine character was independent, autonomous, self-governing, tribal, provincial -- a rural Protestant. He was not Riesman's cosmopolitan urban(e) liberal; tolerance was not one of his virtues. He could be small-minded, even crimped, in his vision of the world, but he was loyal to his friends and his family, and he took part in the governance of his community. He was increasingly threatened by the destabilizing effects of consumer capitalism, among which Lasch included feminism. The place of women was never clear for Lasch; much of the brouhaha occasioned by the publication of *Haven in a Heartless World* stemmed from his confusion over working women.<sup>15</sup> Even his vision of men came to seem increasingly atavistic; by the end of his career, his vision of resistance had given way to a stoic, even heroic, resignation.

#### Once They've Seen Paree...

Richard Sennett shares much of Lasch's analytical

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<sup>14</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*. New York: Vintage, 1969.

<sup>15</sup>Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*. New York: Basic Books, 1979, orig. 1977.

frame, but attempts to reconcile a recognition of the narcissistic tendencies of late capitalism with a recognition of the value of cosmopolitanism. Where Lasch tried to root spiritual discipline in a new Aristotelianism, Sennett contends that it can grow out of a particular kind of urban experience. Unlike Lasch, who traced the process of the invasion of the private by the public, Sennett told the story of the invasion of the public by the private. For Sennett, the decline of the active public life of cities has allowed a species of narcissism to go unchecked.

Sennett's earliest work was a series of attacks on provincialism, which he identified largely with the family-as-haven. *The Uses of Disorder*, for example, is an attack on suburbs in terms similar to those of Lasch and Jane Jacobs.<sup>16</sup> Sennett here traces the outlines of a personality disorder common to adolescents, who try to remake the world in completely familiar images so as to avoid having to come to terms with the unknown. The impulse to handle everything 'cool' is in part a reflection of a fear of real emotional commitment; the impulse to mastery is in part a symptom of a terrible fear of dependence. Sennett argues for the therapeutic benefit of city life -- its constant production of disorder and the foreign forces its inhabitants to learn their own limitations and to confront the limits of mastery.

*The Fall of Public Man*, the work for which Sennett is

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<sup>16</sup>Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder*. New York: Norton, 1992, orig. 1970.

best known, is an extended attack on the cult of authenticity and intimacy.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on Riesman and Lionel Trilling (particularly his *Sincerity and Authenticity*), Sennett argued that real politics, and real sociability generally, requires a "common code of believable appearances."<sup>18</sup> More bluntly, friendship requires distance, including self-distance. This kind of friendship, which is a prerequisite for a political life, was jeopardized when the romantic cult of authenticity combined with popular readings of Freud to suggest that body language, clothing, facial tics and the like represented "involuntary disclosure of character." The belief in deep character (usually called 'personality') finds its way into the workplace through evaluations based on 'potential,' rather than performance; potential can mean anything, but is usually taken to mean an ineffable quality inherent in the individual, discernible through expert scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> Sennett explored the consequences of this development for workers in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, where he traced the processes by which workers come to blame themselves for their standing

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<sup>17</sup>Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopf, 1977.

<sup>18</sup>-----, 44. See also Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

<sup>19</sup>See Warren Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture" in Higham and Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

in the class hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> The triumph of the therapeutic over the political has reached such a point that workers no longer have the vocabulary to express the felt reality of their lives.<sup>21</sup> The effort to get ever farther inside one's own head takes one ever farther from intersubjectivity, even from language itself; getting beyond the mirror stage is an indispensable step in the development of political subjects.

In his later work, Sennett undergoes a revealing shift. The public man of his early work is gradually overwhelmed by the panoply of differences he sees in the city; the citizen gradually becomes the voyeur. In his novels, of which he published three in the 1980's, he explored the attraction to submission nourished by the city. Having shored up one's defenses through the adoption of masks and roles, the temptation to let those defenses down is correspondingly strong. By his most recent work, *Flesh and Stone*, he has given up secular hope altogether, in favor of a vaguely millennial faith.<sup>22</sup> A certain civic indifference, he suggests wistfully, may be the best we can do.

#### Men at Large

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<sup>20</sup>Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Norton, 1992, orig. 1972.

<sup>21</sup>Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, orig. 1966.

<sup>22</sup>Sennett, *Flesh and Stone*. New York: Norton, 1994.

Through these three critics, we can trace certain changes in the social conditions and assumptions that men face, both personally and politically. David Riesman's work, for all of its datedness, outlines in wonderful detail the psychic effects of a certain kind of proletarianization on the middle-class white male. Christopher Lasch offers similar insights for working-class men, and helps us understand the increasingly strained relations between working-class men and what passes for the American left. Richard Sennett glimpses the attractions of a sort of fin-de-siecle decadence, a postmodernism of the streets, but is honest enough to show both the effective limits and the dangerous attractions of that strategy.

In my conclusion, I offer some speculations of my own. I start by revisiting the premises of the earlier critics, to see which of their assumptions no longer hold descriptively; I then examine the possible consequences of these changes. For example, Berle and Means' famous analysis of the separation of ownership from control in the modern corporation (which was later popularized and expanded by John Kenneth Galbraith) figured centrally in Riesman's sociology.<sup>23</sup> For Riesman (and, more explicitly, for Galbraith), the relative autonomy of management from the demands of the marketplace had a two-pronged effect. At one

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<sup>23</sup>Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967, orig. 1932.

level, it promoted a vapid conformism to the norms of corporate culture; in the absence of a clear standard of performance, style became by default the criterion for promotion. More positively, however, the relative autonomy of the managerial sector afforded an opportunity (however frequently neglected) for managers to cultivate a more humanistic personality. Whether that meant a withdrawal from politics, as Riesman implied, or mobilization into a constituency of conscience, as Galbraith preferred, was ultimately unimportant; the salient fact was that managers were able to enjoy a freedom unimaginable in the earlier, more predatory phase of capital accumulation. That managerial freedom, oddly, boded well for unions specifically and workers generally, as managers who did not have direct property interests were often willing to trade 'economic rent' in wages for labor peace and uninterrupted production.

This form of management autonomy no longer exists. Impressionistically, we all know this; the 'good corporate citizen' rhetoric of the 1950's sounds odd to 1990's listeners, who have grown accustomed to the language of 'lean and mean.' Explanations for the increasing brutality of the market are, fittingly, cheap and plentiful -- the rise of Japan, the introduction of the computer, the decline of union membership, and the recovery of Europe from the

devastation of the war are some of the most popular.<sup>24</sup> Without taking issue with any of these, I want to offer another that speaks more directly to the paradigm Berle and Means elaborated.

In *Federalist #10*, James Madison wrote that the best means to control the evils of faction, to render them harmless, is to multiply factions.<sup>25</sup> When power is dispersed into enough hands, it cancels itself out. Hence, for the central government to control such a large country, it had to allow many factions to flourish; that way, no one faction could get in the way. This was, roughly speaking, the condition the stock market presented to corporate managers. With ownership divided among thousands of individual stockholders who each spoke separately, it was exceptionally difficult for them to exert pressure on boards of directors. In the past ten years, however, ownership has re-concentrated. Institutional investors, particularly in the form of mutual funds, have become the new vehicle of choice for stockholders; their share of the total floating stock has soared. Unlike separate investors, mutual funds can exert concerted pressure, because a mutual fund can speak with a single voice. The winnowing of factions into fewer and larger ones has shifted power to those that

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<sup>24</sup>For an interesting, if ultimately unconvincing, contrarian interpretation of these developments, see David Gordon, *Fat and Mean*. New York: Free Press, 1995.

<sup>25</sup>James Madison et. al., *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Penguin, 1961, orig. 1787.

remain; where thousands of separate investors may be essentially powerless to stop management, a single mutual fund can bring a board to heel with dizzying speed.<sup>26</sup> In other words, with the rise of institutional investors, the distinction between ownership and control has started to collapse.

We are only beginning to see the fallout from this reaction. Managers have been forced once again to tend to short-term (often extremely short-term) profitability at the expense of almost all other considerations, but not in the same way they did in the nineteenth century. Prior to the depression, management (at least top management) owned its own companies. After the war, ownership and control bifurcated, with ownership sufficiently dispersed to allow the managers considerable wiggle room. Recently, however, ownership has reasserted its prerogatives through mutual funds and institutional investors. Managers, now, face a bind they have never faced before. They are reunited with the profit motive, but the profits are not their own. Their wiggle room, their autonomy, has evaporated, as they have come to serve goals dictated from outside.

I expect the social and political ramifications to be double-edged, both bad. Managers now are forced to adopt a radically capitalist perspective, but they are placed in the

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<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Dana Wechsler Linden and Nancy Rotenier, "Good-bye to Berle and Means," *Forbes*, January 3, 1994, pp. 100-103.

position of labor. The radical bifurcation of consciousness and social position forced upon managers now resonates throughout our politics. Leftists have traditionally bemoaned the lack of working-class consciousness among American workers; some of Sennett's best work addressed exactly that. What is new here, though, is the institutional incentive for that bifurcation. Where once managers could more or less opt out of the more predatory elements of the rat race in favor of more congenial pursuits and still keep their jobs, now they are forced to learn and practice habits of thought that directly contradict their own life situations. They are forced to think like capitalists while living as workers. Galbraith's 'conscience constituency,' always a shade overdrawn, has simply vanished. The 'organization man' of yore is too slow and good-natured for contemporary market conditions; we are told ad nauseum that the average worker should expect to switch careers five to seven times before retirement, to say nothing of switching companies.

These institutional incentives have gone beyond the workplace. With the increasingly successful siege on the welfare state and the grim truths of demographics, it is becoming less clear that Social Security and other benefit programs will provide for a satisfactory retirement. Workers with real income, therefore, are being compelled to invest in mutual funds and similar vehicles to fill in the gaps; such investment, of course, however individually

rational, simply furthers the stranglehold of institutional investors over companies, and contributes to the attack on the social welfare state.<sup>27</sup>

What effects will these new developments have on politics and character? While it is fatuous (if tempting) to predict the future, we can see the outlines of certain trends already developing. One relatively obvious trend has been the growth in privately-held, small, new firms -- the 'entrepreneur' may be as much a slave to the marketplace as the corporate underling, but at least his interest is actually his own. At the political level, we see a spike in symbolic politics -- issues like abortion, gays in the military, and affirmative action. There have always been symbolic issues in American politics, of course, but what is new is that all politics is becoming symbolic. The decreasing power of the state vis-a-vis the marketplace is forcing politics into an ever-smaller corner. Other than prison construction, which is rationalized on other grounds, the state is getting out of the Keynesian business of demand-stimulation.<sup>28</sup> Its realm of efficacy has dwindled to

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<sup>27</sup>In a fitting turn of the screw, two of the largest institutional investors in the United States are pension funds for workers in eleemosynary institutions -- TIAA-CREF, which represents academics, and CALPERS, which represents public employees in California. In the name of protecting members' retirement benefits, nonprofits may be sowing the seeds of their own destruction.

<sup>28</sup>For a wonderful, thought-provoking discussion of the spread of the 'carceral' in modern America, with a particular focus on Los Angeles, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*. New York: Vintage, 1991.

the symbolic. Where Gusfield and Edelman could discuss symbolic politics as a distraction from or justification for real political interests, we have recently witnessed the desiccation of real political interests.<sup>29</sup> As the realm of efficacy of the state has shrunk, its need for petty displays of masculine power has grown; we may be helpless to raise wages or even clear up traffic, but we can get tough (note the language) on welfare mothers.

Again, a bifurcation. As the state has grown less capable of acting as a viable economic force, it has grown more belligerent in asserting its potency in other ways. I would expect this split to widen with time; indeed, the tragedy of the current generation (the so-called 'Generation X') may be that we've lost any awareness of one half of the split. Politics is purely symbolic, and it is hard for us to believe that it was ever any other way. As institutional investors increasingly have their way with the economy, both individuals and the public sector are reduced to compensatory reactions.

The picture I have sketched here is bleak. As the opportunities for real autonomy shrink, the compensatory belligerence of symbolic masculinity increases; the future as *Blade Runner*. This picture of the future is congenial for institutional investors and certain forms of

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<sup>29</sup>See Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964; Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1964.

libertarianism, but unremittingly hostile to social democratic movements and the development of a less depraved, more integrated masculinity.

It follows from the analysis offered here that the development of a more integrated masculinity requires a more congenial political and economic background. I confess little hope on this front; it is difficult to envision an effective oppositional movement that is also non-belligerent. The closest thing, barring a systemic collapse that throws everything up for grabs, may be a revivified labor movement. Labor unions represent working people as workers, rather than consumers; they allow for a masculine character both assertive and inclusive. They can, when all goes well, exert meaningful counterpressure against management; whether they can exert meaningful counterpressure against the marketplace more broadly remains to be seen. They can teach, through practice, the virtue of resolve in the face of likely defeat -- a classic masculine virtue that has been utterly devalued.

Whether the future lies with unions, capital, or some unforeseen third force is, of course, far beyond my ken. What I can hope to offer, through a close examination of three of the more thoughtful social critics America has produced in the last fifty years, is a piece of the puzzle. The answer will have to wait.

### Abundance Reconsidered:

#### David Riesman and the Wages of Liberalism

With the publication of *The Lonely Crowd* in 1949 and *Individualism Reconsidered* in 1954, David Riesman became one of the best-known and most widely-read social critics in America.<sup>1</sup> He made the cover of *Time* magazine, spawned a certified best-seller, and introduced new terms ('inner-directed,' 'other-directed') into popular parlance. His fans and students included the likes of Lionel Trilling, William Whyte, Arthur Schlesinger, Nathan Glazer, and even Richard Sennett. The problems of which he wrote in his heyday received tremendous attention in both the scholarly and popular arenas; somehow, he had struck a nerve.

In this chapter I will examine Riesman's major theoretical works (particularly from his heyday, the late 40s through the 60s), and will suggest that he embraced the preconditions for the developments he disowned. While part of Riesman's popular appeal probably derived from the fluency of his prose (a genuine rarity among social scientists, alas), I will suggest that a major factor in his appeal was his very ambivalence. By stopping short of the potentially radical conclusions his observations logically

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<sup>1</sup>David Riesman with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969, orig. 1949. Hereafter referred to as LC. David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1954. Hereafter referred to as IR.

entailed, Riesman was able to be both critical and safe.

This is obviously a serious charge. When I interviewed Riesman in Winchester, Massachusetts, in 1994, I suggested to him that there was an unmistakably radical undercurrent to *The Lonely Crowd* that reminded me of the Frankfurt School. Bear in mind that he was in his late eighties at the time, physically frail, softspoken, and courtly; he jumped forward in his chair and bellowed 'NO!' As the interview went on, we became more comfortable with each other and he assured me that he bore no animus; still, he felt compelled to mention that when he first approached Erich Fromm about working with him, he insisted that Fromm check his Marxism at the door.

Riesman was clearly right, at one level; by my reading, he is not, nor has he ever been, a Marxist. He is a self-identified liberal who has been active in the anti-nuclear movement and who has moved comfortably in the corridors of Harvard. What I will suggest, instead, is that his liberalism stands in tension with the philosophic underpinnings evident in *The Lonely Crowd* and some of his later essays. His concept of 'social character,' which he borrowed from his mentor and analyst, Erich Fromm, carries a humanist baggage that stands in tension with his mechanistic vision of modern capitalism. Fromm saw the tension, and penned books like *The Sane Society* in which he diagnosed the

tension and prescribed (however vaguely) a cure.<sup>2</sup> Riesman's 'cure,' to the extent that he suggested one, fell far short of addressing the problem; rather, he chose to evade the problem through a fantasy-projection of a masculinity capable of transcending its surroundings. The limitations of this move were obvious, but, given Riesman's loyalty to the conditions that vitiated his masculine ideal, it was simply the best he could do.

By examining critically the terms of discussion he set, we can discover the roots of much contemporary social thought and, perhaps, begin to trace the outlines of the circles in which we keep spinning.

To understand *The Lonely Crowd*, we need first to examine its predecessors. While Riesman was an admirer of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and had inherited some of Tocqueville's concern with the tyranny of public opinion, I will propose that Riesman's work is more fruitfully understood as a bridge between two twentieth-century Europeans. *The Lonely Crowd* is a provocative, readable blend of Erich Fromm's *Man for Himself* and Jose Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*. New York: Henry Holt, 1990, orig. 1955.

<sup>3</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. New York: Mentor, 1984. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*. New York: Henry Holt, 1990, orig. 1947. Hereafter referred to as MH. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: Norton, 1993, orig. 1932. Hereafter referred to as

### Escape from Frankfurt

In the short term, its immediate forerunners were Erich Fromm's famous works, *Escape from Freedom* and *Man for Himself*.<sup>4</sup> Although his most important intellectual affinity was probably the one with the Frankfurt School, Fromm was known in America as one of the 'sociological revisionists' of Freud, along with Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan. The sociological revisionists held, in their various ways, that Freud overstated the importance of early childhood experiences; they held that adult experience could still effect dramatic changes. By writing situational pathologies onto the psyche itself, they held, Freud naturalized neuroses that are, in principle, avoidable. Once the psyche is linked analytically to the broader society, from family structure to political economy, it becomes possible to envision changes in that psyche.

*Escape from Freedom*, which was published in 1941, is a psychological explanation of how it is that some of the most 'modern,' advanced societies in the world could fall prey to fascism. By Fromm's reading, the fascist temptation was a symptom of a larger anxiety in the general population brought on by the accelerating rate of social change. Fromm elaborated a philosophical anthropology (that would pop up

<sup>4</sup>Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon, 1969, orig. 1941. Hereafter referred to as EF.

remarkably unchanged in *The Lonely Crowd*) that assumed that people are drawn to fixed, legible social roles. We can mark epochs in history by reference to these roles which, in turn, derive eventually from the mode of production. In an agricultural economy, for example, most people are fated to be farmers. They know their fate from birth, and they come to accept it; they develop ways of seeing the world that assume the viewpoint of the farmer. They construct themselves as farmers, and live farmers' lives.

So far, so good. The rub is when people who see themselves as farmers are thrown off the land. The expectations and identities they had formed over decades have suddenly been rendered problematic; large families, for example, make much less sense in cities than on farms. In the absence of larger, structural explanations and sources of comfort, people internalize the anxieties of change. This anxiety, which Fromm saw becoming more common with the accelerating pace of change, manifested itself in a number of different ways. One was Durkheim's famous 'anomie,' in which people surrender to the forces of the world, abdicating moral judgment and adopting a pure instrumentalism that rules ethics out of bounds.

Another, and the one that worried Fromm, was a longing for a parental figure who could restore the sense of security and legibility dimly remembered from childhood. Strong, romantic political leaders, such as Hitler, could displace the blame for frightening changes onto a vulnerable

'Other,' and could consolidate their own power by rallying the troops against the Other. By elaborating grotesque dreams of past political glory, they could shift people's attention (which they desperately wanted shifted) from their own lives to the fate of the state.

By this reading, fascism is not simply a hiccup on the road to modern enlightenment. Rather, it is a predictable side effect that threatens to overwhelm its own cause. We can expect to see variations on fascism repeatedly, wherever the structural preconditions (the emergence of a rapidly changing mass society) hold.

Fromm's book was unexpectedly popular in America, in part because Americans expanded the thesis to include communism. By the American reading, *Escape from Freedom* was about the dangers of weakness on the part of manly entrepreneurs; if we fail to bear the burdens of freedom, the line went, we will entrap ourselves in an overweening State. Indeed, the discursive links between the welfare state and femininity revealed themselves, not merely in the construction of the welfare mother, but in the construction of social democrats as effeminate, ineffectual, and secretly homosexual; it is instructive that Senator McCarthy charged people with homosexuality more often than he charged them with being communists.<sup>5</sup> Ayn Rand's Howard Roark, while

<sup>5</sup>On McCarthy and homosexuality, see John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988, chapter 12. For a broader discussion of the discursive links between anti-communism and masculinity, see

obviously exaggerated, stood as a firm rebuke to the life-denying forces of 'statism.'

Fromm meant nothing of the kind; his later works took great pains to explain his distaste for the exploitation of people and nature that he saw as concomitant to corporate capitalism. Rather, Fromm suggested a smaller-scale form of democratic socialism, in which citizens could take control of the concrete conditions of their own lives. Socialism was not a form of surrender, for Fromm; indeed, it was the polar opposite. Through the collective, democratic control of economic life, people could start to develop their powers of self-reliance.<sup>6</sup> Feelings of powerlessness in capitalist societies were rational responses to an irrational situation; rather than naturalizing them or explaining them away, we should take them as signposts on the path of progress. Where his erstwhile colleague Theodor Adorno, in *The Authoritarian Personality*, read subjective powerlessness as a sign of an underlying fascistic temperament, Fromm

Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983) and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

"Society must master the social problem as rationally as it has mastered nature [!]. One condition for this is the elimination of the secret rule of those who, though few in number, wield great economic power without any responsibility to those whose fate depends on their decisions. We may call this new order by the name of democratic socialism but the name does not matter; all that matters is that we establish a rational economic system serving the purposes of the people...Only in a planned economy in which the whole nation has mastered the economic and social forces can the individual share responsibility and use creative intelligence in his work." Fromm, EF, 299.

attempted to address the concrete conditions under which they made sense.<sup>7</sup> For Fromm, individual feelings could be symptoms of larger social pathologies.

In his next book, *Man for Himself*, Fromm elaborated the psychological typology that underlay the previous book. Here he introduced his notion of 'social character.' Social character, by his definition, was the character type most common in a given society.<sup>8</sup> He held that societies construct the characters they need (a cynic might say, get the characters they deserve), so that, most of the time, the dominant character type will correspond to the mode of production. Character types change more slowly than technology does, though, and the problem of cultural 'lag' is increasingly common.

Fromm divided human 'character' into two major categories, with a series of subcategories. The important divide is between 'productive' and 'unproductive' orientations, which he defined loosely as the divide between habits favorable to the flourishing of human excellence and habits favorable to human decline. He contended, following Aristotle, that psychology could not properly be divorced from ethics; accordingly, the psychologist had to inquire into habits of daily life and the nature of the good life. To make this more concrete (Fromm was never terribly

<sup>7</sup>Theodor Adorno et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York, Norton, 1982, orig. 1950.

<sup>8</sup>Fromm, MF, 60.

concrete), we can look at his notion of 'virtue.' Aristotle defined the 'virtue' of an object as the attainment of its highest function; the virtue of the acorn is to become an oak tree. The virtue of the man, for Fromm, is the pursuit of his own excellences, which he locates in love and work.<sup>9</sup> Both love and work are ways of engaging the world through activity; Fromm would expand on the former in *The Art of Loving*.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, people are able to follow their natural course, which is growth.

A productive notion of virtue, then, is one that locates virtue in the pursuit of fulfillment through engagement with the world by one's highest faculties, resulting in personal growth. An unproductive notion of virtue, which should strike modern readers as familiar, instead equates virtue with self-denial. Self-denial can take many forms, from the relatively obvious case of martyrdom (which at least has a larger cause for an excuse) to the much more common case of consumerist materialism. In whatever form, unproductive notions of virtue share a

<sup>9</sup>Significantly, Fromm assumed a basic equality of human types, which Aristotle did not. Thus, Fromm's attention to 'potentia' led him to advocate a radically egalitarian society, where Aristotle's notion of 'potentia' led him to embrace (and, indeed, to naturalize) a hierarchy of thinkers, workers, and slaves. Note also that Fromm's version of virtue is essentially private; man is not a political animal, except for those men who make politics their work. I am indebted to W. Carey McWilliams for this observation.

<sup>10</sup>Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper & Row, 1956.

frustration of the natural tendency towards growth; following Nietzsche, Fromm suggested that frustrated energy turns inward, curdles, and deforms the self.

He located several variations on nonproductive orientations, which he correlated roughly to different stages in the mode of production in the West. Prior to the 18th century, the "receptive" orientation was dominant; people were apt simply to submit to received norms and to accept their lot in life. With the rise of a capitalist economy in the 18th and 19th centuries, the "exploitative" and "hoarding" orientations became more common. The first may be caricatured as the Robber Baron, the second as Scrooge. Both types rejected the place-bound traditions of their ancestors, in favor of a cosmology of money. They defined themselves in the terms of the cash-nexus; like Scrooge, they found it hard to imagine life outside the ledger books. The shift from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism in the first half of the twentieth century precipitated a new character, the "marketing" orientation. Given the size and division of labor of the new companies, it became more important for people to learn to fit in. The marketer had no essential self; his only criterion of value, crudely, was exchange value. Unlike the exploiter or hoarder, though, he did not try to remake the world in his own image. Rather, he confronted the world as a found fact, more powerful than he, and submitted to it. He learned to sell himself, and gradually forgot that there was any

alternative.

These ideal-types were obviously overdrawn, and Fromm conceded some limitations. Still, the storyline is perceptible: as the forces that made the world 'go' became more abstract, people's sense of placement in the world became more ephemeral. By the twentieth century, they had forgotten that they had selves to place.

A productive orientation, by contrast, would reject the false idols of consumerism in favor of truer fulfillment in spontaneous (that is, unforced) love and work. Such efforts would require tremendous political and economic change; sane people can only flourish in a *Sane Society*.

Riesman was Fromm's patient, student, and collaborator during the writing of *Man for Himself*; he even proofread drafts of the work before it was published. Still, in his own work, Riesman took Fromm's typology in a different and less threatening direction. To understand fully the nature of the shift, we need to look at the influence of Ortega y Gasset.

#### Dark Forebodings, Part I

The link to Ortega y Gasset is less obvious, but equally important. In his famous diatribe *The Revolt of the Masses*, written in 1932, Ortega argued that the 'rise' in the 'historical level' of society was a double-edged sword. Ortega took an unapologetically "aristocratic" view of

history, though he defined aristocracy in terms of character, as opposed to social position. The aristocratic character is marked by the ability to sacrifice present pleasures for future goods; he combines strength with restraint. The mass man, by contrast, has no consciousness of the reality of the passage of time; the world, to him, is an eternal present. History disappears, or, what is the same thing, is judged solely by the standards of the present; the future is merely hypothetical. The mass man's life is directionless, since direction implies movement over time; his "life lacks any purpose, and simply goes drifting along."<sup>11</sup>

There have always been both types in society, of course, but modernity has brought a twist. Always have the aristocrats been given their due, even if that didn't always entail political power. The novelty of modernity is the new brashness of the masses; "not that the vulgar believes itself super-excellent and not vulgar, but that the vulgar proclaims and imposes the rights of vulgarity, or vulgarity as a right."<sup>12</sup> The masses have lost any sense of their own limits, and thereby any sense of the entitlements of nobility. Authority devolves into force, at the level of the state, or mass opinion, at the level of civil society. It lacks any grounding of its own, since real authority

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<sup>11</sup>Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt*, 49.

<sup>12</sup>-----, 70.

requires sacrifice, and the mass man is incapable of imagining anything worth sacrifice.

Again, it is important not to misread Ortega's notion of aristocracy. He does not mean landed gentry, or a ruling political caste; he held no illusions as to the character traits of the long-inbred. The aristocrats of his tale are aristocrats of the spirit, men who recognize excellence and who strive to achieve it through disciplining themselves to external, impersonal forms. The distinction explains how Ortega could move from such an unapologetically elitist conception of society to an embrace of liberal democracy in politics. Liberal democracy, to him, embodied the aristocratic character; liberal citizens make the sacrifices of tolerating diversity. Liberalism calls on citizens to deny their own affective tendencies towards tribalism, nepotism, violence; it cultivates a respect for the rule of law, even when the ruler is a transparent idiot. Perhaps more importantly, it also allowed for the freer, fuller expression of natural inequalities; aristocrats of the soul were not fettered by low birth in a liberal society.

Though he denied that he was outlining or assuming a theory of history, Ortega's tale has a clear historical direction. Mass man embraces a vision of progress drawn from 'technicism.' Technicism is a sort of vulgarized materialism; efficiency at production becomes a goal in itself, and improvements in efficiency are thought to be their own justification. Such a worldview denies both

direction (in the sense of directing production towards one thing and away from another) and a sense of limits. We experience, simultaneously, a material levelling-up and a cultural levelling-down. Unlike Fromm, Ortega did not foresee a happy ending; rather, Ortega feared the preconditions had fallen into place for a tyranny of productivity.

### Crossroads

Ortega's story is closer to Fromm's than either would have been likely to admit. They shared a sense of a break from the past caused by industrialism, and they also shared an uneasiness about the direction (or lack thereof) of the newly prosperous and powerful masses. Both expressed the new dangers through theories of social character (Fromm's term), and both tried valiantly to protect a space for vigorous cultural and political criticism. The important difference, for present purposes, is in the future direction each saw. Ortega saw a continuing cultural decadence and sense of 'drift,' and feared the tyranny of the vulgar, both through public opinion and through the state. Fromm saw the same dangers, but, through the miracles of dialectics, also saw the preconditions for a humane democratic socialism. In Ortega's telling, it is difficult to envision a way that improved productivity could lead to a higher cultural level; for Fromm, it was simply a question of control. Fromm's

faith in the power of habits and the general benevolence of humanity allowed him to envision (however vaguely) a world in which the masses could gradually learn to govern themselves, both politically and economically.

Riesman was torn between the two. While his debts to Fromm are obvious, deep, and freely acknowledged, his debts to Ortega are subtler and more problematic. Particularly in *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman shows an affinity for Ortega's aristocratic character. Riesman's autonomous man, like Ortega's aristocrat, is not tied to a particular social class, and is not a mere symptom of his times. Much of Riesman's more directly political writing of the period, especially that on contemporary conservatism, painted the lower middle class as Ortega's masses. More importantly, the minimalist political liberalism and pronounced cultural elitism of Ortega's framework vitiated the progressive tendencies that were so striking in Fromm. Riesman tried to split the difference through a halfhearted embrace of New Deal liberalism, but the lingering elitism of his framework (which he shared with his friends and colleagues Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer) eventually overwhelmed his sense of possibility.

#### The Bestseller

*The Lonely Crowd* was a paradoxical book, one that could

not explain its own popularity. It quickly became one of the most widely-read and -cited works of its time (published in 1949), and is still cited frequently in intellectual histories of the period. It inaugurated a slew of theoretical tracts (*The Organization Man*), novels (*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*), and plays (*The Crucible*) on themes of 'conformity' and alienation.

Its analysis became so widely accepted and cited, in fact, that we may forget just how striking it was in its original form. For all the cant to which it gave aid and comfort, *The Lonely Crowd* is an astonishingly good book. In the section that follows, I will give a brief summary of its major claims. I will then turn to critique.

Borrowing heavily from Fromm, Riesman started with a brief elaboration of the shifts over time in the predominant mode of production. As Fromm had in *Man for Himself*, Riesman established three major stages: agricultural, industrial, and 'post-industrial.' In a quixotic move that he later disowned, Riesman also tied modes of production to rates of population growth. Agricultural and post-industrial societies grow slowly, he argued, but industrial societies grow rapidly. The argument might have been more compelling had it not been written three years into the postwar baby boom.

In any event, the acceleration of growth in the industrial period brings with it an acceleration of social change. The more or less predictable life of the agrarian

society gives way to a much more fluid existence, in which one's future role is frequently obscure. Tradition is not as useful a guide to life under industrial conditions as it had been in the past. Consequently, over time, a new character type emerges. The 'tradition-directed' character of agrarian times gives way to the 'inner-directed' character.

"Inner-direction" can be a misleading term. Riesman did not suggest that mores are autochthonous; rather, that they are internalized, often in abstract form, at a very early age, and frozen for life. The inner-directed sort resembles Weber's Protestant merchant; he can be ruthless in the imposition of his will on the world precisely because he believes, strongly, that his will has the sanction of moral rectitude.

Unlike Fromm, Riesman was willing to sketch what this process looked like in concrete terms. One element of the historical shift was the increased role of 'privacy' in the home. With the advent of the Victorian notions of childhood innocence and separate spheres, children lost the chance to see their parents as flesh-and-blood role models. They did not get to see the disjunctions between their parents' ideals and their actions; ideals took on a life of their own.

Increasing literacy rates had a complementary effect; as Riesman put it, "to be alone with a book was to be alone

in a new way."<sup>13</sup> Books brought ideas to the home from outside; children reading gained access to worlds beyond anything their parents offered. Books offer sustained visions, sustained ideas; they teach, indirectly, that ideas are bigger than single conversations. Like parental pronouncements, they are disembodied, but unlike parental pronouncements, they draw on spheres of life far beyond parental experience. In a subtle way, books are subversive. They "give children ideas;" they expose children, indirectly, to aspects of life their parents would just as soon keep hidden.

As a consequence, Riesman suggested, ideals take on a reality that experience does not and cannot. A new sort of 'moralism' is uniquely appropriate in a society characterized by inner-direction. This was the age of the great political ideologies -- single-taxers, fascists, socialists, anarchists -- and such ideologies required a level of attention and openness to sustained argument. They required, in other words, a willingness to interpret politics through a consciously acquired lens; they required people to take ideas seriously. Inner-directed characters think such an attitude less strange than their forebears had, or their descendants would; they grew accustomed to taking ideas seriously as children. They were readers, and they developed the mental habits of readers.

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<sup>13</sup>Riesman, LC, 96.

Again, Riesman's tale here is clearly overdrawn -- many of the great 'ideological' movements drew on mainly uneducated followers -- but the error is of degree, not kind. The language of nineteenth and early twentieth century political movements in America partook unmistakably of a moralism (often misplaced) that seems vaguely surreal now. Progressives, ironically enough, were often the most pronounced moralists. To declare that one's opponents are merely symptoms of 'cultural lag' is to insult those opponents profoundly. In any event, the willingness to participate in politics based on ideas (which, in turn, could lead to a willingness to support parties, as opposed to candidates) allowed a panoply of proposals to see the light of day that would not have before or since.

By the early twentieth century, the conditions that had favored the inner-directed character had changed, particularly in the major urban centers. As many subsequent historians have noted, the mode of production underwent a striking shift. Small, independent entrepreneurship began to decline in the face of large-scale, relatively entrenched corporations. More tellingly, as Berle and Means famously suggested, ownership (in the form of stockholding) was gradually separated from control; 'management' became a skill unto itself, functionally distinct from investment. The great population migration into cities and the rise of the corporation (particularly the services-based corporation, such as a bank or an insurance company) changed

the social climate.

This change took a number of forms, but Riesman suggested an effective common thread underlying them. Put simply, this new environment rewarded a different set of personality traits than the previous one had. Success in the nineteenth century depended on drive, risk-taking, self-sacrifice, saving, and a fierce streak of independence; success in the twentieth depended on easy-goingness, risk aversion, friendliness, spending, and an affinity for the group.

Gradually the implications of this shift made their way through the culture. Educators, for example, started grading students on 'social adjustment'; parents slowly surrendered control to schools and nascent peer-groups; the 'helping professions' invested social norms with the authority of science. As Riesman put it, in this new setting, fitting in was more useful than standing out. Hence, the 'other-directed' character.

The 'other-directed' character takes his moral and behavioral bearings from his environment and his peers. In contrast to his 'inner-directed' forebears, he is wary of grand ideas or ideologies, wary of abstractions. He uses radar, rather than a gyroscope; there is very little consistency in his personality as he moves from one setting to the next. Such a character is ill-suited to carving civilization out of the wilderness or bending mountains to his will, but he fits a sales force perfectly. He takes

orders well, and it seldom occurs to him to question them. He prefers consensus to confrontation, and will happily surrender his own preferences if they don't harmonize with the group's.

The other-directed character, who takes ideas less seriously, sees the political world differently. In keeping with his tendency to take his bearings from the 'personalities' around him,<sup>14</sup> the other-directed adopts the standpoint of the 'inside-dopester.' In contrast to 'moralizers,' 'inside-dopesters' attend to personalities and processes. Structural forces, which seem abstract if you aren't directly inside them, fade to invisibility; men make history under circumstances seemingly of their own choosing. Politics, to them, is about who did what, but not about why.<sup>15</sup>

In concrete terms, the new 'inside-dopester' orientation flourished for a number of reasons. The decline of party newspapers and their replacement with nominally 'objective' mass market papers created a demand for putatively 'neutral' political coverage.<sup>16</sup> Radio allowed

<sup>14</sup>Warren Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth Century Culture" in Higham and Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

<sup>15</sup>The locus classicus of this position, of course, is Harold Lasswell's *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1936.

<sup>16</sup>Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

politicians to communicate directly with voters, bypassing the party apparatus -- FDR's 'fireside chats' were astonishingly effective at calling attention to his 'first-rate temperament.' Progressive-era attacks on party apparati proved effective, at least in the sense of empowering candidates as against party bosses. Finally, of course, the Red Scare that followed the First World War made it dangerous to espouse anything too radical; no less a figure than Eugene Debs found himself in jail. Socialists, communists, syndicalists, Wobblies, radical unionists, and anarchists faced new levels of state repression; given a lack of programmatic alternatives, a personalistic politics fills a void.

'Inside-dopesters' both reflected and contributed to a decline in public participation in politics. The gradual linkage of politics and celebrity (which reached its apotheosis with Ronald Reagan) could happen, in part, because the citizenry started to behave more like an audience. Rather than attempting to maneuver elites for their own purposes, which had been notoriously tricky in the past, citizens started to view elites as colorful, interesting, but essentially different, essentially separate. Elites were to be followed, applauded or booed, but not manipulated, and rarely joined. Personality mattered in a way that ideas did not. The terms of political debate employed by inside-dopesters turn on a level of inside knowledge and familiarity that few can

expect to have. Even if they do have it, they can't do anything about it; I might be able to change my party's platform, but my candidate's personality simply is what it is.

Despite the newly exclusive focus on elites, Riesman denied C. Wright Mills' thesis that an 'interlocking directorate' of the 'power elite' ran the country.<sup>17</sup> To the contrary, Riesman asserted, the polity was comprised of an ever-expanding number of 'veto groups,' each of which has the power to block policy but does not have the power to dictate it. The inside-dopester's focus on personality in politics was misleading, then, in that it vested individuals with more power than they actually had; the truth of American politics, at this stage, was that nobody could get much done. The system could run itself, and the mutually offsetting actions of self-interested groups would keep things stable. The new glamour attaching to political celebrities was itself a symptom of their growing irrelevance, by Riesman's analysis, just as the new glamour attaching itself to movie stars reflected the declining role of theater in everyday life. Riesman's psychological terms of inquiry remained at the level of types, rather than

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<sup>17</sup>C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 8. The Riesman/Mills debate was, for a time, one of the most well-known debates in American sociology; Mills was the hero of the New Left, Riesman of the Cold War liberals. Their personal styles were also quite different: Riesman was the cosmopolitan, urbane *homo academicus*, where Mills was known to take target practice in other people's living rooms.

individuals; in the grand scheme of things, individuals were too fleeting and powerless to matter much.

As abstract as it is, Riesman's framework allows us to explain a paradox of American politics. Political scientists have noted that the likelihood that a given individual will vote increases with his level of education; people with graduate degrees vote at higher rates than people with high-school diplomas. The average educational level in America has climbed dramatically since the turn of the century, with the development of mandatory public high schools and affordable public universities and colleges. Yet voter participation has not increased; if anything, it peaked at the turn of the century and has declined since. How do we explain this? Increased levels of education hit first in urban, upper-income areas, precisely where the demand for 'other-direction' was highest. Schools took their cue from their environs; if parents, experts, and employers called for greater emphasis on 'people skills,' then that was exactly what schools did. The nature of education changed.

The most effective parts of *The Lonely Crowd*, in fact, are Riesman's detailed analyses of the ways that concern for 'people skills' structures the lifeworld of young children, especially in school. American public schools actually started offering courses in 'life adjustment,' and grading students on their ability to work in groups. Students learned both intentional and unintentional lessons; stories

like Tootle the Engine taught the virtues of mindless conformity.

Tootle was a child locomotive who wanted to grow up to be a streamliner. He spent his time in train school, learning to stop at red flags and to stay on the tracks at all times. One day he discovered the joys of going off the tracks; birds and flowers and grass were fun! His teacher noticed, and the teacher called a meeting (!) of all the trains in town to discuss Tootle's new habit. The adult trains set up a trap for Tootle. The next time he went off the tracks, they surrounded him with red flags. He stopped and started and stopped and got terribly confused, until he saw his teacher, smiling, with a green flag on the tracks. Tootle returned to the tracks, relieved, where he was welcomed and accepted with smiles all around. There was no punishment, because there was no need for any; conformity was its own reward.

From Riesman's exegesis of such disparate phenomena, the reader came away with a distinct impression that the arrival of the other-directed character was long in coming, and probably long in lasting. For better or worse, probably worse, we were stuck with him.

#### Look, Up in the Sky!

Happily, the conditions that gave rise to the other-directed character also made possible a more congenial sort,

the 'autonomous' character. Riesman's portrait here was sketchier; in a sense, he combined the best of the inner- and other-directed. Autonomous characters may or may not conform; their defining trait is that they "are capable of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society...but are free to choose whether to conform or not."<sup>18</sup> Such characters may resemble their other-directed colleagues, but with a redeeming edge of self-consciousness. They cannot be reduced to their occupations or their demographics; at any given point, they are capable of lighting out for the territories, even if they probably won't.

The major positive recommendations of *The Lonely Crowd* address ways to remove "obstacles to autonomy," both in work and in leisure. Why? Because "[t]he new possibilities opening up for the individual are possibilities not so much for entering a new class but rather for changing one's style of life and character within the middle class."<sup>19</sup> Note the unit of analysis. Riesman asserted, strikingly, that "autonomy will not be related to class."<sup>20</sup> The autonomous character will be formed as much through leisure as through work, because, with the separation of ownership from control, "the psychological advantages of ownership are very much reduced in importance; character is increasingly formed

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<sup>18</sup>Riesman, LC, 242.

<sup>19</sup>-----, 248.

<sup>20</sup>-----, 248.

for leisure and during leisure."<sup>21</sup>

That said, of course, the sheer fact of daily exposure renders the conditions of work relevant. Riesman accordingly identified trends in workplace conditions that prevented the development of the autonomous character. The single greatest obstacle was 'false personalization,' which sapped one's energies for leisure. Similarly, leisure gradually became contaminated with workplace demands; company picnics are company first, picnics second. Characteristically, Riesman suggested that "in the long run...it makes more sense to work with rather than against the grain of impersonality in modern industry: to increase automatization in work -- but for the sake of pleasure and consumption and not for the sake of work itself."<sup>22</sup> By making work less demanding on the personality, he hoped, we could allow for more uncoerced development of the personality on our own, ever-expanding time.

In the realm of leisure, the great threat was the very division of labor that allowed leisure time to expand. The professionalization of leisure through the mass media tended to denigrate amateur efforts and to discourage the autonomous pursuit of craft. Sports and music are perhaps the clearest cases: in both of these realms, the rise of professional teams and groups and their exposure through the

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<sup>21</sup>-----, 248-9.

<sup>22</sup>-----, 271.

emergent mass media meant that weekend athletes and shower singers were constantly exposed to standards of performance they could not reasonably hope to achieve. As individual performance was subtly discouraged, spectatorship (the paradigmatic activity of the other-directed) was actively encouraged. Expanding leisure time wouldn't help us develop autonomy if we spent most of it watching television.

Characteristically, his solution to the professionalization of leisure was more of it. Riesman suggested new attention (even from the government) to developing a class of 'avocational counselors' who would help guide the middle classes through the new, ever-changing possibilities of leisure. By becoming educated, savvy consumers, people could develop a psychic distance from Madison Avenue. He followed this logic through even more fully regarding children, for whom he suggested "model consumer economies...a kind of everyday world's fair" at which children would be issued scrip and would be allowed to develop their own consumer tastes, independent of advertising or peer pressure. "It would be interesting to see whether children who had had the luck to express themselves through free consumer choice released from ethnic and class and peer-group limitations, might develop into much more imaginative critics of the leisure economy than most adults of today are."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>-----, 302.

Notice what is missing from this form of critique.

People need to become more adept consumers, possibly more media-savvy, because that is the direction of things. That they might want to change that direction goes unmentioned and, in fact, would upset the entire theoretical framework. Liberation is an individual project, to be carried out on an individual basis; economic structures are naturalized as given, like the weather. Serious attempts at education had to assume a framework of liberal capitalism. Notice also the picture of the student who moves through the 'everyday world's fair;' in the end, he resembles nothing so much as the "Generation X" "slacker."<sup>24</sup> Irony may be self-protective, but it is also, importantly, passive.

Riesman had an inkling of this, and it may be significant that his next book addressed the life and work of an earlier social critic, much more radical than he.

#### The Norwegian Bachelor Farmer

Riesman was fascinated by Thorstein Veblen, who was the subject of his only effort at biography: *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation*, published in 1953.<sup>25</sup> Veblen was,

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<sup>24</sup>For the former term, see Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1991. Coupland, in turn, took the term from Paul Fussell's book *Class*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1983. For the latter term, see Richard Linklater's film *Slacker* (1991).

<sup>25</sup>David Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

at first glance, an odd choice for Riesman; Veblen was isolated, snarly, largely unappreciated in his own time (though not without his patrons), promiscuous, and radical -- none of which described Riesman. The style of critique Riesman employed helps to explain the choice of subject matter. While Veblen's main contribution was in his work (and judging from the theories in his work, he'd be quite happy with that), Riesman looked more seriously at his life. Veblen as character displaced Veblen as thinker. In his way, Veblen represented an 'autonomous' character before his time -- an astonishingly reductionist reading of a deeply radical (if deeply flawed) thinker. While this move succeeded little in telling us about Veblen, it may tell us something about Riesman.

Veblen's major contribution to American letters was his first book, the wonderfully contrarian *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published in 1899.<sup>26</sup> Here Veblen, borrowing from the Darwinism of his predecessor William Graham Sumner, outlined a theory of social evolution in terms of economics and display. While the theory can get fairly complicated, especially given Veblen's simultaneously tendentious and aphoristic style, it may be reduced without violence to a few essentials. Veblen divided people into two categories, and history into three. People were either producers, which were good, or parasites, which were bad. The stages of

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<sup>26</sup>Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin Books, 1979, orig. 1899.

history were distinguished by which group was on top. In the earliest stage, savagery, the producers were on top, simply because there was no surplus to exploit. Life was, oddly, peaceable and cooperative, and Veblen even hinted that it may have been matriarchal.

The second stage, barbarism, marked the triumph of the parasites. With the gradual enlargement of the social surplus, the spoils of conquest became irresistible. Early pecuniary classes relied primarily on the spoils of war; this was the stage of the warrior-king. Later, as technology advanced, the pecuniary classes shifted to private ownership of property. Note the continuity here between warriors and businessmen: for Veblen, both are barbaric parasites, differing only in their methods. Veblen was at his best in describing the mores of the pecuniary classes (his term for the parasites) in the barbaric stage. The pecuniary classes, in his schema, were motivated less by greed for things than by greed for honor. Status was everything; conquest became a means for status. But how to advertise status, to make sure that even the dimmest members of society know your station? Barbaric elites needed a mode of honorific display.

Here Veblen hit his stride. In a devastating analysis of the mores of robber barons that William Dean Howells misread as satire, Veblen delineated the social function of 'conspicuous consumption.' Wealthy people advertise their wealth by squandering resources; after all, only the wealthy

can afford to squander. Take the walking stick, for example. Nobody needs a walking stick; the addled use canes. The walking stick commands itself to the barbaric elites for other reasons. It is an obvious waste of resources, it shows that the walker doesn't need that hand to carry anything useful, it calls attention to the walker, and, in a pinch, it makes a nice weapon. Veblen's catalog of the intricacies of barbaric display makes up most of the book, and much of it is wonderfully funny. Dogs are better pets than cats because dogs are less useful and higher-maintenance. (Horses are even better.) Ties are favored among elites because they are utterly useless, and you can't possibly work with your hands while wearing one. Therefore, by wearing a tie, you are advertising that you don't have to work with your hands. Wives are the highest examples of honorific display; the man whose wife is the frillest, gaudiest, and most useless is the man who can most afford it. By breeding their daughters for utter uselessness, the upper classes advertise their intention and ability to stay upper class.

Over time, in fact, usefulness becomes a badge of low status. Veblen's account of higher education is uncomfortably instructive here; the Ivy Leagues favor 'abstract' subjects like classics or the liberal arts, and look down on such 'vocational' subjects as accounting or agricultural science. The very superficiality with which the Ivies attack abstract subjects attests to their function

as honorific display; if one takes, say, philosophy too seriously, one might become a teacher and lose one's class position. The point is not to learn the material. The point is to advertise that you don't need to learn anything.

By the peak of the barbaric period, then, we have the perverse situation of parasitism valued over production, conquest over innovation, and display over function. Traits like peaceableness, patience, and practicality relegate their bearer to the underside of history. What hope for humanity?

Happily, there is a third stage. While people have an instinct for honorific display, they also have an instinct for what Veblen called 'workmanship.' Producers take pride in their craft, and resent the forced obsolescence their bosses tell them to incorporate. Here Veblen's tale became sketchier, though a few elements are discernible. In *The Engineers and the Price System*, published in 1921, Veblen suggested an emerging class-consciousness among the producing classes that would lead them eventually to take over the productive process.<sup>27</sup> While his tale resembled Marx' in some obvious ways, Veblen's was not founded on distributive justice or surplus value. Rather, the revolt against the pecuniary classes would be founded on a craftsman's disgust for their indifference to and sabotage of his work.

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<sup>27</sup>Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System*. New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1921.

This part of Veblen's tale is much weaker than the previous one. No less a critic than Theodor Adorno suggested that Veblen "idolize[d] the sphere of production" and thereby overlooked the important ways in which craftsmanship and pecuniary gain drove each other.<sup>28</sup> Veblen's relatively flatfooted psychology allowed little recognition of the ambiguity of human motives; the love of craft and the love of gain can be, and often are, mutually reinforcing. Still, this third stage gave Veblen a position from which to criticize the existing order, as he saw it, and a way to ground that criticism in a reading of history, as opposed to ethics. One of his more distracting traits as a writer (and this was common to his and the previous generation) was his frequent protestation of value-neutrality in the midst of his blistering attacks. *The Theory of the Leisure Class* may be many things, but it is not neutral. In part, his own theory of craftsmanship may have dictated such claims; he was a craftsman of economics, sacrificing his own biases to the exigencies of his material. If the two just happened to dovetail, so much the better.

This was where Riesman focussed his analysis. His book on Veblen engages in a form of long-distance psychoanalysis, rather than a systematic critique of Veblen's economics. For Riesman, the critical facts about Veblen were that he

<sup>28</sup>Theodor Adorno, "Veblen's Attack on Culture," in Adorno, *Prisms*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983, p. 83.

had a distant father, a strong mother, an isolated upbringing in the Norwegian farming community of the American Midwest, and a streak of introversion that he used to keep others away, eventually dying alone and ordering his effects burned. Veblen's life certainly provided grist for a biographer; his notorious affairs with wives and/or daughters of college presidents and/or deans frequently predated shifts in locale by only a few months, and his teaching style was, well, original.<sup>29</sup> His political journey was almost wilfully perverse, flitting from one position to another whenever one became too popular -- that he died only months before the stock market crash of 1929 was simply the final perversity.

What did Riesman see in Veblen? It may have been the purity with which Veblen exemplified the 'inner-directed' character; few American academics have been as indifferent (or even hostile) to public image as he was. Veblen's own admiration of 'craftsmanship' is exactly what we would expect from an inner-directed sort; for the master of a craft, standards of excellence are independent of public opinion. The attack on 'conspicuous consumption' could be fruitfully revisited in the climate of the 1950's and the new concerns with 'conformity,' honorific display had found

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<sup>29</sup>For a full account of the extant historiography on Veblen, in which Riesman plays a relatively small part, see Rick Tilman, *Thorstein Veblen and His Critics 1898-1963*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. See especially chapter 8.

its way to the suburbs.

Veblen also tied 'social character' to the mode of production, and the schema he used wasn't that different from Riesman's. Riesman had more respect for the robber barons than Veblen had, but they both saw a functional link between the mode of production and the prevailing social character (though Veblen didn't use the term). Both saw a potential opening for a less 'barbaric' social character in the new affluence, though neither spent as much time describing that stage as he did the present one. It was, in fact, Veblen's "way of seeing" that Riesman noted specifically at the conclusion of his study. "Irreverent and catty to the very end...his books and his personal style still have the power over us that Veblen was all too inclined to disparage: the power of ideas and of personality."<sup>30</sup> Riesman was far more comfortable with the latter than the former.

#### Social Science Strikes Back

Though his observations on the tyranny of other-direction in American society stung, Riesman was at pains to maintain a posture of something resembling neutrality. The publication of *Individualism Reconsidered* in 1954 confirmed his status as both a celebrity (the cover of *Time* magazine)

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<sup>30</sup>Riesman, TV, 208.

and as a liberal. His essays of this period, especially those collected in *Individualism Reconsidered*, are almost disconcertingly evenhanded. The first essay in the collection, "Values in Context," set the agenda for most of what was to come. There he declared that the social scientist should look at ideas as products of their ages and of the psychological backgrounds of their creators. For example, in reading Thorstein Veblen, we should keep in mind that he had a weak father, a domineering mother, and a strange accent. These traits, Riesman believed, helped to explain Veblen's contrarianism, without which his writings are merely tendentious. In Riesman's own case, we are alerted that he shifts emphases according to the perceived needs of his audience, though presumably not because of some lingering resentment at his parents. He presented himself as a counter-cyclical thinker, a sort of "thermostat," who took whatever position was necessary to prevent the crowd from getting too complacent.<sup>31</sup> His own position here is significant. He is a gadfly, but not in a dialogical way; rather, he elaborates a not-too-challenging critique to an appreciative audience. His claim to truth rests on his audience's acceptance.

In postwar America, one consequence of such self-consciously counter-cyclical thinking was a certain skepticism towards the dogma of the Cold War. In a

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<sup>31</sup>Riesman, "Values in Context," in IR, p. 24.

brilliantly funny satire that was widely misread as a serious proposal, Riesman proposed bombing the Soviet Union with consumer goods -- toasters, nylons, that sort of thing. When the huddled masses realized that the manna from heaven were easily available at Woolworth's, communism would fall.<sup>32</sup> His more serious pieces on the Cold War presented an essentially pluralist critique of the theory of totalitarianism. The theory of totalitarianism, he argued, was unduly flattering to the Eastern states; simply put, no state could exercise the kind of control then alleged by Western intellectuals. Cold War armament levels became "conspicuous production," and Riesman joined the disarmament movements (again, following Fromm) at an early stage.<sup>33</sup>

Riesman's sunniness is harder to explain when he turns to his examinations of 'social character.' Part of the popularity of *The Lonely Crowd* had to do with its timing; 'conformism' was a hot topic in the 1950's. This was the period, remember, of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *The Organization Man*; the boom in corporate hiring and the relative decline of independent producers brought with it a new set of cultural anxieties. For well-employed white men, those anxieties played themselves out in dramas of

<sup>32</sup>Riesman, "The Nylon War," in IR, pp. 426-434.

<sup>33</sup>For 'conspicuous production,' see Riesman, "New Standards for Old," IR, pp. 219-231. For an account of his peace activism, see Riesman, "A Personal Memoir: My Political Journey" in Walter Powell and Richard Robbins, eds., *Conflict and Consensus: A Festschrift in Honor of Lewis A. Coser*. New York: The Free Press, 1984 .

masculinity smothered or eclipsed by the matriarchal suburbs and the matriarchal welfare state. For their wives, of course, the anxieties became Betty Friedan's problem with no name, but that came later.<sup>34</sup>

Despite his protestations of value-neutrality, which he rightly rejected in others, Riesman's work was received as an attack on conformism. This reading was buttressed by *Individualism Reconsidered*, in which he explicitly called for a new appreciation of the "nerve of failure."<sup>35</sup>

By this reading, and there is considerable textual support for it, Riesman chronicled a myriad of ways in which middle-class American life had become difficult for the introverted, especially those of a critical bent. Enforced sociability had become the norm without argument, workers and students were evaluated for 'adjustment' and congeniality. The new needs of capital were not so much for hard workers, since technology had grown wildly productive, but for 'team players.' Companies were producing so much, and were capable of producing so much more, that the new economic problem was a scarcity of outlets for consumption.

<sup>34</sup>For a solid intellectual/historical gloss on this period, see Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1985. For a wonderful feminist revisionist account, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. New York: Anchor Books, 1983. Also see her *Fear of Falling*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990. For the problem with no name, see Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Laurel Books, 1983, orig. 1963.

<sup>35</sup>Riesman, "Individualism Reconsidered," In IR, p. 33.

By Riesman's reading, companies dumped the surplus in two major ways.<sup>36</sup> The first was by "conspicuous production," alternately called "conspicuous corporate consumption." Companies found themselves able to pay significant 'economic rents' in the course of production, and frequently did so in the name of comity and good public relations. These rents took several forms; unprecedented wages and benefits for the working class, padded expense accounts for executives, a new willingness to tolerate laziness on the job (firing people was so, well, *distasteful*). The second way, of course, was by gearing up the advertising and sales divisions; alert young people noticed tremendous growth prospects in these areas, and were advised to tailor themselves accordingly. People whose personalities meshed more with the "glad hand" than the "invisible hand" were at a premium; without an aggressive 'sales team,' made up of 'team players' and 'go-getters,' companies would never unload the unprecedented amount of goods they produced.

All of which was, of course, walking death for the more sensitive soul. Where he may have been happy working autonomously at a craft he spent years learning, he simply could not see the attractions of product pimping. Where he may have been willing to accept criticism of his work from craftsmen of greater experience than he, he was less willing

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<sup>36</sup>For the classic elaboration of the genesis and resolution of the problem of abundance, see John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*. New York: Mentor Books, 1970, orig. 1959.

to be told by the human resources manager that his personality test profile revealed an unacceptable streak of independence. To make matters worse, the new demands at work put pressures on home life. Good team players were expected to maintain domestic appearances while expending tremendous emotional energy at work; the combined burden was simply too much to ask. Drained by the new demands of the workplace on their already-fragile personalities, Organization Men relied on their wives to have their emotions for them; men who could not stuff their emotions into acceptable slots were ostracized or simply ignored.

#### Knights in White Cotton

For all of his critique, though, Riesman remained a liberal. His essential conflict was that he was wedded to the conditions that give rise to the other-directed character. He could embrace New Deal liberalism safely because New Deal liberalism did nothing to address the nature of work itself; his refusal to embrace Fromm's decentralized socialism or any other radical alternative left him with nowhere to go.

He resolved the tension, or at least tried to, through a fantasy projection. "[T]he rare autonomous character we have been describing, the man of high, almost precarious, quality, must arise from that aloneness, that helplessness

of modern man, that would overwhelm a lesser person."<sup>37</sup> The autonomous individual would emerge from corporate America, Phoenix-like, and, somehow, make it all better. "[W]e depend for advance, in morals no less than in physical science, on individuals who have developed their individuality to a notable degree."<sup>38</sup> Exactly how these individuals were going to precipitate moral advance was not clear.

By this point, his position had shifted subtly from the one he advocated in *The Lonely Crowd*. What Riesman wanted, whether he formulated it this way or not, was an ideal of self-mastery that would operate socially by the shining force of example. He was quite clear that he did not want to interfere with the inner workings of capitalism itself. He did not even address ways of removing obstacles to autonomy from daily life, particularly for the masses; the most the masses could hope for now was an inspirational example. The shift played itself out in his writings on politics. He excoriated 'do-gooder' movements for their pronouncements of 'apathy' -- in good postwar fashion, he took political apathy as a sign of health. He attacked 'social critics' for focussing on work, as opposed to leisure (though he addressed work himself in *The Lonely Crowd*); he distrusted "efforts to restore the participative

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<sup>37</sup>Riesman, "The Saving Remnant," in IR, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup>Riesman, "Individualism Reconsidered," IR, p. 37.

significance of work," and embraced mindless entertainment in all its unpretentious glory.<sup>39</sup> He attacked those who called for more programmatically coherent political parties as mired in the past;

What we need now are new ideals, framed with the future rather than the past in mind -- ideals closer to the potentialities actually realizable under the impetus of industrialization.

One of the elements in such a new ideal would seem to be a relaxation of the demand for political dutifulness now made by many citizens who are worried about apathy.<sup>40</sup>

Significantly, the first new ideal he cited was the freedom to ignore politics.

In the realm of leisure, which occupied much of his attention throughout the fifties, Riesman drew a distinction between genuine leisure and 'ascetic' leisure. He announced, riffing on Fromm, that "there is no 'escape from leisure'" in the post-industrial period.<sup>41</sup> Given the new pervasiveness of leisure, social critics needed to turn their attention to the nature of leisure. When they did so, they would find that

A kind of ascetic selflessness rules much of the greatly expanded leisure of the other-directed person: selflessness disguised by the craving for comfort, fun, and effort-lessness, but ascetic nonetheless in its tense use of leisure for preparing oneself to meet the expectations of others.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Riesman, "IR," IR, p. 35.

<sup>40</sup>----, 36.

<sup>41</sup>Riesman, "Saving Remnant," IR, p. 111.

<sup>42</sup>----, 111.

Hence his dislike for 'message movies' and his embrace of television. The best television is not tendentious; in its purest form, it doesn't claim to be anything more than it is. 'Serious' drama, art, and the like, by contrast, are supposed to make the viewer a better person; they take on the aura of a homework assignment. The nervous young executive might feel the need to be able to discuss the serious entertainment of the day with his cohorts and superiors; the expectations of work crowd the home and stifle individuality. Entertainment that remained at the level of entertainment actually showed more respect for its audience, because it allowed its audience to make of it whatever it wanted. The autonomous character, then, the 'saving remnant' of the culture, is no threat to it.

The Red Scare is Coming! The Red Scare is Coming!

By 1955, Ortega was overtaking Fromm. Confrontation with the political climate of the 1950's forced Riesman to spell out explicitly the political implications of his views far beyond the hints dropped in *The Lonely Crowd*. To this end, he and Nathan Glazer contributed a chapter to Daniel Bell's collection *The New American Right*, first published in 1955.<sup>43</sup> Bell's book, which became hugely influential in

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<sup>43</sup>Riesman and Nathan Glazer, "The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes," in Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (New York: Criterion Books, 1955), pp. 56-90.

intellectual circles and which was reissued in 1963, was largely a reaction to the McCarthyism of the early fifties and the fears among intellectuals that the masses were ripe for demagogic.<sup>44</sup> As Bell outlined in the introduction, the various authors included in the book (Richard Hofstadter, Talcott Parsons, S.M. Lipset, and Riesman & Glazer, among others) all brought an emphasis on "status anxiety" to the study of the new American right. Conventional narratives couldn't account for the red scare, according to Bell; the communist party in America at its height was far too small to be even a mildly important interest group. Post New-Deal discontents couldn't be explained by economic grievances, since a rising tide was lifting all boats; at most, economic grievances could simply be outlasted. The animating force of the new right, then, had to be located in symbolic complaints.<sup>45</sup>

This was where Riesman came in. In his essay, "The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes," co-written with Glazer, Riesman addressed the seeming loss of self-confidence among liberal intellectuals when confronted by the McCarthyite masses. The immediate problem was to explain the resurgence of the political right in America in the early 1950's -- why, given the palpable economic and

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"For an influential critique of this school, see Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967.

<sup>44</sup>Daniel Bell, "Interpretations of American Politics," in *The New American Right* pp. 3-32.

military successes of FDR's Democratic Party, did the country lurch to the right? Riesman's answer was twofold. First, "opinion leaders among the educated strata...have been silenced, rather more by their own feelings of inadequacy and failure than by direct intimidation." Second, "many who were once among the inarticulate masses are no longer silent: an unacknowledged social revolution has transformed their situation."<sup>46</sup> The established elites, who are usually the agents responsible for political change, have been eclipsed by the ascendant, inarticulate masses. Consequently, the elites have lost confidence in their own solutions, which hastens their decline.

In a sense, the elites are the victims of their own success. The business cycle had been tamed, and prosperity spread over almost the entire population; the newly middle-class middle class guarded its status jealously. The speed of the change precipitated a particularly ugly anxiety. The new American right was made up of "people made ill-at-ease by an affluence not preceded by imagining its reality, nor preceded by a change to a character-structure more attuned to amenity than to hardship."<sup>47</sup> Lacking "the practice of deference and restraint which is understood and appreciated only among the well-to-do and educated strata," the new middle carried its knee-jerk skepticism beyond "the family

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<sup>46</sup>Riesman and Glazer, "Intellectuals," pp. 59-60.

<sup>47</sup>----, 60.

and neighborhood" and into "the national and international scene."<sup>48</sup>

Once they reached prominence, the masses' characteristic distaste for 'ambiguity' started to translate into politics. The cosmopolitan elites' habit of attacking existing cultural norms, Riesman argued, was tolerable when coupled with a direct appeal to the masses' economic self-interest. Shorn of that appeal, though, it drove a wedge between elites and masses. Hierarchies and barriers are reflections of attitudes, but they are also habits and 'facts on the ground'; a willingness to attack them in the abstract may not portend a willingness to live with the consequences of abandoning them. Riesman cited sexual emancipation as a particularly telling case; to the newly middle-class male, the specter raised by sexual emancipation was the specter of homosexuality.<sup>49</sup> Hence the language of the attacks on Eastern liberals, and the style of the McCarthyites. If effeminacy was the fear, thuggish masculinity was the obvious antidote.

By the mid-fifties, then, American politics faced the historically unprecedented situation of a newly confident middle class with essentially working-class or peasant attitudes confronting a newly timorous, urban elite. Part of the solution, of course, was a vigorous defense of the

<sup>48</sup>-----, 78, 70.

<sup>49</sup>-----, 71.

rights of the elites to abjure conformity to long-standing norms, but that was merely defensive; over the long term, the newly articulate (or, at least, loud) masses would have to adjust to their new power, which would involve learning the habits and attitudes (especially the restraint) of the earlier elites. Hence the importance of education.

#### Tenured Liberals

Riesman's turn to education was in keeping with a tradition of American progressivism exemplified by such thinkers as Herbert Croly and especially John Dewey.<sup>50</sup> Riesman added a characteristically mid-century twist, however. Where Dewey and others of his period advocated education as a way to help students master the rapidly changing forces of history, Riesman was more concerned that students learn to set themselves apart from (or, more accurately, above) history. In the concern with 'conformity' characteristic of much white liberal writing of the 1950's, the masses and the country at large figure as scary, wild, powerful, stupid, and inescapably there; men of taste cannot hope to master them, but they can hope to carve out enclaves of autonomy, far from the madding crowds. Liberalism became, characteristically, defensive.

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<sup>50</sup>See, for example, Croly's *The Promise of American Life*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1963, orig. 1909. Also see Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1966, orig. 1916.

And so did Riesman. His horror of 'collectivism,' of any sort of concerted group action, fed his distrust of the very agencies through which non-conformists could defend themselves. Capitalist firms didn't need ideology as an organizing principle, but unions and parties did; when ideology was attacked as conformist, the 'autonomous' man was left largely defenseless. Riesman suggested cultivating individual defenses -- the "nerve of failure," a sense of irony, a psychic detachment from work and popular culture that would function as a cushion.

Riesman had noticed something real and important, but had misdiagnosed it. Strikingly for one who cited Tocqueville as much as he did, Riesman paid little attention to the decline of intermediate groups. If anything, he took the decline as a welcome development; fewer group pressures on the individual allowed for greater idiosyncrasy. Yet Riesman confused quantity with quality. When the number of relevant intermediate groups declines, the power of those that remain correspondingly increases, as does their size; conformity to the firm became important precisely because there were fewer alternatives, and the nature of that conformity became blander as the size increased. Office jobs may demand stylistic conformity, but they are substantively empty, and it is that very emptiness that constitutes the real threat.

By this point, Riesman's distance from Fromm is clear and crucial. While he borrowed freely Fromm's analysis of

'social character,' Riesman simply abandoned its socialist underpinnings. Socialism was, in the trope of the time, simply another species of 'collectivism,' under which were lumped ideologies as disparate as fascism, syndicalism, socialism, and Leninism. Liberalism was exempted because liberalism denied the validity of the 'public' as a category; 'pluralist' political theory, which reached its apogee during this period, saw the political world as nothing more than a set of disparate actors haggling over the size of their respective slices of the pie. The pie itself, its size and nature, was taken for granted, as were the actors. Liberalism denied being an ideology by denying the validity of any but the most immediate, monetary claims. That is, itself, obviously an ideological move, as critics from both the left and the right never tired of pointing out -- here Russell Kirk could find common ground with Theodor Adorno. Still, in the prosperity of the time and set against the backdrop of such recent atrocities, it seemed the best that could be done. Riesman attempted to make a virtue of that necessity, and that was his mistake.

#### Back to School

The second half of Riesman's academic career has been devoted exclusively to the sociology of education. While much of his work of this period is irrelevant for present purposes, I will address the first and most important book

of this period as indicative of the position into which he had painted himself.

*The Academic Revolution*, which he co-wrote with the sociologist Christopher Jencks, is a history of higher education in America.<sup>51</sup> Strikingly for its length and scope, it is a history without much of an argument; the closest it comes to a point is in highlighting the bureaucratization and specialization of labor that emerged as the academy expanded. When it was published in 1967, the part that gained the most notice was its then-controversial evaluation of historically black colleges: bluntly, Riesman and Jencks saw them as intellectually untenable and, with only a few exceptions, unlikely to hold their own in a relatively desegregated marketplace.

It was in the lingering influence of Veblen, however, that Riesman's position became interesting. For Riesman, higher education was less about content or competence in any instrumental sense than it was about socialization. The function of the higher education was to socialize students into the folkways of the educated classes. This was even more true at the level of graduate education, where any pretense to objective content was rejected.

Unlike Veblen, Riesman did not then romanticize manual labor or cast aspersions on the validity of "the higher learning." He was notably sanguine about it; for one as

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<sup>51</sup>Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1968.

clear-eyed as he was about the content of collegiate training, he still strongly supported it. After all, the higher learning could help to impart the practice of deference and restraint, which is characteristic of the educated strata.

This reading of the role of the academy may help to explain Riesman's strongly negative reaction to the rise of the campus counterculture in the late sixties. After all, the hippies spoke much the same language that he had; they railed against 'conformity,' they cared about life beyond work, and they firmly believed in the virtues and glories of individualism. The fatal flaw was that they had little use for self-restraint. While they and Riesman may have shared much common ground in their critique of the pretenses of the university, Riesman held out the centrality of character-formation as a legitimate function, and he took the hippies as a discouraging sign. They were discouraging as a sign of internal failure within the system, of course, but they were also discouraging as a portent of a broader social backlash against education specifically and the educated classes more broadly.

Notice here that while Riesman was unwilling to defend most intermediate institutions, he rushed to the defense of higher education as a necessary tool for the development of character. Unions and the like merely promoted the self-interest of the group; the university promoted the interest of the entire society, which happened to coincide with the

interest of the educated classes.

Ortega had beaten Fromm; the lonely critic was left to exhort his countrymen to fortitude, and to keep a wary eye on the countrywomen -- it may be instructive that Riesman testified in 1992 on behalf of keeping the Citadel all-male. The heroic man who could save us all was strong, yet restrained; confident yet ironic; grounded yet utopian. He didn't exist, of course -- Riesman's treatment of Veblen sufficed to draw attention to the hero's feet of clay. But he needed to exist, because the alternatives were unthinkable. Without him, we were utterly at the mercy of forces we couldn't control and didn't want to question. Without him, we had no distance on our own complicity; without him, we had no integrity.

Left, Behind  
Christopher Lasch and the Idea of Craft

Where David Riesman somewhat wistfully defended a masculine character with its roots in an aristocracy, Christopher Lasch devoted his career to extolling the masculine virtues of the working class. Over three decades, Lasch produced a corpus of work both wide and widely read; his *Culture of Narcissism*, while often misinterpreted, became a touchstone of late century cultural critique. His idiosyncratic vantage point cut across the prevailing political categories of his time, leaving him distrusted by most of both the Right and the Left.

In a nutshell, Lasch despised the effects of proletarianization on formerly independent men. His critique encompassed politics, economics, the family, literature, and popular culture; at one time or another, he managed to offend almost everybody. In this chapter I will examine the development of his thought from his earliest publications in the 1960's to his posthumously-published work of the mid-1990's.

**Historians of the World, Unite!**

Whatever else Lasch was, he was an American historian. To make sense of some of his concerns, we must first look at the context of the practice of academic American history;

his concerns are a reaction to the work of two previous generations. For our purposes, we can start at the turn of the century with the Progressive historians.

The Progressive historians (not to be confused with the Progressive movement in politics) blended Jefferson and Marx to tell tales of class conflict without an urban proletariat; they often substituted region or occupation for class. The best known and most influential of the Progressives, Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington, had argued that economic elites had sold out the virtuous masses. In Beard's famous *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), for example, sneaky money-lenders triumphed over heroic farmers in the framing of the Constitution, and the tension between evil Hamiltonians and virtuous Jeffersonians has recurred throughout American history.<sup>1</sup> Beard shared with the Marxists (and the Aristotelians) a preference for wealth that was earned by labor, and took seriously Jefferson's association of agricultural labor with civic virtue. Parrington, in his massive *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), took Beard's division all the way back to the Puritans -- Mather bad, Williams good.<sup>2</sup> As with Beard, Parrington's politics were often vague, fusing an

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. New York, The Free Press, 1986: originally New York, Macmillan, 1913.

<sup>2</sup>Vernon Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*. New York: Harvest Books, 1954, orig. 1927.

antimodernist Jeffersonianism with an unformulated Marxism. Parrington built the dualism of his thought into his prose; as Richard Hofstadter later pointed out, the characters in *Main Currents* come in pairs.<sup>3</sup> Democrats and antidemocrats move through American history in an unending waltz, locked in each other's sights.

#### The Well-Adjusted Historians

The Progressives were the first to try to debunk the popular hagiography of the Founding Fathers. As such, their contribution was essential; still, their tendency to value polemic over evidence (and the evident limits of the political left in America) brought a reaction. The generation that followed the Progressives to academic prominence came to be known as the 'consensus' historians. The term 'consensus' is importantly misleading; nobody who reads Hartz or Hofstadter can come away without a sense of the prevalence of meaningful conflict in American politics. What made the 'consensus' approach unique was its emphasis on the common ground shared by various disputants.

In contrast to the polemical history of the Progressives, who were obsessed with the failure of a socialist or egalitarian political project in America, the consensus school took 'American exceptionalism' as a

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<sup>3</sup>See Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*. New York: Knopf, 1968.

starting point. They looked to the unique conditions of American history to explain why socialist projects would not have taken root here; as such, they didn't need to posit eternally recurring conflicts or conspiracy theories. In a sense, the consensus historians held that nobody in American history really knew what they were doing, but that the objective conditions of American history (particularly the lack of a feudal past) turned a curse to a blessing.<sup>4</sup> By their accounts, liberalism encountered fertile soil in America precisely because the wealth and expanse of the land defeated any sustained efforts at the establishment of an aristocracy. In *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), Louis Hartz emphasized the lack of an aristocracy; as he told the tale, socialists need aristocrats to fuel lower class resentment. In the absence of a landed gentry, the workers (who were mostly rural until the twentieth century) identified as petit bourgeoisie. They did not resent their social betters; rather, they fully expected to become those betters within a generation or two, or even less. For Hartz, then, political conflicts were often reduced to internecine squabbles among various brands of (un-self-conscious) liberals. The one important exception in American history, the Civil War, produced a body of

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<sup>4</sup>One may be forgiven for getting the impression from Louis Hartz' *The Liberal Tradition in America* that the only liberal in America who understood the tradition was Hartz himself. See Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*. New York: Harvest, 1991, orig. 1955.

genuinely conservative thought that barely outlasted the war itself.

Richard Hofstadter, who was one of Lasch's teachers at Columbia, told the story more times in more ways, but without much essential difference. Where Hartz saw endless repetitions of internal conflicts among liberals, for example, Hofstadter, in *The American Political Tradition* (1948), saw a "mute organic consistency" among the great leaders and thinkers in American politics.<sup>5</sup> In his work on popular movements, which is in many ways the most interesting work he produced, Hofstadter usually discerned either proto-liberalism or simple irrationality. The titles tell the story: "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*.<sup>6</sup> Hofstadter, like many academic liberals of the fifties (including Riesman), was haunted by the spectre of demagoguery in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and McCarthyite America. His reading of the Populists in *The Age of Reform*, for example, which has remained a standard text in American history for forty years, highlights their millenarian or anti-Semitic tendencies, often reducing them

<sup>5</sup>Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, orig. 1948, p. xxxviii.

<sup>6</sup>See Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. New York: Vintage, 1967. See also his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Vintage, 1963.

to historical cartoons.<sup>7</sup>

Hofstadter's treatment of mass movements in America was part of a broader trend in the academy in the sixties that emphasized the symbolic elements of politics, often by refusing to take political actors seriously on their own terms. Joseph Gusfield published *Symbolic Crusade* in 1964, in which he argued that the Temperance movement in America was really about anxiety over immigrants in the cities.<sup>8</sup> Murray Edelman published his classic *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* that same year; again, the task of the scholar was to look beyond appearances, to see what was really going on in political movements.<sup>9</sup> If that involved discounting actors' own accounts of their actions, so be it.

Although their politics varied widely, from Hofstadter's left-liberalism to Daniel Boorstin's centrism, the consensus historians' work was received by the younger generation as essentially conservative. Ironically, its seeming conservatism was a result of a reworked Marxian methodology. While the consensus historians certainly did not privilege the epistemic position of the proletariat, they did take care to relate ideology to material conditions. For Hartz, Hofstadter, and the rest, liberalism

<sup>7</sup>Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*. New York: Vintage, 1955.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964.

<sup>9</sup>Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1964.

in America was an outgrowth of objective conditions; the ideological posturings of activists were mere superstructure.

### Republicanism Redux

The successors of the consensus generation took the rejection of Marxism farther, even as they asserted their own Left credentials. Led by a cluster of American radicals at the University of Wisconsin, they placed importance on the historical role of ideas as they were popularly understood. As such, they rejected both the traditional history of ideas approach that looks at philosophers in a vacuum and a Marxian approach that reduces ideas to epiphenomena of economics. Exemplified by E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, the post-consensus historians looked for and found a form of oppositional consciousness among workers that could not be reduced to (and judged lacking by the standards of) Marxist categories.<sup>10</sup> 'Labor republicanism,' which became the accepted term for this oppositional consciousness, bore an ambiguous relationship to Marxism. It shared with Marxism a sense of the value of labor, and a corresponding distaste for economic 'parasites.' However, it rejected the Marxist tale of progress away from local

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<sup>10</sup> See Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*. New York, Knopf, 1976. See also Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York, Pantheon, 1964.

culture and towards ethical universalism; republicanism drew instead on notions of 'civic virtue' (variously defined), and was as likely to tell tales of decline as tales of progress. The lens of labor republicanism allowed a new generation of labor historians to explain the otherwise puzzling mixture of radical egalitarianism and cultural atavism in workers' movements, and it also allowed for some understanding of the anti-urbanism and anti-Semitism these movements sometimes expressed. At its best, the new focus rehabilitated the radicalism of American workers' movements without succumbing to a flat Beardian narrative of virtue defeated. Still, it could fall prey to romanticism, sexism, and a basic inability to explain Americans' persistent conservatism. Its 'exceptionalism' made solid comparative work difficult; certainly the comparatively greater success of workers' movements in Western Europe casts doubt on the efficacy of the civic republican tradition as a resource for political resistance.

#### Go East, Young Man

Lasch was influenced by this school, though he took its insights in idiosyncratic directions. This may account for much of his isolation -- his radicalism was based in a sense of older morality, rather than progress away from older morality. His early works, which I date from the publication of his dissertation in the early sixties to his

discovery of Freud in the mid-seventies, are his most engaging, straightforward, and readable. They are very much the products of a young writer; they are critical, even impassioned at times, but are almost purely in what Richard Rorty calls the 'edifying' mode.<sup>11</sup> For Rorty, 'edifying' philosophers teach us the limits of systems and solutions, rather than setting out to build new ones. Lasch's early works do just that; while we can catch glimpses of positions he would later develop in more detail, their chief value consists in their attacks on prevailing myths and mythic figures. His forays into the past were in the name of clearing out the underbrush of contemporary thought; his efforts to recover the best of the past were always partial and fragmentary.

Lasch's first book, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (1962), was an expansion of his doctoral dissertation, which he had written under Walter Leuchtenberg and Richard Hofstadter.<sup>12</sup> While *Liberals* hardly resembles the theory-laden work for which he later became famous, it does contain moments of the liberal-bashing that would become familiar in his later work.

*Liberals* detailed the liberals' (and a few socialists') stand on American intervention in the First World War and,

<sup>11</sup>See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979.

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972, orig. 1962.

later, American policy towards the Russian revolutionaries. By Lasch's account, American liberals were divided by the War. The more hawkish among them, whom Lasch termed the 'war liberals,' included William English Walling, William Allen White, and Woodrow Wilson. The more squeamish (not dovish, because they were not fully pacifists), whom he termed the 'anti-interventionists,' included Walter Lippmann, Lincoln Steffens, and Walter Weyl. The groups split on the point of the war, and therefore split on such tactical questions as statements of war aims. The Russian Revolution intensified the split, with dire consequences for American liberalism.

Lasch's posture throughout this work foreshadowed the skepticism and incredulity toward progress that he honed in his later writings. "[L]iberalism in America," he declared, "has always been a messianic creed, which staked everything on the ultimate triumph of liberalism throughout the world...It was impossible to accept coexistence, therefore, without questioning progress itself."<sup>13</sup> Given their belief in the inevitability of liberalism's triumph<sup>14</sup>, Americans

<sup>13</sup>-----, xvi.

<sup>14</sup>"Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc in 1989, we have been treated to a new series of paeans to the historical inevitability of liberalism. Francis Fukuyama has gone so far as to proclaim liberalism the end of history; I suspect the second half of his title is closer to the truth. See Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press, 1992. As I will discuss below, Lasch himself eventually came to embrace a version of the 'death-of-socialism' thesis in his last works.

convinced themselves of one of two propositions about the Bolsheviks. Either the Bolsheviks were simply childlike anarchists who needed the firm hand of the West to guide them (via invasion), or they would naturally mature into a liberal republicanism. The Americans' persistent inability to take the Bolsheviks seriously on their own terms was a direct consequence of the Americans' belief in progress.

Only with the greatest difficulty could [Americans] imagine a future in which they would no longer inspire the rest of the world with the sheer splendor of their example. To set an example, after all, was their original reason for being. Other countries have had to give up empires -- a painful task, but not as painful as giving up a long and splendid dream. The empires of the imagination are the last to fall.<sup>15</sup>

This motif, of the futility of the dream of mastery, would recur throughout most of his career.

#### Self-Awareness, Part I

His next book, *The New Radicalism in America*, published in 1965, made Lasch's name among historians.<sup>16</sup> He picked up here where he left off in *Liberals*, though with a different substantive focus. He conceded in an interview at the end of his life that much of his own work was conceived in response to Hofstadter's, none more directly than this one. Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* won

<sup>15</sup>Lasch, *Liberals*, 220.

<sup>16</sup>Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*. New York: Norton, 1986, orig. 1965.

the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1964; it is the story of ignorant and easily swayed masses sacrificing civil liberties and secular common sense to a parade of charlatans and fools. Lasch's response was to attack the vision of cosmopolitan masculinity embraced by the consensus generation in favor of a more typically working-class vision.

The nine-page introduction to *Radicalism* set forth most of the themes that would occupy Lasch for the rest of his career. "The main argument of this book," he announced, "is that modern radicalism or liberalism can best be understood as a phase of the social history of the intellectuals."<sup>17</sup> These intellectuals turned to a species of radicalism as a symptom of their own alienation from the larger society; the radicalism they chose ratified their own estrangement.

The growth of a class (or more accurately, a 'status group') of intellectuals is part of a much more general development: the decline of the sense of community, the tendency of the mass society to break down into its component parts, each having its own autonomous culture and maintaining only the most tenuous connections with the general life of the society -- which as a consequence has almost ceased to exist.<sup>18</sup>

Having estranged themselves from the rest of American society, especially in the North, the intellectuals trained their animus not simply on the predations of capitalism but on the culture of the emergent middle class. They attacked 'wage slavery,' but also the nuclear family; they rejected

<sup>17</sup>Lasch, *New*, ix.

<sup>18</sup>Lasch, *New*, x.

the cult of the robber baron, but also the cult of domesticity. "[T]he new radicals understood the end of social and political reform to be the improvement of the quality of American culture as a whole...it is precisely this confusion of politics and culture...that seems to me to betray its origins in the rise of the intellectual class."<sup>19</sup>

Tragically, the intellectuals' loss of roots led to a certain desiccation in their thought, even on its own terms; the new radicals distrusted the intellect almost as much as they distrusted popular traditions. Jane Addams' or John Dewey's writings are marked by a longing for 'life,' for a primal energy that they identified with a romanticized, distant working class. Theory seemed sterile, lifeless, next to the vital energy of the industrial laboring classes. Pragmatism, by this reading, is the natural philosophy of the turn-of-the-century left intellectual; it resolves questions of theory into historical practice, which is, happily, best decoded by intellectuals. New radicals, thrilled by the energy of the lives others lived, were particularly susceptible to the temptation to "forsake the role of criticism and to identify themselves with what they imagined to be the laws of historical necessity and the working out of the popular will."<sup>20</sup> Lacking any sort of Marxist tradition in America, they unwittingly fell into

<sup>19</sup>-----, xiv.

<sup>20</sup>-----, xv.

technocratic or pragmatic liberalism.

The body of the text is a series of biographical essays that frequently reveal as much about Lasch as they do about their nominal subjects. In the chapter on "Woman as Alien," which is largely about the first wave of feminism at the turn of the century, we get an inkling of the view he later developed into *Haven in a Heartless World*.

[O]ne has to admit that the envy of men was very pronounced in American feminism. Sometimes it amounted to outright antagonism...Even when the envy of men did not reach the point of outright hostility -- and it is possible to exaggerate the Lesbian and castrating aspects of the feminist revolt -- the envy nevertheless remained. So did the unconcealed abhorrence of everything connected with middle-class life in general, an abhorrence of which the envy of men, in fact, was probably a single facet.<sup>21</sup>

Here Lasch noted that class, gender, and politics intersected in peculiar ways. Feminism, in his tale, was a class prerogative; the longing for vitality expressed by such early feminist luminaries as Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Margaret Sanger was part of a larger class revolt by the intellectuals against the middle class. These feminists envied men because "[i]n America the idea of culture was predominantly feminine to begin with...the rebellion against culture necessarily became a rebellion also against the definition of woman's 'place' with which the nineteenth-century concept of culture was so closely

<sup>21</sup>Lasch, *New*, 57.

bound up."<sup>22</sup> Their feminism was consistent with other new radicals' revolt against middle-class culture, and shared with the other radicals an unstated class background. Strikingly, Lasch was to reinscribe a version of this dichotomy in his later work, particularly in his final works.

"And such small portions, too..."

His essay on Randolph Bourne was particularly exemplary of Lasch's idiosyncratic position. Bourne expressed the cultural revolt in a closely related way; he privileged the wisdom of youth over the corruption of age and habit. By virtue of physical deformity and peculiar temperament, Bourne took naturally to alienation; in some of his most affecting prose, Lasch traced the stages of Bourne's increasing disappointment with alternatives to the middle-class culture that rejected him. "What Bourne looked forward to was nothing less than a new era in sexual relations. To his dismay, he discovered that the girls who talked so convincingly about the 'human sex' were not interested in the art of personal relations. They were more interested in asserting their right to enjoy the privileges formerly monopolized by men."<sup>23</sup> Bourne's famous

<sup>22</sup>-----, 65.

<sup>23</sup>Lasch, *New*, 95.

'malcontentedness,' which he saw as the engine of progress, ultimately stalled any particular vehicle of progress. Feminists disappointed him, liberals disappointed him, pragmatists disappointed him, and Middle America disappointed him worst of all. He became his own logical conclusion; he was a prophet without a country.

The new radicals more broadly were dimly aware of their rootlessness, but lacked a vocabulary to express it. Psychoanalysis, the new Continental import, seemed to offer promise; it spoke of the essential, inner being, which was crushed or deformed by arbitrary social constraints. "It fell to the new radicals in America to convert the discovery of the hidden recesses of the spirit into a program of social and political action. In Europe, on the other hand, the new ideas helped to bring about a revival of the sense of the tragedy of the human predicament."<sup>24</sup> The intellectuals were in revolt against the felt paralysis of their own lives, but they lacked a specific alternative. The old order had weakened enough to render continued loyalty pointless, but the new had yet to be born. Consequently, the intellectuals took refuge in vague statements of the value of 'life,' or 'development,' or 'growth,' which they correctly refused to define in accessible ways. They longed for the simple, vital experience they projected onto the lower classes, but they

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<sup>24</sup>-----, 144.

rejected the cultural restraints against which those classes struggled vitally.

One unintended consequence of the psychic distance between the intellectuals and the masses was that "[t]he revolt of the intellectuals had no echoes in the rest of society."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the new radicals' gradual realization of their own irrelevance led them into the arms of the political elites they had theoretically rejected. Given the lack of a mass movement, and given their own distrust in the products of the mind, the new radicals moved, by default, to a neo-Fabian strategy. The masses as they existed simply couldn't be counted on, so the new radicals had two options: cozy up to those with 'real' power (the preferred route of Lippmann and Croly), or educate the masses so that they could be counted on. Jane Addams and John Dewey, in their different ways, chose the second course. For Addams, the settlement houses offered means by which to acculturate wayward working-class girls to upper-middle-class norms. By casting herself and members of her class as teachers, Addams could try to reassure herself of her usefulness and cultural correctness while also trying to effect social change. For Dewey, progressive education was supposed to be a way to inculcate habits of mental independence in youths of all classes; it went without saying, of course, that the teachers would be of reliably upper-middle-class

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<sup>25</sup>-----, 147.

backgrounds. Both Addams and Dewey could take heart in the basic correctness of their positions even in the face of mass skepticism or resistance, since, from their perspectives, skepticism was a symptom of ignorance.

Along similar lines, the watchword of the day for the crowd at *The New Republic* was 'mastery.' Walter Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery* and Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* argued, in different ways, for political rule by experts.<sup>26</sup> Some of the ease with which these men were seduced by power during the War crisis may be explained by their respect for hardheaded realism and their contempt for tradition and provincialism; even when they rejected the policies of the political elites, they thought of themselves as the same kind of people as the political elites. Lippmann's postwar meditations *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* attest to the elitism implicit in his earlier work; in these books, published in the 1920's, Lippmann argues that democratic theory has to be reconceived in light of the inevitable incompetence of democratic man.<sup>27</sup> The average citizen is presumed to be too busy with the stuff of daily life to form any sort of reasoned opinion on the increasingly complex issues facing the polity; the most that

<sup>26</sup>See Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, orig. 1914. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life*. New York, E.P. Dutton, 1963, orig. 1909.

<sup>27</sup>Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. New York: The Free Press, 1965, orig. 1922. *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993, orig. 1927.

can be asked of him (and of her -- women got the vote six years before *The Phantom Public* was published) is to pass periodic judgment on the performance of the incumbent elites. He might be able to act as a check on tyranny, but he cannot be asked more than that. Having discerned where the real political action is, then, it was a natural step for Lippmann and others of similar bent to cast their lots with the ruling classes.

The other side of the new radicalism, of course, was the muckraking tradition. Lasch took Lincoln Steffens as exemplary of this group. Steffens' *Autobiography*, which was widely read at the time, is a tale of a gradual awakening to reality (and a concomitant loss of innocence). Lasch didn't buy it.

...it is a mistake, in my opinion, to take the literature of disillusionment at face value. The radicals and bohemians of the twenties claimed to have lost their illusions about the world, but if their own earlier testimony is to be believed, they never had any illusions to begin with -- not, at any rate, the particular illusions they later claimed to have lost...disillusionment, for many American intellectuals, had early become an end in itself. One of the dogmas of the new radicalism was that appearances were illusory.<sup>28</sup>

For all of the muckrakers' insistence on speaking for the silenced, Lasch read them as speaking for themselves. Their invocations of the oppressed many, while arguably sincere and well-meant, gave them an excuse to do what they really wanted to do, which was to show their own insight. The

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<sup>28</sup>Lasch, *New*, 253-4.

'debunking' temperament is ultimately disloyal to any particular politics, including its own; that the muckrakers would turn to self-mockery late in their lives follows from their methods. Like its technocratic counterpart, the muckraking mind is susceptible to the lure of 'real' power; it is ultimately unable to counterpose 'truth' to power, since it doesn't believe in any one truth long enough. Lasch traced an ambiguity in Steffens' writing along these lines; Steffens held elites in distrust, yet had respect for what he saw as 'real' power. The problem was not strength, or even strength misapplied; it was only strength misunderstood.

In its attack on many of the heroes of mid-century liberal intellectuals, *The New Radicalism* was Lasch's statement of purpose. It was a qualified rejection of Hofstadter's method and shadow. It was also an apt, if necessarily unconscious and somewhat accidental, description of the path his own career would take. While he never embraced many of the cultural positions the new radicals did, Lasch did embark on a series of increasingly contrarian, isolating works that repeatedly invoked images of disillusion, of progress away from the idea of progress. He would embrace, upside-down, the turn-of-the-century feminists' vision of 'culture' as distinctly feminine; his portrayal of contemporary elites accents their effete, even their effeminate, vices. Like the new radicals, Lasch grew increasingly distant from any particular political movement.

The more distant he became, the more insistent his invocations of the benighted working class on whose behalf he fancied himself writing. A distinct authorial persona began to emerge, marked by internal conflict and a sense of pain.<sup>29</sup>

#### Domestic War Correspondent

With his next book, *The Agony of the American Left* (1969), Lasch turned his attention to contemporary politics.<sup>30</sup> He was sufficiently known by this point to command the front page of the *New York Times* book review section, where Martin Duberman took him to task for understating the importance of the cultural innovations of the new left.<sup>31</sup> *Agony* is a collection of essays originally published separately (mostly in the *New York Review of Books*), which makes for a certain disjointedness. Still, certain themes persist throughout, including the focus on the estrangement of intellectuals from politics that marked *The New Radicalism*.

The agony of the title is the agony of loss, in a

<sup>29</sup>Interestingly, Lasch's friends remember his personality as quite different. Consistently, they describe him as softspoken, courteous, diffident, and kind -- hardly the image that develops from reading his work.

<sup>30</sup>Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*. New York: Vintage, 1969.

<sup>31</sup>*The New York Times Book Review*, March 23, 1969, p. 1.

double sense -- the left has lost most of its political battles in America, but it has also lost its sense of purpose and history. In a series of essays on populism, socialism, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Black Power, and the sixties, respectively, Lasch traced the gradual estrangement of leaders from the groups they purported to lead.

The opening essay, which addressed the decline of populism, set the tone for the rest of the book. Lasch traced the decline of populism to its failure to address what Marxists called 'ideology' -- because they insisted on reducing actions to crudely defined material interests, they were prone to inventing conspiracies to explain political failures.<sup>32</sup> With the social and economic division of labor becoming more pronounced, "what took place was a splitting off of the reform impulse from the particular clusters of interests that originally lay behind it."<sup>33</sup> The gap between leadership and constituency worked to their mutual detriment; leaders, inevitably, came to identify with the elites with whom they socialized. Over time, reform leaders slowly metamorphosed into apologists for the elites; actual representation of the needs of the rank and file might jeopardize their standing among their new colleagues.

<sup>32</sup>Note the Hofstadter influence here; Lasch's account of the decline of Populism in this essay parallels strikingly Hofstadter's account in *The Age of Reform*.

<sup>33</sup>Lasch, *Agony*, 18.

This was not the same thing as a theory/practice split. Lasch praised the American Socialist Party for understanding the importance of a socialist consciousness; by his account, their emphasis on ideology kept them from making the European Social Democrats' mistake of embracing the war effort. Of course, their purity was bought at the expense of political marginality; at the socialists' peak in 1912, Eugene Debs pulled only six percent of the vote. The left thus faced a choice; popularity through a deeply problematic political vehicle, or marginality with purity.

Lasch himself was impaled on this dilemma, and much of Agony was his attempt to work through it. Here he started to develop a sense of the constructive function of forms that would take on greater importance in his later work. In his essay on Black Power, then, we read that political efficacy in America is a group phenomenon, and the Irish and Italians were able to gain power as a group by building their own, autonomous economic, social, and political institutions before integrating into 'mainstream' society. He suggested a similar path for black radicals in the sixties. Premature integration, he suggested, will merely ratify the status quo; blacks should instead concentrate on developing their own institutions, which will give them the leverage with which to integrate meaningfully. He embraced Stokely Carmichael's call for the development of a separate black culture and consciousness, but insisted that the new consciousness spring from the realities of daily practice

(institutions), rather than therapy and programs of 'self-esteem.' Without the development of separate institutions, the new nationalism will become hollow and eventually self-destructive, just as the new radicalism had.

His emphasis here on work and the value of repeated, institutionalized practices foreshadowed what he would later call his 'populism.' He tied consciousness, whether class or racial, to work, but not just to drudgery. The work had to be independent, difficult, and sustained; in the language of another time, it had to be character-forming. By going back to the turn of the century, he was able to recover a work ethic that he thought would sustain efforts at black liberation. Of course, he had yet to develop this line of thought as fully as he would later, and had yet to face up to its limitations (with the limited exception of its hyper-masculinity). The extent to which this doctrine was still shaky showed clearly in his essay on the student movements of the sixties.

In contrast to the Black Power piece, here Lasch came down firmly on the side of a consciousness-driven politics. University students, by virtue of their social location outside the confines of paid employment, are in a peculiarly favorable position to engage in political action. The failure of the political system to provide acceptable outlets for dissent (the marginalization of Eugene McCarthy, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, and the nomination of the war hawk Humphrey at a violent convention) simply added

spark to an already-flammable situation. Lasch's usual academic distance and perspicacity started to fail him here; he managed, in the same essay, to refer to students as (in Kenneth Keniston's words) 'sociological adults and psychological children' and to see them as the radical hope of the present. He went beyond calling for a third party, which he did, to call for a second political system. He attempted to import a labor ethic to the new left by recommending that it develop alternative town councils and state legislatures charged with passing budgets, setting tax levels, and the like; if the left could not hold (and learn from) real power, it should at least pretend to responsibility and develop its habits accordingly. Of course, as Martin Duberman pointed out at the time, history offers few cases of masses of people pretending to influence for any length of time without breaking out of the game and insisting on the real thing. Third parties, for example, don't usually sustain themselves for long when they lose; people want to win or stop putting in the effort.

Equally importantly, his attempt to blend an Aristotelian sense of the virtues cultivated through practice with a privileging of universities as sites of rebellion didn't make sense conceptually. Part of Keniston's point (Jurgen Habermas made a similar point much more cogently in *Toward a Rational Society*, particularly in the essay on Marcuse) was precisely that the practices characteristic of the academy are consistent with the

cultural rebellion of the new radicals.<sup>34</sup> Students are relatively removed from the world of paid employment (though much less so now than in the sixties), and are bombarded by strange and new ideas. They are encouraged to be critical, or at least to gain some distance on their parents, and some of them will translate these habits into politics. They are not engaged in the practices of solidarity-building; quite the contrary. They are trained to be 'antagonistic cooperators,' competitive in their expressiveness.

Lasch's flirtation with the student-centered New Left, however, would prove to be brief and aberrant. For the rest of his career, his work retained the skepticism for which he had become known.

#### Exile

Lasch was recruited to the University of Rochester in 1970, leaving Northwestern. Eugene Genovese, with whom he began an intellectual and political comradeship that lasted throughout the seventies, recruited him. Lasch stayed in Rochester until his death in 1994.

His first book since arriving at his new home, *The World of Nations*, is a fragmentary and largely forgettable collection of occasional pieces and reviews, but it does

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<sup>34</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

allow some insight into the directions of Lasch's thought.<sup>35</sup> In the preface to this book, Lasch opened by referring to his own "longstanding antipathy to Whiggish or progressive interpretations of history."<sup>36</sup> He asserted that linear history was starting to make a comeback as a rejoinder to the consensus school; he allied with neither. He cited an unpublished manuscript co-written with Eugene Genovese in 1969 that "argued for the uselessness of both the Leninist and social democratic traditions. It emphasized the legitimacy of the working-class demand for law and order, upheld the primacy of work against leisure, and defended (perhaps too unreservedly) the concept of professionalism."<sup>37</sup> Where his previous work had located him comfortably within the sixties generation of historians, he was starting here to distance himself from his age-cohort.

Most importantly for present purposes, *Nations* featured a reprint of a 1966 article on "Divorce and the 'Decline of the Family'" that set the groundwork for *Haven in a Heartless World*. In an historiographical essay at the end of the book, Lasch explained that he intended this article, which drew heavily on the work of Phillippe Aries, to contrast with the prevailing myth that the nuclear family

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<sup>35</sup>Lasch, *The World of Nations*. New York: Knopf, 1973.

<sup>36</sup>-----, xii.

<sup>37</sup>Lasch, *World*, 329.

was an artifact of industrial capitalism.<sup>38</sup> The article itself is less clear. It starts by setting up the popular myth that the family is in decline, evidenced by "bikinis on the beach and skirts above the knee," among other things.<sup>39</sup> In the popular imagination, the new sexual frankness represents a sea change from the Victorian family, with stern patriarch and submissive wife addressing such matters in hushed tones, if at all. Lasch suggested here shifting the chronology; by his account, following Aries', the isolation of the family unit from the rest of society started in the late eighteenth century and picked up steam in the nineteenth; earlier than that, the family-as-haven notion would have been peculiar. The increasing ease and frequency of divorce, which dates from the mid-nineteenth century (when divorce was moved from the legislative to the judicial branch), worked as a safety valve for the new domestic ideal. Families-as-islands were stressed and stressful; for such an ideal to hold across society, the costs of failure must be manageable. Thus it is a mistake to read rising divorce rates as evidence for the family's decline; rather, frequent divorce is a symptom of the new importance placed on the family. The sentimentalization of womanhood was actually the grounds on which divorce laws were eased; virtuous women (as opposed to prostitutes)

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<sup>38</sup>See Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* trans. Robert Baldick. New York: Vintage, 1965.

<sup>39</sup>-----, 35.

should not be subject to the vagaries of brutish male behavior.

Aries tied the sentimentalization of womanhood to the new understanding of childhood. Children became a different order of being in the eighteenth century -- before then, they were treated as miniature adults, on the level of servants. Starting in the 18th century, children came to be seen as qualitatively different from adults, requiring age-segregation and protection. The new cult of childhood allowed the rise of many of the protections we still consider important today; the ban on child labor, for example, was argued largely in terms of the unique delicacy of children. As dependent beings, children required caregivers; as custodians of the newly sacralized children, mothers became sacralized themselves, and in some very similar ways. The functions of the family were gradually rewritten; the old function as community center was slowly replaced by the new role of nursery. Childcare was parceled out more to individual homes, and then to common schools; children were more segregated from adults and the adult world.

Surprisingly, in the light of his later work, Lasch seemed critical of the fetishization of 'privacy' involved in the construction of the nuclear family. He noted carefully the ways in which the construction of the Victorian cult of true womanhood rested on the construction of other women as prostitutes or mistresses, though he did

not attack the arrangement on the grounds of 'hypocrisy.' Rather, he appeared to accept a certain brutality as the natural state of things in human affairs; the choices are between more and less discreet versions of it. Thus, while he was willing to portray the Victorian family as artificial and oppressive to women, he did not side either with the modern 'liberationists' who saw freedom in the absence of restraint. His next book would develop this line of thought further, though without much of the historical underpinning.

#### The Morning After

The political scene in America had shifted dramatically by the mid-seventies. The scope of political discussion had started to veer well to the right, and the new left fractured beyond recognition. The economic abundance which social theorists (notably including Riesman) had taken for granted in the sixties had suddenly come into serious question, and a resurgent feminist movement caught many men, even on the left, by surprise. Watergate and Vietnam resonated as crises of authority; movies like "The Towering Inferno" spoke to a sense of male impotence. Suddenly, men who had prophesied confidently about the promise of the future found their positions threatened both structurally and personally.

Lasch turned to Freud to find a vocabulary to narrate the present. His friend Russell Jacoby published *Social*

*Amnesia* in 1974, which was an attack on what Jacoby called 'conformist psychology;' Lasch wrote a glowing introduction.<sup>40</sup> He favorably reviewed Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, published that same year, which attempted to apply Freudian insights to the oppression of women.<sup>41</sup> As it had for the new radicals before him, psychoanalysis seemed to offer promise in addressing deeper causes of the contemporary malaise (or, more modestly, his own alienation). His psychoanalytically-inclined books, *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), and *The Minimal Self* (1984), were his biggest sellers, but they were also strange and scattered works, as idiosyncratic as they were synthetic.<sup>42</sup> They were marked by tensions and odd juxtapositions; the ahistoricism of psychoanalysis, for example, never fit cleanly with the sociological and historical method of his arguments. More importantly, the Freudian turn that broadened and deepened his cultural critique took him farther from politics. Aristotle teaches that politics is always intersubjective; Lasch's Freud abandoned this realm altogether in favor of a pure subjectivity.

<sup>40</sup>Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.

<sup>41</sup>Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. New York: Pantheon, 1974.

<sup>42</sup>Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*. New York: Basic Books, 1979, orig. 1977. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton, 1991, orig. 1979. *The Minimal Self*. New York: Norton, 1984.

### Bringing Up Father

*Haven in a Heartless World* is an extended meditation on the rise and fall of the nuclear family. Lasch here picked up where his earlier article left off, to peculiar effect. In the earlier article, Lasch told the story of the rise of the nuclear family as a compensatory reaction to a pathological social development. In *Haven*, however, Lasch wrote only of the decline and fall of the nuclear family, particularly as the decline and fall were encouraged by progressive thinkers. The elision is crucial; without the story of the rise of the nuclear family, the story of its fall takes on stronger moralistic overtones. Indeed, the reception *Haven* received did much to demonize Lasch among his erstwhile colleagues on the left.

To steal one of his section headings, *Haven* is primarily about "the proletarianization of parenthood." By his account, the rise of the 'helping professions' (staffed largely by the new radicals he attacked in the sixties) took functions out of the home, while the rise of industrial capitalism and the new idea of the public ratified the necessity of the family-as-haven. As a consequence, the family became simultaneously more necessary and more hollow. He set the terms in the introduction:

Bourgeois society has always held out the promise that private satisfactions will compensate for the reduction of work to a routine, but at the same time it undermines this compromise by organizing leisure itself as an industry. Increasingly the same forces that have

impoverished work and civic life invade the private realm and its last stronghold, the family. The tension between the family and the political order, which in an earlier stage of bourgeois society protected children and adolescents from the full impact of the market, gradually abates. The family, drained of the emotional intensity that formerly characterized domestic relations, socializes the young into the easygoing, low-keyed encounters that predominate in the outside world as well.<sup>43</sup>

As Marx put it, all that is solid melts into air. Lasch was concerned that the increasing division of labor characteristic of late capitalism was draining work of meaning, and thereby forcing the burden of meaning onto a private sphere that was ill-equipped to handle it. To make matters worse, the "forces of organized virtue" (social workers, psychologists, feminists) were slowly draining familial authority of its practical foundations; parents were no longer responsible for training their children for a trade, for educating them morally, or for forming their characters. Parents, then, were placed in an impossible situation. They were asked to provide meaning, but forced to make that meaning utterly arbitrary. The youth noticed the arbitrariness of parental authority and therefore held it in contempt, but had little notion of a positive alternative. They therefore gravitated towards nihilism, or passive acquiescence, or towards mimicking the forces of organized virtue. The socialization of reproduction, which was supposed to encourage independence and a form of

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<sup>43</sup>Lasch, *Haven*, xxiii.

empowerment, actually undercut one of the only remaining bases of resistance to capitalist culture.

*Haven* is a deeply conflicted book. Lasch's own protestations to the contrary aside, the argument moves in so many directions at once that a reader almost can't help but respond to it as an inkblot, reading in it her own fears or hopes. At one level, it is a 'populist' attack on capitalism. The demands of economic production are met by the sphere of personal reproduction; families are bent, broken, deformed, and desiccated in their efforts to survive the market. Value is a product of labor, but parents are deprived of the opportunity for the kind of labor that increases their value to their children and buttresses their authority.

On a more disturbing level, the book doesn't quite seem to know what to do with women. Their integration into the capitalist workforce, of course, is one of the most frequently cited causes for the decline of the nuclear family, and Lasch mentioned it repeatedly. He never actually condemned feminism *per se*, though, and he seemed sympathetic with the feminist critique of marriage that stressed its likeness to prostitution. He seemed to take the stay-at-home wife as a necessary evil for the sake of children, rather than a logical consequence of women's natures or capacities. Yet even this reading doesn't square with Aries' story of the isolation of the family in the eighteenth century; if we follow through on Aries' premises,

we would place the blame on the demise of the public, rather than on the demise of the private. Rather than asking why the nuclear family is in such trouble, we might ask why it was asked to carry such a burden in the first place. Rather than trying to help families carry an impossible burden, we might try to lift the burden from families and let families rearrange as they may. Lasch's omission of the pre-history of the family, which he had covered earlier, seriously limited the possibilities for his analysis, and left him open to charges (which would gradually become more frequent) of bad faith.

In the introduction to the paperback edition of *Haven*, published a year later, Lasch suggested that the prevailing social organization of work needed to be made more family-friendly, but again, the focus was on women's work. "The most important indictment of the present organization of work is that it forces women to choose between their desire for economic self-sufficiency and the needs of her children. Instead of blaming the family for this state of affairs, we should ask how work can be reorganized -- humanized -- so as to make it possible for women to compete economically with men without sacrificing their families..."<sup>44</sup>(emp. added) His somewhat grudging shift of focus here lost its impact for two reasons. First, he didn't include it (or its substance) in the body of the text itself. Second, he still placed the

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<sup>44</sup>"Lasch, *Haven* (1978), xvii.

burden of childraising on women, asking only that women be given some sort of break in the workplace.

Paging Dr. Freud...

Haven marked Lasch's turn to Freud, which would consume most of his work for the next ten years. He allied himself with what he identified as a pessimistic, European reading of Freud that stressed the tragic, insoluble conflicts of the human condition. The enemy was the school of 'sociological revisionists,' of whom the most prominent were Erich Fromm and Karen Horney. Fromm, of course, was Riesman's mentor, and much of *The Lonely Crowd* was adapted closely from Fromm's *Man for Himself*. According to the sociological revisionists, Freud taught that social restrictions on the libido are crippling, but that the libido could be restored to health through enlightened social policy. For Fromm, that policy would focus on allowing opportunities for meaningful engagements with productive work and interpersonal love. For Wilhelm Reich, the free, unfettered expression of the id ('let it all hang out') was the road to mental health. By Lasch's reading of Freud, on the other hand, conflict is essential and inescapable. The Oedipal conflict, for example, is at the root of ego-formation; without it, ego boundaries never solidify (which Freud read as true of women). After the Oedipal conflict, the child (and the adult) encounters

conflict after conflict with social restrictions on behavior, with internalized mores learned in early childhood, with other people, and with himself. "The ego is not master in his own house" -- psychoanalysis, taken seriously, suggests a profound and disturbing sense of the limits of human agency.

Among other things, it suggests the limits of politics. Fromm (and the early Marcuse) argued that capitalism worked by a process of 'surplus repression,' by which libidinal energy was alienated in capitalist production; they suggested that a democratic socialist regime would restore the lost wholeness of the work process, and thereby restore mental health. For Lasch, such a program was hopelessly optimistic. At one level, it simply understated the depth and tragedy of psychic conflict; socialism is no cure for childhood trauma. At another level, it missed the point of work. Fromm, the young Marcuse, and the young Marx were concerned with overcoming the worker's alienation from his labor. By restoring the unity of worker and work, they hoped, they could restore health and the possibility of psychic wholeness (or what the young Marx called 'species-being'). For Lasch, the psychic value of work was precisely in its alienation. The worker builds strong ego boundaries by learning to submit himself to the demands of a craft with clear, external standards of performance. 'Self-expression' is not the point, except to the extent to which it happens through pride of craftsmanship. The psychic problems with

capitalism, for Lasch, are twofold. First is the gradual deskilling of labor; craftsmanship is rewarding, but drudgery is drudgery. Second, the rapid turnover of consumer goods makes it difficult to invest anything with any psychic value; he would develop this theme at length in his next two books.

*Haven* provoked a firestorm of criticism when it was published. From Lasch's perspective, all the wrong people liked it, and all the good people didn't. George Gilder, the author of *Sexual Suicide*, praised it as 'marvelously reactionary,' speculating that the 'Marxist buncombe' in which the family-values argument was made was simply for the sake of academic cover.<sup>45</sup> In the *New York Times Book Review*, Marshall Berman admonished Lasch for several illiberal passages, which he tried to psychologize away; he speculated that on a topic as close to the heart as family, one's own personal prejudices and experiences can't help but come to the fore.<sup>46</sup> Such political confusion was to become standard fare for the rest of Lasch's career.

#### Malaise

His next book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, picked up on the Freudian themes that *Haven* started. Where *Haven*

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<sup>45</sup>National Review, February 17, 1978, pp. 220+

<sup>46</sup>The New York Times Book Review, January 15, 1978, pp. 6-7.

restricted itself (more or less) to a discussion of the evolution of the family, *Narcissism* was far more ambitious. Like *The Lonely Crowd*, which Lasch took as a working model in writing *Narcissism*, it was both a product of and a critique of its times. It attacked progressive education, feminism, technology, professional sports, and the dream of mastery generally; it held out hope only in fragments. The subtitle, *American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, was misleading; part of the problem with American society, by his reading, was that it expected far too much.

The book opened with what would become a standard Laschian laundry list of contemporary problems; New York City's finances, economic stagnation, the energy crisis. It invoked a sense of national 'malaise,' a word that Jimmy Carter embodied, to his everlasting regret.<sup>17</sup> Most of the book is occupied with various manifestations of this 'malaise,' this failure of the seemingly pleasure-oriented society of the seventies to provide opportunities for real fulfillment. The ideology of nonbinding commitments, the flight from standards in public schools, the increasing anxiety with which competition in sports is regarded, are

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<sup>17</sup>"Though his 'malaise speech' has lived in infamy as a public relations nightmare and a negative example to subsequent politicians, its reception may tell us more about its listeners than about its content. Carter never actually used the "m-word" in the speech, and the immediate reaction in a *New York Times* reader poll the next day was generally positive. Many folks were struck by the substantiveness of the speech -- no President has made that mistake again.

all taken as signs of the same underlying problem.

Picking up on the Freudian themes he elaborated in *Haven*, Lasch suggested that the 'hedonism' of contemporary society, its seemingly effortless 'other-direction,' was actually a frantic effort at compensating for and hiding a deeper anxiety. We act so tolerantly towards others because we are secretly unforgiving of ourselves, and we suspect they may be equally unforgiving of us. Most of this book is an effort at debunking the popular myths (and popular mythmakers) of the hedonistic society; most of the solutions American culture offers to feelings of personal emptiness only exacerbate the problem, which actually benefits the professionals whose job it is to treat unhappy people.

Lasch took aim at the forces of organized virtue throughout the book, though he still offered little alternative. He distinguished his attack on bureaucracy and expertise from the conservatives' on the grounds that an attack on the bureaucracy makes sense only in the context of an attack on capitalism. Accordingly, he offered the possibility that the growing distrust of experts might result in the formation and growth of 'communities of competence,' which would foster both real alternatives to the prevailing intellectual fads of the day and the internal discipline that forms through sustained, serious work.

*Narcissism* was unmistakably a book of the seventies. Part of its popular success lay in its timing; thanks in part to Tom Wolfe (who coined the phrase 'the 'me' decade'),

there was a popular debate about the rise in self-involvement that Lasch's book (and especially its title) entered easily. After the excesses of the sixties, the popular narrative went, radicals and fellow travellers turned inward; they moved from protest to therapy. The feminist movement drew particularly heavily on therapy and notions derived from psychology to score political points; divorces could be justified on the grounds of 'health,' as opposed to male desertion or infidelity, for example. 'Consciousness-raising' groups urged women to 'find themselves,' usually by abandoning traditions and traditional roles. An antifeminist backlash ensued, of course, but it drew on psychology as well. Old traditions needed new justifications; that very shift suggests that the old traditions were newly vulnerable.

Lasch claimed to resist placement in the context of the 'self-absorption' debate, though his discontent seems somewhat disingenuous. He took 'narcissism' in a more orthodox Freudian way than did Tom Wolfe or Time magazine. By his reading of Freud, narcissism is the inability to distinguish self from non-self, the absence of meaningful boundaries. The narcissist may be the imperial self, stomping over any external differences, or he may be the minimal self, overwhelmed by an environment from which he cannot distinguish himself. Either way, he is incapable of forming serious, sustained relationships (even though he desperately needs them), because he cannot recognize

separate, autonomous beings. The narcissist presents a problem for liberalism, which is founded on reciprocity and distinct selves, but he fits consumer capitalism nicely. His work has been degraded, so he will not develop a sense of competence through that. He is easy prey for advertisers because he has no internal resources with which to resist them, and he may well be an avid shopper because he needs external goods to have any self-definition at all. He may go in for therapy, on the grounds that his personal obsessions are the most important things in the world, but he probably won't go in for organized religion or monogamous marriage, which both require some level of recognition of otherness.

As many reviewers noted, *Narcissism* was very much a mood piece. The book is shot through with ironies, misgivings, and overstatements; Lasch attacked therapy, for example, on Freudian grounds. His chapter on feminism is simply schizophrenic; he acquiesced in the feminists' claims that women have been mistreated, but spoke the antifeminist line just a little too enthusiastically. He conceded that male responses to feminism have been overwrought, but then invoked *vagina dentata* imagery far beyond anything found in the popular debates. The heading of the last chapter, "Paternalism without Father," offers a sense of the undertone of much of the book. His debt to Alexander Mitserlich's *Society Without the Father* became clear; they were both concerned that the state was acting like an

overbearing Mom, which rendered Dad irrelevant and the kids dependent and confused.<sup>48</sup>

Narcissism has, in fact, been a common trope in feminist writings on women's experience. Much of the academic feminist criticism of the eighties drew on the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, for whom the mirror stage was all-determining; the moment at which the infant learns to distinguish self from non-self is the moment at which it enters the domain of the father.<sup>49</sup> The identification of narcissism and femininity is strong enough that Lasch was frequently pilloried for attacking the feminization of American culture. His prose didn't help his own cause; chapter headings like "From Horatio Alger to the Happy Hooker" certainly raise legitimate questions. In the offending chapter, he was concerned that the skills of other-direction fostered under conditions of monopoly capitalism (note the debt to Riesman) more closely resembled those of the prostitute than of the citizen or the worker; the prostitute uses her charms to seduce, but she holds her customer in silent contempt. Her interaction with her customer is both purely commercial and falsely personal; the superficial cure for loneliness only makes the loneliness worse. Unlike the citizen, the prostitute rarely says what

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<sup>48</sup>Alexander Mitserlich, *Society Without the Father*. New York: Harper, 1993, orig. 1969.

<sup>49</sup>For a reasonably readable account of Lacanian feminism, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

she means in the presence of others; unlike the worker, she has to please others.

From the vantage point of the mid-nineties, it is possible to criticize Lasch (and Riesman) for mistaking the exigencies of the service sector for those of monopoly capital; starting in the eighties, the paternalistic corporate behemoths broke up into smaller units and sometimes went under altogether, but the dynamics of interpersonal interaction in the work setting did not shift course. If anything, the movement towards 'other-direction' intensified. Monopoly capital has transformed, but the plight of the worker is no better.

Similarly, the welfare state has come under concerted attack from the Right, and has gradually lost funding in real terms, but with no discernible effect on the dissolution of ego boundaries. If anything, it seems to have accelerated the process. Lasch noted the tendency that started in the sixties of white youth appropriating black culture as their own; he attributed the affinity to a shared alienation that was rooted in a shared lack of faith in the future. With the reduction in the social wage and the Darwinian turn in the political economy in the eighties and nineties, youth alienation and loss of faith in the future have spread and, perhaps, gained intellectual validity. We face the increasingly common (and farcical) situation of the youth with no future being told to 'serve with a smile' at the (increasingly inadequate) minimum wage; a sense of

alienation here is simply a sign of intelligence. The extant alternative, drug dealing, is closer to the Happy Hooker than the Yeoman farmer; drugs promise to dissolve ego boundaries, and drug dealers certainly hold their customers in contempt even as they seduce them over and over again. Other than salesmanship, it is hard to see what 'skills' are developed through drug dealing or burger flipping.

Strangely for a self-identified socialist (which he still was at this point), Lasch missed or understated the importance of class cleavages. For example, much of the most humiliating service sector work employs either the lumpen or the lower working class, but therapy is most popular in the educated middle class. Additionally, it is misleading to tie 'other-direction' to monopoly capitalism, because people skills are more important in moving between companies than in moving up within one; it is a commonplace in bureaucratic organizations that the way to prosper internally is to make yourself indispensable through your output, but the way to prosper externally is to advertise and shmooze.

Still, for all of its limitations (both conceptual and textual), *Narcissism* offered a powerful and resonant critique of the drift of American society at the time. Much to Lasch's chagrin, it was widely misinterpreted. In a largely futile effort to clarify, his next book was virtually an appendix.

### Once More Into the Breach

In his follow-up to *Narcissism, The Minimal Self*, Lasch expanded on his reading of Freud. Here, again, he tried to distance himself from the popular reading of narcissism as another word for selfishness. Critiques of selfishness had been around for some time, in any of several forms. Christian moralists, for example, had long preached variations on altruism, and some (such as the Social Gospel movement) had even tried expressing the doctrine politically.<sup>50</sup> Ortega y Gasset, in *The Revolt of the Masses*, held an aristocrat's disdain for the grubby many. He conceded that the masses were capable of technical advances, and that the material level of life could rise, but he was concerned that the mass man would poison the rest of society with his petty-bourgeois shortsightedness. The masses might understand power, for example, but they have no conception of authority. Finally, various schools of Marxism had attacked bourgeois reformism as the democratization of greed.

Lasch tried to refocus on the degradation of the sense of the separate, autonomous self, which he tied to the degradation of meaningful work. Drawing on Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, he suggested that

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<sup>50</sup>For an able account of the relationship of the Social Gospel movement to American political thought, see James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*. New York: Oxford, 1985.

consumerism "is only the other side of the degradation of work -- the elimination of playfulness and craftsmanship from the process of production."<sup>51</sup> Under the reign of consumerism, "the individual learns not merely to measure himself against others but to see himself through others' eyes...he adopts a theatrical view of his own performance on and off the job."<sup>52</sup> Consumer goods are distinguished from use goods on the basis of durability; the whole point of consumer goods is their consumption, not their usefulness. Echoing Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man*, which he did not do in the previous volume, Lasch asserted that "it is possible to see that the collapse of our common life has impoverished private life as well."<sup>53</sup> The shift from 'character' to 'personality,' which had become a standard refrain of his work by this point, placed new significance on accessories and outward appearances.<sup>54</sup> 'Character,' as it was used in the nineteenth century, had to do with conduct. A good character was someone who lived up to his obligations, provided for his family, and so forth.

<sup>51</sup>Lasch, *Self*, 27. See Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

<sup>52</sup>Lasch, *Self*, 29-30.

<sup>53</sup>-----, 32.

<sup>54</sup>For an earlier and highly influential formulation of this contrast (replete with echoes of Riesman) see Warren Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture" in Higham and Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

'Personality,' by contrast, referred to the inner self, which was only sporadically visible through external conduct. Paradoxically, the new emphasis on 'personality' made appearances much more important; where character could be proven over time, personality could slip out at any moment. Consequently, workers' sense of identity started to come less from work and more from consumption, or what social critics at the time called 'leisure.'

The flaw in that formulation, of course, is that consumption was anything but leisurely; 'keeping up with the Joneses' wasn't the half of it. Capitalist consumerism prospered not by making pleasure easily available, but by instilling the fear of pleasure missed. Advertising created needs that didn't exist before, and planned obsolescence (such as annual fashion changes) kept both feeding the dream and putting it off; whatever you acquired before isn't good enough now. Lasch thus distinguished his position from Daniel Bell's in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, which it strongly resembled; where Bell saw consumer capitalism fostering hedonism, Lasch saw it fostering neurosis.<sup>55</sup>

Having outlined the conservative and Marxian critiques of selfishness and mass culture, Lasch discerned a common assumption behind both. "[B]oth parties to this debate agree that modernization leads to the democratization of

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<sup>55</sup>Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.

society and culture."<sup>56</sup> He shifted the grounds of discussion.

What if we reject the premise behind this whole discussion, that industrialism fosters political and economic progress? What if we reject the equation of industrialism with democracy, and start instead from the premise that large-scale industrial production undermines local institutions of self-government, weakens the party system, and discourages popular initiative?<sup>57</sup>

Thus, the shift in industrial production to a separation between design and production (as opposed to the separation between ownership and control) disempowers workers and renders their knowledge of their craft meaningless.

Politically, the evolution of political parties from mass organizations to cartels of elites reduces citizens to spectators, elections to plebiscites. Political skill among the citizenry is left to atrophy, to be replaced by the skills of an audience.

#### Real Men Don't Eat Quiche

The emphasis on craftsmanship here is a clear statement of Lasch's break with Marxism and Marx-flavored socialism. Marx had great respect for the efficiency of capitalist production; his concern was the direction of that production. Lasch rejected the goal of efficiency. His idealization of craftsmanship sounds vaguely like much of

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<sup>56</sup>Lasch, *Self*, 40.

<sup>57</sup>-----, 41.

the environmentalist or ecological thought that grew out of the New Left in the seventies and eighties. Lasch's relation to the ecology movement was equivocal. He liked the recognition of the value of limits, both as limits on production and as recognition of the limits of human capacity. He also liked the emphasis on local institutions and the importance of citizen involvement. He was far less enthused about the feminization it took as a positive good. The sexual experimentalism and the survivalist mentality that many of its intellectual leaders espoused struck him as simply furthering the destructive dynamics of narcissism that had already undermined many of the traditional masculine virtues. Survivalism, by his reading, is the apotheosis of narcissism. It is the effort by the beleaguered self to reject any meaningful claims to selfhood beyond the biological; it is a form of surrender. Echoing Hannah Arendt, Lasch drew a distinction between mere biological life and the good life that rested on efforts at transcendence. The survivalist self has forsaken any claims at transcendence, and, as such, has forsaken any claims to real politics, real culture, or even a real self. It may be understandable as a symptom, but it is hardly a cure.

Lasch concluded the book with a strange application of Freud's tripartite division of the psyche to politics. He identified three major political responses to 'modernity,' each corresponding to one component of the psyche. The

party of the superego argues that the real problem is the decline of authority and public morality. This group is usually on the political right, although he also counted Daniel Bell and Lionel Trilling among them. They argue that, in the absence of a firm public sense of shame, society must fall back on force to achieve social control. The loss of resonance of organized religion, the family, and schools portends increased violence and decay, both on and by the state. By their lights, the recent frenzy for incarceration is a natural consequence of the decline of recognized social and moral authority; if we give up a sense of shame, we are left with brute force.

The second camp, the party of the ego, argues that the problem of the age is 'adjustment.' By bringing inclination into line with duty, needless social conflict can be eliminated and real, uncoerced harmony achieved. Although variations on this position go back to Plato's city in speech and Rousseau's social contract, its most famous recent exponent was John Dewey. In Dewey's view, social conflict was a result of a failure to communicate, or to organize the means of production most efficiently. In the realm of education, for example, he held that a pedagogy that takes students' interests as its driving force would ultimately be far more effective in getting students to learn what teachers want them to learn. This view was premised on an assumption of generally good will and good faith on the part of both students and educators, and it

easily lent itself to evasiveness on both sides. While it is true that Deweyan progressive education was originally more critical than its later exponents made it out to be, it is also true that Dewey had no principled way to criticize the accommodationist turn, and Dewey's own political work succumbed to accommodation over and over again.<sup>5a</sup>

The party of the ego, which in contemporary politics is generally left-of-center, argues for the perfectability of man and politics. Education, therapy, and other versions of the helping professions perform the same function that organized religion and a common sense of shame did for the conservatives; the key difference is that education and therapy try to root obedience in the individual's very sense of reality. Disobedience gets rewritten as deviance, and political dissent gets explained away as psychological anomaly. Character flaws become personality disorders, treatable by certified experts. Stresses that have their roots in real social conflict get treated and understood as deriving from sicknesses of the self; politics gets reduced to management. The party of the ego, by this account, is

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<sup>5a</sup>While he may be forgiven for acceding to the First World War on the grounds of ignorance, Dewey repeated the same mistake as late as 1937. In *Liberalism and Social Action*, published that year, he made the bald, breathtaking claim that the engine of history is consensus, rather than conflict. Rejecting a "dogmatic philosophy of history" that insists on the permanence of conflict, he declared that "mankind now has in its possession a new method, that of cooperative and experimental science which expresses the method of intelligence."(23) See Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1963, orig. 1937.

misnamed; it is not a party at all, because it abhors politics.

Finally, the party of the ego-ideal, which Lasch renames the party of Narcissus, argues that the social strains of the day are rooted in the frustration of healthy instinctual drives. Wilhelm Reich was perhaps the least ambiguous proponent of this view, but elements of it percolated into the New Left and, later, feminism. The party of Narcissus unites inclination and duty by collapsing the latter into the former; sexual promiscuity, for example, is not merely permitted but recommended as a healthy expression of unfettered sexuality. 'Do your own thing' is an imperative, as well as a declarative and a wish.

Ironically, the party of Narcissus shares with the party of the ego a trust in expert wisdom. You don't know yourself, the saying went, so someone had to point yourself out to you. Authenticity is a necessarily evanescent ideal; like Hoover's prosperity, it's always just around the corner. The journey inward requires a travel guide.

Lasch allied himself, vaguely, with the party of Narcissus, even while he saved his most strident criticism for it. He attacked Jessica Benjamin, who had attacked his *Culture of Narcissism* as a rant against the feminine, on the grounds that narcissism isn't particularly gendered.<sup>59</sup> Both

<sup>59</sup>Jessica Benjamin, "Authority and the Family Revisited: Or, A World Without Fathers," *New German Critique*, 13, Autumn 1978, pp. 35-57.

the Promethean dream of mastery and the infantile longing for oneness share a root in the lack of clear boundaries. More critically, he rejected Benjamin's identification of ego boundaries with heroic male isolation; rather, clear ego boundaries are themselves prerequisites for meaningful interpersonal connection. The call among a group of Freudian feminists (Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Benjamin, and, later and less directly, Sara Ruddick) for a more feminine, mutualist culture struck Lasch as a recipe for disaster; in a consumerist society, the last thing progressives should call for is a stepped-up program of narcissism.<sup>60</sup> Quite the contrary; the left should instead be trying to create spheres in which people can engage in meaningful work, the better to restore genuine mastery to their lives.

The only way out of the impasse of narcissism is the creation of cultural objects, 'transitional objects,' that simultaneously restore a sense of connection with mothers and with Mother Nature without denying our dependence on mothers or nature. It is precisely this compensatory activity, however, that is condemned by the party of the ego ideal -- the party of Narcissus -- on the grounds that substitute-gratifications are inherently pathological.<sup>61</sup>

Like the call for 'communities of competence' that concluded *The Culture of Narcissism*, the call for new spheres of

<sup>60</sup>See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*. London: Verso, 1989.

<sup>61</sup>Lasch, *Self*, 246.

mastery was both vague and oddly compelling. In the new book he cited Aristotle's distinction between phronesis, the practical wisdom (prudence) involved in politics, and techne, which is basic physical know-how, to point out that capitalism makes no room for the former.<sup>62</sup> Only by recognizing the impact of work on character could we start to beat back the oceanic.

Of course, efforts to beat back the oceanic are bound to be quixotic, and a certain defeatism pervades all of Lasch's Freudian works. Solutions are always just greater failures, and contemporary ills all share common, intractable roots. He tried to envision a masculinity with limits, splitting the difference between the prevailing options; as such, his work was primarily negative in character, defined by what it opposed. He never specified agents of change in these books, and what prescriptions he did offer were vague to the point of emptiness. Like Foucault's seventies work, on which he drew from time to time, Lasch's middle work often seems to describe seamless webs without spiders. The helping professions, big capital, feminists, academics, and new leftists share in the blame, but they don't know it. In a backhanded way, Lasch

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<sup>62</sup>Unhappily, the citation he gave for Aristotle was Jurgen Habermas' *Theory and Practice*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973. *Theory and Practice* devotes all of one paragraph to Aristotle. Reliance on secondary sources, while relatively harmless in this instance, would come back to haunt him with his conflicted reading of Machiavelli, probably cribbed from Pocock, in *The True and Only Heaven*.

reinvented Hofstadter; the consensus had simply shifted from a relatively healthy and self-conscious liberalism to a fundamentally sick and unconscious narcissism. His diagnoses became more acute, his prescriptions much less. In his earlier work, Lasch adopted the role of gadfly; by this point, he was resigned to playing Cassandra.

#### With No Direction Home

By the last years of his career, the tension between his picture of character and his picture of society paralyzed Lasch completely. Where he had been able to paper over the tension with calls for a decentralist, democratic socialism (or at least 'communities of competence') in the past, his abandonment of the socialist ideal left him with no way around fatalism. He tried to respond by a return to the historical craftsmanship of his early work, but the result was disappointing. The tone of his prose underwent a noticeable shift; where his sixties work had been confident and his seventies work energetic, his nineties work was dreary, even sour.

Seven years passed before his next book, the big and clunky *The True and Only Heaven*.<sup>63</sup> Heaven is, in many ways, a failure. As intellectual history, it is idiosyncratic or worse; as jeremiad, murky; as prose, leaden. It was roundly

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<sup>63</sup>Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*. New York: Norton, 1991.

panned by reviewers, though Lasch's prominence by this point assured it an audience. Lasch remarked in an interview at the end of his life that *Heaven* was unusually difficult for him to write, and the strains show in the text. For this book Lasch abandoned Freud entirely, although he still used Freudian terms in occasional pieces elsewhere ("The Culture of Narcissism Revisited" in 1990). It reads like an elegy; it starts with autobiography, delves into the past and returns to the present, broken and bowed.

Lasch started by adopting the unaccustomed role of host, introducing himself to the reader before embarking on his historical narrative. His self-presentation is revealing, though not always in the ways he seems to have intended. As he told it, he was raised by good progressive Midwesterners, radicalized in the sixties, opposed to the War. He read Dwight MacDonald on the election of 1960 and never recovered. He started to identify as a socialist in the late sixties, attending Socialist Scholars Conferences and writing books like *The Agony of the American Left*. He read Marx and Gramsci and the Frankfurt School relatively late, and developed a taste for the British Marxists E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams.

By the mid-seventies, however, he had come to question the usefulness of ideologies of progress.

The unexpectedly rigorous business of bringing up children exposed me, as it necessarily exposes almost any parent, to...the unwholesomeness, not to put it more strongly, of our way of life: our obsession with sex, violence, and the pornography

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of 'making it'; our addictive dependence on drugs, 'entertainment,' and the evening news; our impatience with anything that limits our sovereign freedom of choice, especially with the constraints of marital and familial ties..."<sup>4</sup>

He went on in this vein for some time. Rather than narcissism, he blamed the belief in moral and material progress that underlay both the left and right of contemporary American politics. He noted that 'pessimism' is the most serious charge one political camp can levy at another; the underlying assumption is that political failure is the result of failure of nerve. He proposed instead an ethic, rooted in producerism, that recognizes the value of limits.

The cantankerousness of the authorial persona in the introduction resembles greatly the stylishly disillusioned 'new radicals' of whom he wrote thirty years before. His chronology of disillusionment, with the key point in the mid-seventies, looks strange when read next to his reference to a "long-standing antipathy to Whiggish history" in the preface to *The World of Nations* in 1973, or his attacks on the messianic gloablism of liberalism in *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* in 1962. Like the muckrakers, he kept moving up the moment of clarity, the better to work the trope of surprise. His professions of earlier naivete are belied by his earlier skepticism; like Claude Rains in *Casablanca*, he was "shocked, shocked" that

<sup>4</sup>"Lasch, Heaven, 34.

appearances were deceiving.

What was new in Lasch's repertoire was the application of his skepticism to the socialist ideal. He had never been a specifically partisan writer, but even in his seventies work he never repudiated the concept of a democratic socialist society. He did not rush to embrace capitalism in *Heaven*, of course, but the younger Lasch would not have simply declared that "socialism's moment has come and gone."<sup>65</sup> The abdication of the socialist ideal may explain the puzzlingly disingenuous tone of much of *Heaven*; deprived of the normative ideal by which to judge political positions, he was left without an alternative to the prevailing options. Where his previous work showed a clear sympathy with the white working class combined with aspirations towards a more just society generally, *Heaven* adopted the putatively working class persona uncritically. The danger of collapsing the possible into the actual, as he noted so perceptively in *Agony*, is that you lose the basis on which to attack the actual; hence, the European socialist parties endorsed the First World War and the American socialists did not. Lasch was left at the end of *Heaven* defending Louise Day Hicks and the violent white opposition to school busing in Boston in the 1970's, barely pausing to distance himself from (or even acknowledge) their racism.

*Heaven* was essentially an extended attack on

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<sup>65</sup>-----, 24.

aspirations. The subtitle, "Progress and Its Critics," tells part of the story; Lasch's sympathies were firmly with the latter. He constructed a tradition of dissent that included figures as disparate as Jonathan Edwards, Orestes Brownson, William James, Reinhold Neibuhr, and the young Martin Luther King. What united these figures, he declared, was less a coherent body of doctrine (which they simply did not have), than a temperament, a way of seeing. He located the common denominator of that temperament in a notion of 'virtue,' which he defined two ways. First, of course, is the republican notion of sacrifice for the public good; King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a recent example. Second, though, is a more gendered notion of virtue exemplified by Machiavelli. In *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, Machiavelli defined virtue as *virtu*, the essence of strong masculinity. The good ruler, for Machiavelli, is the man of *virtu*, who can bend wily Fortuna to his will.<sup>66</sup> 'Virtu' shares a root with 'virile,' and part of its meaning.

Part of the problem Lasch's text faced was that it was torn between two essentially conflicting definitions of a key concept. The man of *virtu* has little use for altruism, except to the extent that he can fool others into practicing it for his own benefit. Lasch's exaltation of heroism

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<sup>66</sup>For a provocative discussion of gender politics in Machiavelli, see Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988.

suffered from this division. He argued forcefully that part of liberalism's problem is its inability to offer any outlet for an heroic conception of life; popular movements require an almost religious level of faith among their members if they are to succeed over the long term. He then denied the validity of any doctrine in which people could have faith. He was left with faith without doctrine, which he tried to resolve into a latter-day Stoicism. Endurance itself became heroic, but of course, endurance does not, in itself, bring change. Like William James before him, Lasch was left exalting the 'twice-born' personality without trusting any particular belief, whether religious or secular.<sup>67</sup> (Also like James, his distrust was less severe towards certain versions of Protestantism than towards other faiths). Shorn of higher aspirations, the stoic is left to practice heroic endurance for its own sake; the malcontent has become oddly complicit.

Given his emphasis on producerism, which only increased in this volume, one might have expected Lasch to embrace the syndicalists of the early twentieth century. The syndicalists adopted an unapologetically producerist view of economics, and combined it with a strong political decentralism. They embraced local participation and democracy, a strong sense of community, and an egalitarianism rooted in concrete achievement. Lasch

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<sup>67</sup>See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982, orig. 1899.

dutifully noted the fascination of the Wobblies for contemporary left intellectuals, but dissented for two reasons. First, the Wobblies' romantic individualism (their easy embrace of the Wild West rugged individual) left them fragmented and prone to infantile rebellion, rather than sustained, serious struggle. Their romanticism won them fans among the new Greenwich Village bohemians, such as John Reed and Emma Goldman. Reed and Goldman were as taken with the expressive panache of the Wobblies as with any economic program; their new cult of self-expression put distance between the left and the workers. Second, syndicalism generally was easily absorbed into mainstream trade-unionism and social democratic movements because, as he put it, they shared a belief in the necessity of material progress before social equality. Thus the IWW eventually fell prey to the dream of one big union of all workers, thereby attenuating any sense of loyalty.

The loss of loyalty increased became painfully apparent after the First World War. In Europe the left lost credibility with the workers by supporting the war; in America, the workers lost credibility with the left (such as it was) by supporting the War. Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public* spoke to many on the left, and John Dewey's response, *The Public and its Problems*, was, in Lasch's words, "too little, too late."<sup>68</sup> While Dewey tried hard to

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<sup>68</sup>See John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1954, orig. 1927.

salvage the possibility of meaningful public participation through small group membership, he conceded that family, church, and neighborhood were all on the wane. He didn't have a replacement; as with much of Dewey's work, he filled the gap with a residual Hegelian faith in progress, order, and communication. Among progressives less careful than Dewey, that faith came to be used as a bludgeon against the backwards, time-bound masses. The increasing distrust of the mass public (and the increasing characterization of the 'mass' public) led many on the left to embrace versions of Fabianism; paradoxically, the failure of 'access' to mitigate the horrors of the War led to an even greater emphasis on access.

By the late twentieth century, Lasch's narrative continues, the left had split firmly along class lines. The upper-middle-class left defined itself primarily in cultural terms, and against tradition; this group favors legal abortion, gay rights, personal mobility, gun control, and, in some instances, drug legalization. The working class, by contrast, stakes out more traditional cultural positions while still favoring left-of-center economic policies; they don't have much use for gay rights, but they support national health care. The academic left, picking up where John Reed left off, has almost completely abandoned issues of economic power in favor of freedom of cultural expression, while labor unions have become moribund. The elite left suspects the working class of racism, while the

working class accuses the elite left of irrelevance.<sup>69</sup> I suspect that both may be right, though Lasch has little to say about the former.

### Meritocracy and its Discontents

Lasch's bête noire in *Heaven* was the liberal notion of meritocracy. Meritocracy was an odd enemy, but an important one. In its most abstract form, it is simply circular; those who deserve power have merit, and they have merit because they deserve power. On the ground, though, definitions of merit are very much at issue. In America, Lasch argued, ideals of individual merit have functioned to discredit ideals of group loyalty. Americans typically defined merit in terms of material income or native talent combined with hard work, with the understanding that native talent combined with hard work would translate into material income. The flip side of meritocracy, though, is to blame the unsuccessful for their lack of success. If merit is rewarded, and you are unrewarded, then you must lack merit. If you lack merit, you have no standing to complain.

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<sup>69</sup>Of course, the elite left rarely goes so far as to level a straightforward accusation anymore; rather, it relies on vaguely demeaning and airily distant explanations of the fissures in popular discourses. The spirit of Hofstadter lives on; we academics know what you people mean better than you do. For a bracing (if ultimately depressing) example of what it looks like to take working-class attitudes and experiences seriously, see Thomas Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On?* New York, Plume, 1991.

Lasch's historical argument was twofold. First, he argued that the triumph of the meritocratic ideal was relatively new. "Those who opposed the more and more militant demands made by artisans in the 1830s and 1840s did not quarrel with the claim that wage labor was a form of slavery. They merely denied that a permanent wage-earning class was taking shape in the United States."<sup>70</sup> The Horatio Alger stories and the Progressives' emphasis on public education served to redirect working-class resentment away from collective ownership and towards individual fortunes; the gradual emergence of the vocabulary of meritocracy served to blame losers for losing.

Second, he argued that the working-class producerist ethic stood in important tension with the liberal meritocratic ideal. By replacing the spoils system of political appointments with civil service exams, for example, the upper classes were able to consolidate their hold on the choice positions. For all their corruption, which was real, political machines provided avenues of mobility and protection for those otherwise excluded. Equally importantly, they fostered a sense of group loyalty, which the test-graded system did not; success was not measured purely by individual achievement. While it is true that group identities are, in some sense, constructed and restrictive, they are at least obviously so; meritocratic

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<sup>70</sup>Lasch, *Heaven*, 204.

achievement grounds its hierarchy in nature. Meritocracy circumvents real politics by disqualifying dissent; if you didn't make it, you aren't worth taking seriously.

Lasch never clarified, or really even addressed, the tension between his vision of craftsmanship (or 'communities of competence,' or 'producerism') and his attack on meritocracy. Craftsmanship involves skill, and some craftsmen are more skilled than others. Unless the rewards of skill are supposed to be entirely internal, it is hard to imagine a serious community of competence that did not reward excellence. If the rewards are entirely internal, then social struggle is pointless, and the 'community' part of 'community of competence' is terribly thin.<sup>71</sup> While his preferences are clear, his solutions are murky.

Even more than his earlier work, *Heaven* is a lament without a prescription. Lasch concludes his mammoth examination and exposition of populism by conceding that populism "has generated very little in the way of an economic or political theory -- its most conspicuous weakness."<sup>72</sup> It knows what it doesn't like, but it has very little concrete to offer for contemporary politics. As

<sup>71</sup>Indeed, Lasch was willing to exalt certain historians over others on the basis of their skill at the historian's craft. "The new labor history represents the triumph of historical craftsmanship -- a stubborn respect for the evidence -- over ideology." (*Heaven*, 216). Presumably, those historians who were better able to overcome "ideology" (by which Lasch meant Marxism) were deserving of greater prominence than their blinkered peers.

<sup>72</sup>----, 532.

such, it is surprisingly easily co-opted by interests directly opposed to it; the Reagan revolution, for example, argued successfully for the interests of big capital using the language of put-upon little guys. As Michael Kazin noted in *The Populist Persuasion*, the rhetoric of resentment can be deployed against capitalists or welfare cheats, corporations or Jews.<sup>73</sup> In the absence of a normative political theory or ethical ideal, Hofstadter's fears of anti-intellectualism and paranoia are well-founded. Lasch tried to circumvent this attack with an emphasis on the "spiritual discipline against resentment," exemplified by James, Niebuhr, and the early King, but did not offer anything for the discipline to be for. Opportunists on the right had no such compunctions.

#### Parting Shots

Perhaps reacting to the critical revulsion against Heaven, Lasch took care in his last book, the posthumously published *The Revolt of the Elites*, to clarify which side he was on.<sup>74</sup> Returning to some of the themes he had explored in *The New Radicalism*, he attacked "the new elites [that] are in revolt against 'Middle America,' as they imagine it:

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<sup>73</sup>Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

<sup>74</sup>Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*. New York: Norton, 1995.

a nation technologically backward, politically reactionary, repressive in its sexual morality, middlebrow in its tastes, smug and complacent, dull and dowdy."<sup>75</sup> The "betrayal of democracy" (the book's subtitle) was rooted in the increasing distance, physical, political, and cultural, between the elites and everyone else. The elites' "quest for certainty" (Dewey) compelled them to try to escape any forces they could not master; gated suburbs and urban crackdowns go hand in hand.

Although it is his most engaged book since *The Agony of the American Left*, *Revolt* is still strangely quietistic. The title essay is some of his very best work; it is a sustained attack on meritocracy and its attendant ideology of legitimate hierarchy.

An aristocracy of talent -- superficially an attractive ideal, which appears to distinguish democracies from societies based on hereditary privilege -- turns out to be a contradiction in terms: The talented retain many of the vices of aristocracy without its attendant virtues. Their snobbery lacks any acknowledgement of reciprocal obligations between the favored few and the multitude. Although they are full of 'compassion' for the poor, they cannot be said to subscribe to a theory of noblesse oblige, which would imply a willingness to make a direct and personal contribution to the public good. Obligation, like everything else, has been depersonalized; exercised through the agency of the state, the burden of supporting it falls not on the professional and managerial class but, disproportionately, on the lower-middle and working classes."<sup>76</sup>

The newly privileged, whom Robert Reich has identified as

<sup>75</sup>-----, 5-6.

<sup>76</sup>-----, 44-5.

'symbolic analysts,' have effectively seceded from public life. They send their kids to private prep schools and elite colleges, they live in gated suburbs with private security guards, they heap scorn upon the cultural practices of those stuck in the declining manufacturing sector or the dead-end service sector. Their claim to status rests neither on land nor property, but on access to and training for information. As such, they recognize no claims by others to their good fortune; they got the grades on their own, so they get the goodies on their own. The old landed gentry at least had some interest in keeping its immediate surroundings presentable; the symbolic analysts pride themselves on mobility. If an area starts to decline, they simply leave. Those who don't have the wherewithal to leave are left to prey on each other.

The 'secession of the successful' creates a series of structural strains throughout the political economy. States and localities compete with each other to lure the dwindling, prized symbolic analysts, at the expense of public services frequented by the working class. Cities are left with those who can't afford to leave, forcing both higher taxes on those left behind and cuts in services and the general quality of life. Suburbs that cast their lots with the information elite may find themselves abandoned at the next market blip. The new elites' monopolization of political discourse (exacerbated by the sustained decline of labor unions and political parties as mass organizations)

narrows options to different variations on Darwinism; conservatives rely on the market to select and reward the fittest, while liberals rely on universities for the same thing. The neo-liberals' emphasis on 'job training' and 'education' as cures for the massive job dislocations attendant upon the globalization of capital simply misses the point; engineering jobs will never rival the number of manufacturing jobs they've displaced, and they will only pay well as long as the field is relatively uncrowded. It is simply bad economics to argue that since engineering pays well, we need only make lots of engineers. It pays well precisely because we haven't made many. Given the realities of the PhD job market in recent years, it strains credulity to argue that education is the answer.

Having set the sociological background, Lasch moved to a definition of his question. "Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?" He answered that it may, but that the answer depends on our willingness as a society to hold citizens up to standards of civility and achievement. By his telling, the recent espousal of 'tolerance' and 'openness' in the name of multiculturalism has drained public discourse of meaningful content. If anything is good enough to take seriously, why take anything seriously? The elites' adherence to a self-righteous libertarianism deprives non-elites of any opportunities for substantive recognition; if citizenship does not derive from achievement, then it must derive from position, and some have more position than

others. Accordingly, Lasch called for "equal access to the means of competence," the better to "confer self-respect," which is a precondition to meaningful participation in public life."<sup>77</sup> Rights without respect lead to the unfettered, destructive individualism on which the libertarian elites thrive. Citizenship grounded in mutual respect, however, may provide opportunities for the formation of democratic habits and democratic characters. The concept of 'civic virtue,' which sounds hollow in contemporary discourse because it is hollow in contemporary discourse, could actually take on some meaning. In this version, civic virtue would imply compliance with and achievement under agreed-upon practices that confer respect. "Respect is what we experience in the presence of admirable achievements, admirably formed characters, natural gifts put to good use. It entails the exercise of discriminating judgment, not indiscriminate acceptance."<sup>78</sup> Far from being opposed to standards, good liberals should promote standards, as long as they also promoted the availability of substantive opportunities to meet them. Lasch called himself a populist, as opposed to a communitarian, on the grounds that communitarians promote ungrounded ideas of community, whereas populists root community in practices.

The middle portion of the book, which is its weakest

<sup>77</sup>-----, 88.

<sup>78</sup>-----, 89.

section, is devoted to illustrations of the decline of democratic discourse in America. It levels predictable attacks upon "academic pseudo-radicals" and racial demagogues, but it also suggests a vision of what real democratic discourse should look like. Bluntly, real discussion requires argument. Lasch attacked Horace Mann for distilling all "politics" out of public education in the name of openness; by repressing all conflict in the name of comity, we have both drained education of much of its inherent interest for students and deprived students of training in the art of political and civic debate.

Surprisingly, Lasch embraced John Dewey here.<sup>79</sup> Dewey recognized the importance of debate on the local level as well as the national or elite level, and he saw the key to successful education lying in tapping into the interests of the students. Students subjected to bland, rote learning will become bland, rote citizens; only by learning how to engage actively will they become capable of sustaining democracy.<sup>80</sup> Dewey had a sense of 'civic virtue,' by

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<sup>79</sup>I suspect that Lasch's association with Robert Westbrook at Rochester had something to do with Lasch's reappraisal of Dewey. Westbrook's outstanding intellectual biography, *John Dewey and American Democracy* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991, did much to absolve Dewey of the charges of elitism that Lasch, among others, had levelled in the past.

<sup>80</sup>As John Patrick Diggins has argued in *The Promise of Pragmatism* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, Dewey's views on politics and education rested on two important tensions. First, most of the great democratic thinkers in Western history were educated under relatively strict, traditional regimes; Voltaire, for example, was

Lasch's reading, even if his followers and cronies didn't.

*Revolt* ends on an elegiac note, with an extended essay (divided into three chapters) on shame, religion, and the dream of mastery. He returned to psychoanalysis, this time addressing it as a substitute (albeit an inadequate one) for religion. Like religion, psychoanalysis offers both solace and a sense of guidance. He conceded that Freud took an unremittingly dim view of religion, but cited Melanie Klein's appropriations of Freud as evidence for the paradigm's ethical moment. As he had in *The Culture of Narcissism*, he emphasized Freud's notion of the limits of human agency. The conflict between instinct and society was tragic and irresolvable for Freud (as opposed to his sunnier revisionists), and the best answer he came up with was stoic endurance.

Lasch turned to an unspecified 'religion' for what little positive answer he can find. Again following William James, he rejected views of religion that emphasize its dogmatism, and embraced instead the 'twice-born' temperament. "[T]he secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy."<sup>81</sup> Lasch understood religion as a counterpoint to the secular dream of mastery; science

taught by the Jesuits. Second, Dewey's 'flux' view of reality stood in odd contrast to his 'mastery' view of politics. He tried to resolve the tension through an emphasis on procedure, as opposed to result, but a pragmatist who does that is left without any standards for judgment at all.

<sup>81</sup>Lasch, *Revolt*, 246.

falsely promises the conquest of necessity, and we have consequently come to lose our belief in necessity. Since we don't fully accept the existence of external forces beyond our control, we see the world as a reflection of ourselves. When we fail, we blame ourselves; when we succeed, we share it with no one. "[T]he whole world seems to be going through a dark night of the soul" because we have lost our sense of rootedness in a larger process.<sup>82</sup>

Revolt is an odd book. It starts with a sociological diagnosis of the decline of democracy that recalls Lasch's best work from the sixties. As it develops, though, the energy and pointedness of the early chapters shifts to a lament, a cry of the heart. We need 'religion,' he tells us, but we don't know which one, and certainly not any of the extant alternatives. We can begin to understand the fragmentation of modern society, but we can't do anything about it; the dream of mastery has crashed in Eastern Europe. We need to recapture the lost art of argument, the lost practices of civility, the lost culture of an imagined pre-industrial America, but we can't. At most, with luck and effort, we can gather the moral strength to endure the fall with integrity. The man who so devastatingly attacked the 'survivalist' mentality in *The Minimal Self* wound up embracing a species of it by default.

In the end, his version of producerism simply didn't

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<sup>82</sup>-----, 246.

mesh with his Weberian understanding of advanced capitalism. He tried various solutions to the dilemma over the course of his career; like the Frankfurt School, he tried both Marx and Freud (sometimes together), and like the Frankfurt School, he ultimately wound up embracing a fatalistic theology. By insisting on locating the psychologically relevant habits in work, he gave himself no place to go in late capitalism. By abandoning the socialist ideal, he lost cogency and a certain intellectual honesty as a critic. His malcontentedness ultimately thwarted any particular avenue of change; like the 'new radical' Randolph Bourne, of whom he had written so perceptively in the sixties, he was isolated, raging against the dying of the left.

It's Hard to be a Saint in the City:

Forms and Freedom in the Work of Richard Sennett

This chapter is, in a sense, two chapters. It is partly the chapter I intended to write; at times, I take Richard Sennett as exemplary of a liberal/universalist defense of cosmopolitanism. Particularly in his best known book, *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett offers an appealing way out of the universalism/particularism debate that has tied up so many good minds in knots.

Partly, however, this is a disturbing rebuttal to the chapter I intended to write. As I deepened my interrogation of Sennett's corpus, I noticed some unsettling patterns. If we look closely at the trajectory of his writings, particularly with an eye toward the figurations of gender in his work, we begin to discern a harrowing account of the psychology of the public man.

Frantic, I tried to reconcile the two. Maybe the second pattern is a mere personal idiosyncracy, separable from the first; I've come to reject that. Maybe the second invalidates the first, stains it with a permanent blush; again, unconvincing. Perhaps each implies the other, and his defense of cosmopolitanism is inseparable from an awareness of its costs. Perhaps, in fact, the two sides produce each other through some obscure dialectic I can only begin to detail. Perhaps his defense of cosmopolitanism runs even deeper than it looks; perhaps he calls on his

readers to summon a maturity, a level of nerve both unfamiliar and necessary. Perhaps learning to accept that dialectic is a form of cosmopolitanism of the soul.

Let's see.

### Tracks

Sennett's earliest work spoke directly to a tradition of urban studies that had emerged in America (especially in Chicago) before the War. Urban studies as such took shape in America as a combination of sociology and architecture. Several schools developed immediately, each with a different emphasis.

One school emphasized the benefits of the metropolis above all else; the most famous member of this group was probably the French architect Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier, in his famous 'Voisin' plan for Paris, proposed to raze most of the older districts (save for a few historical landmarks shorn of context) and to replace them with a series of X-shaped skyscrapers. The skyscrapers would be connected by a series of superhighways and overhead walkways, and each would be surrounded by its own patch of green space. The Voisin plan proposed to segregate the pedestrian life of the city from its commercial life, which would be conducted more efficiently; pedestrian life was relegated to the green spaces, which would effectively become parks.

To understand the appeal of this plan (which Le

Corbusier hoped would result in the "Radiant City"), we need to keep in mind the time period and its attendant concerns. Europe in the 1920's had been undergoing urbanization for some time, and the capitalist economy was reaching levels of productivity never before seen. Cities bore the scars of rapid economic dislocation; buildings hundreds of years old were being forced to adapt to uses unimagined by their builders. The most spectacular scars, of course, were inflicted by Baron Hausmann in the 1870's. Hausmann replaced the winding, limited-visibility avenues of the central city with wide streets in a grid pattern; his goal, which he was not shy in explaining, was to allow troops to move through the streets of the city more quickly, the better to stop urban riots. For Hausmann, the idiosyncrasies of the layered history of the city simply got in the way of effective rule; Le Corbusier took Hausmann to the next level.

In the U.S., Le Corbusier's most important disciple was the New York architect Robert Moses. It was Moses who designed and built most of the important traffic arteries out of the city; like Hausmann and Le Corbusier, he had little use for the layers and complexities of urban history. Moses' vision of the city was predicated on movement; the city is a place to get through, and out of, as quickly as possible. The Cross-Bronx expressway, the Brooklyn Bridge, and Jones Beach, among others, stand as monuments to Moses' vision of New York. In Moses' work we can see the politics

of city planning in stark relief. Jones Beach is a case in point; he built the overpasses over the highway that led there too low for buses to fit under them, specifically to keep non-whites out. He drew his highways through neighborhoods, always ready to sacrifice the working class to his favorite word, 'progress.'

Moses' work drew some opposition, of course, some of which holds real intellectual interest. The architectural critic (and literary critic, and social critic, and...) Lewis Mumford made a career out of opposing Moses; his *New Yorker* column and an impressive series of books served as his soapbox. Mumford's vision of the city, while clearly drawing on Enlightenment rationality and a faith in progress, did not define the city simply as a space to move through. For Mumford, the tragedy of the modern age was precisely a misplaced faith in unguided technics; not for nothing did Mumford admire (and help restore critical attention to) Herman Melville.<sup>1</sup> Mumford called for a new, humanistic use of technology that defined success by its effect on the quality of life, rather than economic profit.<sup>2</sup> His vision of the city was as a noble failure, but a redeemable one; left to their own devices, expert planners could create cities that offered nearly everything to nearly

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<sup>1</sup>See Lewis Mumford, *Interpretations and Forecasts, 1922-1972*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972.

<sup>2</sup>See esp. Mumford, *The Urban Prospect*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968.

everyone. Civic space could coexist happily with green space, commercial space, freeways.

Despite their attractions, Mumford's criticisms were fraught with ambiguities, which became harder to sustain over time. He was a critic of unfettered science, but his solution was expert planning. He believed that political authority and planning decisions had to devolve to the neighborhood level and expand to the regional level simultaneously, a feat of jurisdictional derring-do he never fully explained.

#### Eyes on the Street, Part I

Jane Jacobs seized on Mumford's confusion to great effect. In her classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs subjected most of the canon of urban planning, including Mumford, to withering attack.<sup>3</sup> *Death and Life* is an engaging, personal account of city life that works by a brilliant authorial artifice: Jacobs poses as a civilian, and only gradually reveals the extent of her knowledge. For Jacobs, the tragedy of American urban planning was its lifelessness. Urban planning, by her reading, was infatuated with various forms of segregation: housing here, commerce there, factories over there. Spatial segregation by function led to the decline of useful public

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<sup>3</sup>Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage, 1992, orig. 1961.

space; the very idea of the public declined as likes met only other likes.

Jacobs attempted, through a semi-autobiographical and highly idealized portrait of Greenwich Village, to recover the lost tie between city and citizen. Moving fluidly from the particular to the general and back again, Jacobs suggested the political, social, and personal value of daily exposure to diversity. In her Greenwich Village neighborhood, for example, the heavy pedestrian traffic, impressive mix of ages, incomes, and races, and variety of architecture combined to create an environment in which both children and adults could gain a broad exposure to life's options within a safe and familiar setting. Since Greenwich Village had been spared the homogenization-by-use characteristic of more planned areas, its residents were able to construct rewarding lives within its confines. In a more economically-segregated area, by contrast, pedestrian traffic is more limited to particular times of the day, leaving the streets to gangs the rest of the time. Suburban housing tracts offer little opportunity for their residents to meet people outside of private homes, so people don't; over time, physical maps become psychic maps, and the public, as such, disappears.

The "casual public sidewalk life of cities" requires both exposure and distance; "[t]he requirement that much

shall be shared drives city people apart."<sup>4</sup> More disturbingly, areas like Wall Street, which teem with activity during the day, empty out completely at night, depriving the area of the natural protectiveness ("eyes on the street") of permanent residents. Large scale public housing projects, especially high-rises with vast open green spaces in front of them, preclude any possibility of accidental community between residents; in the absence of interested observers, the green spaces rapidly become no-man's-lands ruled by criminals. Without the opportunity for unstructured, regular and frequent interaction (such as happens between neighbors who frequent the same stores), people can't build a comfort level with each other that is a prerequisite to more advanced levels of community involvement.

This is the political moment in Jacobs's work. When neighbors have achieved a certain comfort level with each other, and when they have access to educational and financial resources, they can start to form self-governing coalitions. "Formal political organizations in cities require an informal public life underlying them, mediating between them and the privacy of the people in the city."<sup>5</sup> Taking as her model Saul Alinsky's citizens' groups in the Back-of-the-Yards district of Chicago, Jacobs proposed a

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<sup>4</sup>-----, 57, 62.

<sup>5</sup>-----, 57.

radical reconstruction of urban politics. She argued for the devolution of most meaningful decision-making to the level of "administrative districts," as opposed to fragmentation into use-based bureaus at the city-wide level. This arrangement has two major advantages: it replaces false fragmentation from a distance with real familiarity, and it allows citizens a meaningful voice in the forces that shape their lives. Like Mumford's jurisdictional doodling, though, her scheme was more tantalizing than real.

The point of Jacobs' work was to secularize urban studies. "A city cannot be a work of art," if a work of art is understood as the tightly controlled expression of a single will.<sup>6</sup> Cities are defined by their lack of definition; their liveliness, to the academic eye, looks like sloppiness. Their growth is haphazard, and, to Jacobs, should be haphazard. Chaos, to Jacobs and her followers, is a sign of life. The 'Radiant City' of Le Corbusier only works if we accept the architect or city planner as Rousseau's Lawgiver, enunciating for all time the conditions under which the rest of us will live.

#### Leaving the Nest

Richard Sennett adopted Jacobs' appreciation for urban density and variety and developed it into a

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<sup>6</sup>-----, 372.

social/psychological theory. In his earliest works, *Families Against the City* and *The Uses of Disorder*, he launched broadsides against the nuclear family and various forms of social withdrawal.<sup>7</sup> Here he elaborated the major themes that would preoccupy him for the rest of his career; simply put, the refusal to confront difference both reflects and reinforces a certain immaturity. In *Families*, for example, he argued that in the Union Park district of 19th century Chicago, relatively intense, close-knit nuclear families spawned less occupationally-successful sons than did looser-knit families. The key factor was the exposure the latter offered to the workings of the world. Tightly-knit families tried to construct self-contained little worlds; they produced sons who couldn't function outside those worlds.

In elaborating the mechanisms for the production of those sons, Sennett tripped over a second major theme, closely related to the first: masculinity is a fragile construct, defined in part by a flight from the suffocating, feminine hearth. Fathers who spent more time at home, as he characterized those in the 'close-knit' group, were effectively subsumed by their wives. Fathers who identified more closely with their work were better able to maintain separate masculine identity, and therefore to maintain the

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<sup>7</sup>Richard Sennett, *Families Against the City*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984, orig. 1970. Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder*. New York: Norton, 1992, orig. 1970.

basis for the respect of their sons.

*Families* was an entry into a debate about social science understandings of families. The first camp derived from Talcott Parsons, who argued for the naturalness of the nuclear family and who assumed that each role existed for (and performed well) its given function.<sup>8</sup> The second derived from Philippe Aries, who argued that the nuclear family was a response to the decline of the public, and that it was inherently pathological.<sup>9</sup> Sennett sided strongly with Aries, and cited census data, diary entries, and literature of the time (especially Dreiser) to prove Aries' case. By Sennett's reconstruction, Parsons' paradigm would lead us to expect that tightly-knit families ('intensive,' in his social-science terminology) would be more upwardly mobile than looser-knit families, where Aries' would predict the opposite; the data, as Sennett read them, supported Aries.<sup>10</sup>

What made *Families* interesting as more than a simple statistical test of Aries' theories (a quixotic enterprise in itself, given the sweep of his claims) was the psychology

<sup>8</sup>Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales, *The Family: Socialization and Interaction Process*. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955.

<sup>9</sup>Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* trans. Robert Baldick. New York: Random House, 1965.

<sup>10</sup>To be fair to Parsons, upward mobility per se wasn't his criterion for success. Indeed, the main concern of the branch of social science exemplified by Parsons was social stability; upward mobility was a threat, not a goal.

Sennett brought to bear. While his data spoke to income, occupation, family size, and geography, his psychological theory spoke to 'father-weakness' and the decline of the effective male. In a nutshell, he asserted that

...as the intensive family came to serve as the main primary-group defense against the new energies of an industrial city, the position of the father in the new urban family weakened...the Union Park father might have lost his acquisitive energy, and thereby part of his manhood in this culture, out of fearful withdrawal into the shelter of his family. This change in fatherhood was the sad, and certainly unintended, consequence of a stance the middle-class families of Union Park assumed toward an era of rapid social change in their city.<sup>11</sup>

Selectively employing his data and adding a generous dose of his own intuition, Sennett generated two sets of intergenerational dynamics for Union Park families, corresponding to the more- and less-intense families, respectively. In the "Dominant" cycle, fathers with low occupational mobility present a defensive portrait of the world to their sons, who find such a portrait of little use in their own efforts at mobility. Consequently, the sons gradually cease looking to their fathers as role models or authority figures, effectively ceding authority in the home to the wives/mothers. Finally, a

[c]ombination of instability in work and apathetic response to concrete events in [the] community create (sic) a social bleakness for the sons, a condition of social isolation and aimlessness that makes them weak in the urban world. This anomie becomes then the means by which their own sons will perceive them in the future as 'absent,' as

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<sup>11</sup>Sennett, *Families*, 187.

weak guides to the conduct of life.<sup>12</sup>

In the "Minority Cycle," by contrast, relatively less-intensive families spent more of their emotional energies on meeting the challenges of social mobility. The "[f]athers have an ego-integration in their work that can be communicated in rearing the sons."<sup>13</sup> The sons, who are always looking for help in establishing themselves as independent adults in the world that greets them, find their fathers useful guides, since their fathers have had the same experience of mobility that they face. Consequently, fathers and sons can develop

[a]n emotional rapport between the generations, like the earlier process noted by Tocqueville; the basis of the bond is a common experience of change and movement, so that the residential split between the generations ultimately severs the physical ties between generations, though the strength and dignity of the parents is maintained. This is the process of healthy intergenerational break.<sup>14</sup>

Note the word 'healthy;' not only is the less intensive father morally preferable and economically stronger, he is also more psychologically balanced.

Sennett's vision of masculinity is the linchpin on which his theory of family structure and occupational mobility turns. Successful fathers succeed in the outside

<sup>12</sup>-----, 190.

<sup>13</sup>-----, 191.

<sup>14</sup>-----, 191.

world and therefore do not need to idealize the isolated nuclear family as a haven. They are able to set examples for their sons, who are able to appreciate the force of their fathers' examples when they reach autonomous adulthood. Unsuccessful fathers get subsumed by strong wives, who run the domestic sphere. Mothers are strangely absent from the picture; overly strong mothers can poison their sons, the story goes, but Sennett didn't address the possible problems of maternal weakness. Mothers figure here as 'threat,' but not as 'possibility;' the success or failure of the family, by his definition, rests with the father. The social castration of the fathers leads to a loss of respect on the part of the sons, who lack real-world role models for success. The sons either accede to feminine domination as well, and thereby perpetuate the dynamic, or rebel nihilistically, lacking any alternative visions of the possible. There is no third term in the typology.

#### The Purloined Pater

Lest this seem an unfair reading, Sennett went into even greater detail in *The Uses of Disorder*. Here he argued that "intense family life is the agent, the 'middleman,' for the infusion of adolescent fear into the social life of modern cities."<sup>15</sup> Drawing vaguely on the work of Erik

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<sup>15</sup>Sennett, *Disorder*, 67.

Erikson, Sennett suggested that adolescents are in the impossible situation of trying to combine infinite possibility, expanding powers, and a lack of experience; they resolve the tension through a false 'coolness,' through acting as though they've seen everything before. A key component to the act is the avoidance of anything genuinely different; the hothouse flower of adolescent identity dies by exposure to the cold world. Eventually, of course, it must be killed, and its death marks the entry into adulthood. The adult recognizes that the world extends beyond his experience and even his potential; he accepts partiality and finitude as part of life.

Sennett took this process as a metaphor for the (white, middle-class) experience of cities. The retreat to the suburbs and the idealization of the nuclear family gathered around the television have in common the avoidance of genuine difference. For Sennett, all bonds of familial attachment become suspect. The ideal city is one that allows for an infinity of random, noncommittal encounters, through which monad/citizens can form and break bonds of affinity and learn the limitations of their own identities. They aren't wrong to form limited, provincial identities at first; the power of the later confrontation with reality depends on contrast. By having something to lose, we find ourselves in a position to gain.

Already here we can glimpse the odd dialectic of gender that would be gradually elaborated in his later work. Urban

'adults,' by his definition, are unconstrained by the ties of home and family -- their cosmopolitanism is a sign of maturity. Yet, the ethos with which they indulge these experiences resembles the very adolescent 'coolness' Sennett set out to debunk. Men floating free in the city, having random encounters with each other, experiencing the thrill of difference over and over again; this sounds quite a bit like the adolescent fantasy that cities are supposed to cure.

#### The Other Half

Still, the limits of *Disorder* begged a corrective. In his next book, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Sennett and Jonathan Cobb examined the characterological fallout of being working-class in an affluent America.<sup>16</sup> As aberrant as this work is in Sennett's larger corpus, we can begin to see in it a shift toward a more nuanced understanding of power, restraint, and agency.

The central question in *Class* is much clearer than its answer. "Why do [workers] take their class position so personally?"<sup>17</sup> To answer this question, Sennett and Cobb examined workers' statements and demeanor during interviews. They noted a disturbing reticence among most of the

<sup>16</sup>Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Norton, 1992, orig. 1972.

<sup>17</sup>-----, 29.

interviewees when confronting certified 'intellectuals,' laced with a discernible trace of anger. Most of the text was devoted to outlining the forms this anger took, and to proposing explanations for it.

At one level, the authors explain, the absence of a meaningful political discourse of class in the United States does obvious damage; simply put, it denies working-class people a way to explain their economic standing that doesn't involve self-blame. Sennett and Cobb went beyond that, though, to a critique of what Sennett termed a "false humanism." In the name of universal equality, and in the absence of traditional notions of class and caste of the Old World, Americans have adopted a worldview that ascribes individual worth to individual achievement, manifested in work.

The dilemma posed to workers is cruel. On one level, they are assured that they have all of the opportunities that their bosses have, and in a strictly formal sense, they do. On a more visceral level, however, they feel their lives circumscribed by forces well beyond their control, forces that they imagine (rightly or wrongly) don't affect their bosses in the same way. Sennett noted that in interviews, workers repeatedly slipped into the passive voice when discussing occupational mobility ('they promoted me') while reserving the active voice for describing either their emotional lives or occupational failure ('I screwed up'). Workers blamed themselves for failure, but didn't

take credit for achievement.

Sennett tried to explain this self-defeating pattern through a Tocquevillian observation. In the face of a mass society in which all are supposed to be equal, workers are faced with the marketing problem of product differentiation. If any loser off the street could do what you do, what makes you worthy of respect? The philosophers of the Enlightenment, by Sennett's account, tried to ground respect in either mere existence or in 'potential.' The former is simply too weak to carry weight in daily life, and the latter presents a fatal dilemma. Some express their 'potential' more than others; if respect is based on potential, it will slowly shift to achievement (or, more accurately, status). The embrace of standardized testing in schools and the increasing interchangeability of most workers from a performance standpoint exacerbate the problem. When employers have several qualified people to choose from to fill a single promotion, they frequently justify their decision based not on performance, which is visible, but on 'potential,' which is invisible, at least to the untrained eye. By basing promotion on qualities invisible to workers, they generate anxiety among the workers that the workers often resolve into self-blame. 'They know what they're doing, so if I'm here it's because I should be.' Workers internalize employers' judgements of them, even as they recognize, in the abstract that the system is grossly unfair. Bosses' judgments are

inscrutable, which affirms bosses' superior ability to judge. Even critique is ruled out of bounds; you are only allowed to complain if you have already proved that it's not 'sour grapes,' but if you have anything substantive to complain about, it is axiomatically sour grapes.

Workers, then, catch themselves in the bind of trying to prove themselves worthy of respect in occupations that don't reflect on the inner selves that respect is supposed to reflect. They try to earn the love of their families, and they fail, because love can't be earned. In the absence of genuine respect, they adopt an ethic of martyrdom that often leaves their children feeling trapped; Dad sacrificed for me, but I don't want to 'succeed' if it does to me what it did to him. The ethic of 'sacrifice' also helps explain workers' hostility to welfare, which the academic left (and the New Left) usually wrote off as simple racism. While it is partly that, it derives more importantly from the ethic of sacrifice. If others are able to provide for their children without sacrificing so much, then the father's sacrifices are devalued. To the extent that his self-worth comes from sacrifice, welfare strikes at his self-worth.

Sennett turned to the work of R.D. Laing, who famously claimed in *The Divided Self* that schizophrenia was a healthy response to capitalism.<sup>18</sup> He responded that a splitting of the personality into the performing self and the emotive

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<sup>18</sup>R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self*. New York: Pantheon, 1969.

self is one way that workers deal with an essentially pathological system of motivations. "The more a man's actions are split up in his own mind, the less chance he has of being overwhelmed as a whole."<sup>19</sup> Occupational prestige is inversely related to the level of schizophrenia the occupation requires; 'professionals' are envied to the extent that their jobs seem to allow for the unification of the performing and the emotive selves. Over time, a man's career comes to signify his depth as a person; much of the respect accorded professionals derives not from a greater respect for their work as such (which many of the interviewees derided as 'paper-pushing') but from a sense that professionals are, by definition, worthier people.

Workers themselves, by contrast, have been denied the presumption of respect. They feel that they have to earn it, but the criteria are often obscure; promotions sometimes go to people not visibly better than themselves. The Enlightenment teaches us to value everybody equally, but such a concept spreads respect too thin. Instead, we come up with class bases for invidious distinctions, and we reflect those distinctions back onto the inner selves of the workers.

The answer Sennett offered was peculiar. Where the Frankfurt philosopher and New Left guru Herbert Marcuse diagnosed the malady of the present as an inevitable side

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<sup>19</sup>Sennett, *Class*, 214.

effect of affluence, Sennett embraced affluence as part of the answer. If a class society will inevitably perform such violence on the personalities of its members, then the blessing of affluence is that it will allow us to imagine a society without class. If respect grounded in 'achievement' causes such anxieties, better to junk the concept completely. A producer ethic may be functional under conditions of scarcity, but contemporary affluence renders it superfluous. We can afford to be kind.

Sennett's answer encapsulated several of his pet paradoxes. In his eagerness to lift the burdens on workers, he proposed eliminating certain groups of workers altogether. Like the young Marx or the mature Oscar Wilde, he proposed relegating most of the dreary and repetitive work to machines. It is not at all clear how Sennett's utopia makes room for respect; having already established that universalism is too thin a brew, he rejected achievement and 'potential' as standards. If Veblen was correct, of course, invidious distinctions will arise based on something or another; the only room we have is in shaping the criteria. If rank isn't based on wealth or achievement, it will be based on looks or strength or height.

For present purposes, *Class* offers the first glimpse of the positive role that Sennett would soon assign to 'forms.' The idea of class can function as a psychic buffer against the felt deprivations of class; maybe my station isn't my fault. In the absence of a notion of class, people become

paralyzed by self-blame, which poisons even the most intimate aspects of life.

I've fallen, and I can't get up...

Indeed, the paradoxical coupling of freedom and constraint hinted at here developed into a full-blown theory in his best-known work, *The Fall of Public Man*.<sup>20</sup> Here Sennett proposed, through a lengthy and idiosyncratic historical exegesis, that 'roles,' rules, and arbitrary social conventions are necessary conditions for a flourishing public life. A "common code of believable appearances,"<sup>21</sup> such as the subtle shadings of class and rank in the street clothes of Paris in the 18th century, allowed for greater self-expression than the 'anything goes' ethos of public life in the twentieth.

The argument is broad and subtle, but familiar to readers of his earlier work. Twentieth century public life is plagued by a false personalization that takes a myriad of forms: the cult of pop psychology, the rise of candidate-centered politics, the proliferation of annoying nametags that announce only first names. By treating everybody as an 'individual' (class-based references have become taboo, and racial references are increasingly suspect), we trivialize

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<sup>20</sup>Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*. New York, Knopf, 1977.

<sup>21</sup>Sennett, *Fall*, 40.

interaction altogether. We become reluctant to disclose too much of ourselves, so we keep interaction on a superficial level; over time, we lose the ability even to envision what it would mean to work together as a citizenry. Politics becomes a televised spectacle with a tiny cast, most of whom we know by first name. "Charisma," which Weber and Freud understood as pathological eruptions of the irrational into politics, actually becomes functional, from the standpoint of elites; excessive attention to the personal quirks of leaders distracts workers from their substantive grievances.

It was not always so. Before the rise of the society of 'intimacy,' Sennett argues, people were less inclined to deny the realities of group identity. In 18th century Paris, for example, gentlemen were gentlemen and commoners commoners; weirdly, the reciprocal recognition of rank allowed for real communication. When the rules were clear and widely recognized, people were able to conduct themselves with some confidence that they were 'appropriate.' In concrete terms, a gentleman could dine with his mistress in public and trust that his fellow diners would discreetly fail to notice; such discretion, as hypocritical as it may seem to moderns, actually allowed more truthful and realistic behavior. More importantly, the recognition of class as part of identity allowed members of the middle and lower classes to organize, and to make the necessary sacrifices for political action.

*Public Man* was, in some ways, Sennett's response to *The*

*Lonely Crowd.* In that work, recall, Riesman described a shift in modes of 'social character' from inner-direction to other-direction, which he tied to a shift in the mode of production. For Sennett, a similar shift took place, but 'inner-direction' and 'other-direction' were misleading characterizations. Rather, the distinction between the public self and the private self eroded, leading to the "tyranny of intimacy" in the present. Riesman's typology implied that the inner self was being overtaken by a conformist society; for Sennett, conformist society actually allowed more room for the development and expression of the self. The move to 'freer' (or, at least, less guided) expression in public left the inner self more exposed and vulnerable, and therefore less expressive.

Sennett traced the process of change through following the changes in the relationship between theater and public life, between stage and street. In his view, theatricality correlates to a strong public life, and intimacy to a weak one. The link between theater and public life is in the presence or absence of a "common code of believable appearances." In the absence of an understood set of roles and costumes, people in public feel that they have to prove their credibility every time they interact. Since such a burden is impossible to sustain, they quickly come to restrict their interaction to a small group, generally of those like themselves.

Rather than liberating people from the restrictions of

the past, then, the new intimacy actually had a chilling effect on public interaction. In part, this was due to the impossibility of full self-disclosure at every meeting. More disturbingly, though, it was a form of self-protection. Given the decline in legible roles and the subsequent rise of a popularized version of psychoanalysis, people adopted a strategy of silence to avoid inadvertent self-disclosure. To compensate, they expected and engaged in attempts at self-disclosure among friends that easily overloaded the capabilities of friendship. The rise of the family as a "haven in a heartless world" was part of this process, but so too was the rise of a new standard of judgment; given the superior moral standing of the intimate family, people came to judge the public by the standards of the private.

These new standards of public judgment lent themselves well to the flaneur (whose lineal descendants, the compulsive shopper and the mall rat, are still with us), but they made political organization far more difficult. Political work involves, by necessity, working with people whose style may offend; large political movements or coalitions require a patience that grew steadily more foreign over time.

Sennett laid the blame for the fall of public man on secularism. By his definition, secularism is the loss of belief in any sort of larger world-ordering system. In the absence of a system, particulars take on a new importance. Positivism and psychoanalysis are outgrowths of this form of

secularism; both assume that the true significance of the mind or of an object is to be found in the thing itself, if you know how to look for it. Similarly, the new "tyranny of intimacy" ruled nothing out of bounds; to get a sense of your interlocutor, you had to consider every little mannerism. "Everything counts because everything might count."<sup>22</sup> Such close scrutiny is fatal to theatricality. Effective self-expression requires a certain self-distancing; the presence of rules actually constitutes the precondition for true freedom.

Here we can see the beginnings of Sennett's move towards a Foucauldian understanding of power. Social interaction is inevitably constituted through and by power relations. The options we face, he argues, are not the presence or absence of rules for public interaction, but rather, the particular nature of those rules. In *Authority* he took a major step in this direction, and started to complicate the position he had just developed.<sup>23</sup>

#### Good Cop, Bad Cop

*Authority* is less an argument than a series of observations, strung together by a mood. The mood is one of paradox; here Sennett is concerned with the temptation to

<sup>22</sup>Sennett, Fall, 21.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Sennett, *Authority*. New York: Norton, 1993, orig. 1980.

surrender the self to larger forces. He contrasts 'authority' to 'legitimacy,' and announces that the crisis of the modern age is that we are "attracted to strong figures who we do not believe to be legitimate."<sup>24</sup> The basis of the attraction is strength. "Charisma" is rooted in strength; the secret of charisma lies not in the charismatic figure himself, but in the audience. The audience wants to be seduced; strong authority figures, even terrible ones, speak to our need to feel weak.

This is the crucial shift in Sennett's work. In *Public Man* he attended to the liberatory possibilities of structure; by filtering out the static of personal idiosyncracy, structures made self-expression possible. Here, by contrast, they make self-surrender possible. The interpenetration of agency and submission elaborated here would become the dominant theme of his later work.

The central claim of this book, to the extent that it has one, is that authority and legitimacy, which social scientists have traditionally conflated, are both analytically and factually distinct. The 'crisis of authority' of our age is that "we feel attracted to strong figures who we do not feel to be legitimate."<sup>25</sup> Authority, then, has become the effort to "convert power into images of

<sup>24</sup>----, 26.

<sup>25</sup>Sennett, *Authority*, 26.

strength" -- it is a process of interpretation.<sup>26</sup> The political challenge of late capitalism is to elucidate conditions in which the need for suitable authority can be met without giving in to tyranny, on the one side, or nihilism on the other.

Sennett elaborates several manifestations of this dilemma. For example, he coins the term 'bonds of rejection' to describe the attachments we feel to habits and expectations formed under regimes we consciously consider illegitimate. He gives the example of a 26-year-old white woman who consistently dates black men to irritate her parents. She complains about parental interference, but refuses to establish the distance that would render their interference moot. She claims that she 'just happens' to find those particular men attractive, but leaves them whenever her parents start to warm to them. Though she consciously rebels against her parents' dictates, she still takes them as guides to her own life; she simply reverses them. The only fates worse than parental disapproval are parental approval or indifference. Though she claims to reject their input, she could not function without it. Her rebellion is a form of "*rebelling within authority*," as opposed to *rebelling against it*.<sup>27</sup>

At least in this case, parental love is genuine. The

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<sup>26</sup>-----, 165.

<sup>27</sup>-----, 28.

paternalism of 19th century capitalism, "an authority of false love," gave rise to similar behavior and attitudes among workers. Sennett cited the Pullman company towns; the control exercised by Pullman was breathtaking, and the rhetoric of the company stressed the paternalism of Pullman himself. As a consequence, Pullman was stunned when workers expressed dissatisfaction, and workers took layoffs as personal betrayals. Told that Pullman was the source of all action, they blamed him for the exigencies of a variable capitalist economy.

Pullman's efforts to revive feudalistic relations were bound to fail in a capitalist context because, as Sennett noted briefly, capitalism is dynamic. We can't count on jobs lasting indefinitely, because the market is too volatile. The superimposition of the image of the father on the image of the boss ('pastiche') renders a convincing portrait of neither. We can't be secure anymore, which means we can't be weak anymore. We try to compensate by forming false and destructive relations to authorities in other ways, in exchange for the (usually false) promise of protection or security.

By the twentieth century, the volatility of capitalism and the rise of the bureaucratic corporation made traditional paternalism too costly to sustain. Schools of business management responded by suggesting a new ideal of autonomy, "an authority without love." The autonomous boss can never be pinned down to a single position; in a sense,

he plays 'hard to get' with his employees. By withholding any human presence from them, he intimidates them into compliance; they imagine slights and punishments that may not exist. The oft-heard complaint about 'impersonality' in bureaucracies, by this reading, is a reaction against the arrogance of autonomy. People perceive 'impersonality' because they feel the lack of connection, respect, and love. The autonomous boss uses his employees' insecurities against them.

Sennett's use of 'autonomy' here contrasts significantly with Riesman's in *The Lonely Crowd*. For Riesman, the autonomous individual did not have to be a boss; in fact, he made much more sense as an independent professional. He was outside the chain of command and indifferent to it; obedience was on his own terms, if at all. For Sennett, the autonomous boss is an image, a metaphor. The boss is caught up in the hierarchy of the corporation, even if not as thoroughly as his underlings. His goals are not his own, except to the extent that he can move between companies. The impression created of self-sufficiency is a tactical move, designed to foster greater dependence among the workers.

When Sennett moves from description to prescription in the second half of the book, the argument starts to lose its way. Through a strained use of Hegel's parable of the master and the slave, he tries to establish the preconditions for the possibility of a renegotiation of the

terms of authority. He suggests that the first step in a renegotiation is for the underling momentarily to step out of the relationship and look at it objectively. For example, when the slave realizes that the master needs him more than he needs the master, the slave gains the power of refusal. When the slave realizes that he has gained skills through his work that the master has not, he understands the possibility of a real autonomy. He understands that his previous conception of the master's omnipotence was mistaken and disabling; he is able to envision authority based on reciprocity and mutual respect.

Sennett takes the possibilities farther. Where Hegel stopped with a call for reciprocity, Sennett wants to legitimate demands for nurturance, a form of authority grounded in love and aimed at its own abolition. Humans need to be able to be weak; we have a right to demand an environment that allows us to express that need. Reciprocity, yes, but reciprocity that allows human frailties.

The concrete proposals he advances towards this end are perplexing. For example, he suggests regular 'role exchange' between doctors and nurses, the better to give each an idea of the obligations and burdens of the other; why doctors would ever accede to this is left open. He wants memos to be phrased in the active voice, the better to demystify the decision-making process; again, why bosses would agree to this is a mystery. Indeed, for all his

attention to the subtleties of motivations in interpersonal relationships, Sennett completely ignores the relatively obvious motivations of public relationships. There is no particular agent of transformation in the text, so we are left guessing exactly how he expects these changes to happen. Although he addressed briefly the role of political economy in undermining corporate paternalism, he elided it completely in the second half of the book; why a company would give away its secrets in a competitive marketplace is left obscure. Bosses mystify because they can, and because there is something in it for them. In the absence of a serious effort to address motivation, their actions won't change.

Authority suggests some of the limits of Sennett's new understanding of roles. While he can coherently call for greater legibility and procedural openness, he has no basis from which to mount a substantive political critique. There is little in this book that the Right could not, in principle, endorse. American conservatives are particularly fond of calls for 'law and order,' which is, in a sense, what the book values. His chosen examples suggest a progressive politics, but they needn't; Newt Gingrich supports public executions as 'visible' and 'legible' statements of authority, for example. Further, the early part of the book suggests that visibility and legibility would imperil the standing of any particular authority figure; if our attraction to them is based on strength, they

would be foolish to show any sign of weakness.

### Daring

The rest of his career has been a series of attempts to speak to this dilemma. The unmistakably masculine subject of his early work faces a quandary: his falsely whole identity, which is the only identity he has, is predicated on and productive of a desire to submit. He fears what he wants, and is condemned, alternately, to one form of deprivation or the other.

Sennett's novels elaborate the dilemma in a variety of settings. *The Frog Who Dared to Croak* is probably the most direct of the group.<sup>28</sup> Here we meet the Hungarian philosopher Tibor Grau, who walks a series of tightropes over the course of the early decades of Communism. The plot is reconstructed through Grau's autobiographical notes, which have been received in the mail by a London publisher. Grau comes off as a slightly pathetic figure, a weak man cast along with the currents of the day. He spends most of the novel hiding in one way or another; hiding his homosexuality, his brushes with the law, his heroism, his lack of heroism, his philosophy. Caught up in the Communist takeover, Grau ingratiates himself with his superiors by writing philosophy in the service of (or at least not

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<sup>28</sup>Richard Sennett, *The Frog Who Dared to Croak*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982.

opposed to) the state.

The leitmotif of the novel is a parable of frogs, rewritten several times to reflect different morals. In the original telling, a family of frogs went on holiday in Transylvania, where they were surrounded by strange and threatening animals. Mama frog warned her brood to keep quiet, so as not to attract the attention of predators. The youngest boy frog, though, was headstrong, and declared that "I am proud to be a frog, and it is in the nature of a frog to croak." The boy's croaking attracted a mountain goat, who ate him. Mama frog scolded her dead son, but Papa frog demurred. "Do not scold your dead son. He had the courage to be himself."<sup>29</sup>

Grau, sadly, did not. His attraction to Marxism, he recalled in a reverie prompted by a party questionnaire, was a product of his attraction to working-class men. "My elective affinities began with my working-class lovers; they continued among my working-class colleagues."<sup>30</sup> As the scion of wealth in a depressed city, Grau discovered that recently displaced peasant boys and men would do anything for money; the park became his nightly destination. Over time, however, prostitution lost its appeal; he yearned for the emotional connection of real love. When he asked his favorite if they could continue their meetings without

<sup>29</sup>-----, 78.

<sup>30</sup>Sennett, *Frog*, 34.

money, the man responded that his family counted on the income, and left Grau for an older man willing to pay. Grau attended his first political rally to hear real passion in men's voices.

Grau was both attracted to and afraid of strength. His "adventures in the park were all about danger resolved, the statues turning into warm bodies."<sup>31</sup> He was taken into custody after a political demonstration (to which he had been lured by an attractive undercover cop) and suffered a nervous breakdown under questioning. By the next stage of the narrative he is diligently working for the Department of Cultural Propaganda, editing fairy tales for ideological correctness.

The remainder of the novel is a series of fairy tales, one of them rewritten several times, each with a different putative moral. Grau writes of a utopian colony of lovers of music that gradually collapses under its own pretensions; at the end, the organizers expelled most of the members, whose zeal was less than their own. Only with the unleadable gone could the leaders enjoy the music. Grau sympathized with the leaders, but drew the lesson that, contrary to their inflated hopes, "no one can give to another more than permission to exist, and that permission entails all manner of mistakes, stupidities, and

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<sup>31</sup>-----, 34.

waywardness."<sup>32</sup> He was drawn to the leaders, but could not love them until they had failed. Upon failure, he had to leave.

The parable of the frogs recurred twice more. Grau worked as a translator on the German Front during the war; he told a revised version of the frogs to German POW's. In this version, the frogs are part of the Animal Olympics high-jumping team. They fully expect to win (high jumps are measured by proportion, so a frog beats a dog), and they carry themselves with great hauteur. At the Olympics, they lose to a cat, and they retreat to Transylvania, humiliated. In their humiliation, however, they have lost their arrogance, and have come to be accepted and even loved in the animal community. In this telling,

true happiness comes not from a mastery of others but from fraternity. Only in a world of brothers can an animal or a man take pleasure in himself. My last words were 'Real fraternity occurs among those who share their frailties.'<sup>33</sup>

The POW's were mystified, but Grau contented himself with the new version. He never commented on the position of a jailer trying to share frailties with the jailed.

The second retelling of the tale of the frogs occurred at the political climax of the novel, on the eve of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Grau counseled his fellow Hungarians not to revolt, but rather to attempt to

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<sup>32</sup>-----, 122.

<sup>33</sup>-----, 151.

ingratiate themselves with the Russians. In a convoluted speech that satisfied no one, he argued that neutrality is impossible and that the Russians are not yet sufficiently decadent to overthrow. The Hungarians at the time took the speech as a betrayal, but the Russians did as well; while he counseled acquiescence, he expressed no great love for the masters. He responded to the Russians' reprimand pensively, retelling a story of frogs; this time, what makes frogs special is their sperm. They reproduce incessantly, and thereby they survive. The final telling (the chapter is headed "The Frog Croaks") comes closest, perhaps, to Grau's life; his efforts at fraternity failed (he was rejected by his working-class lovers, the Party, two countries, and the world of academic philosophy). His sharing of frailties was halfhearted and, often, simply obtuse; his only effective self-criticism occurred in the accusatory letters he wrote to his wife. His efforts to find passion ended in a series of debacles, both personal and political; the one relationship he found himself able to sustain is with an older, fraailer man than he. But he survived.

Frog is much more pessimistic about the possibilities for nurturance within authority than any of Sennett's previous nonfiction. Grau's pursuit of love, his efforts to humanize authorities, to resolve tensions into porous flesh, always backfired; once authority was weakened, Grau had to leave. Once the mystery was solved, the metaphor made legible, authority lost its appeal. Grau could only look to

power for protection and nurturance when it didn't have a human face; once he humanized it, the relationship cracked. Hence, the Russians' rejection at the end of the book -- his portrayal of them as not yet decadent, while not supposed to be subversive, was still too humanizing to allow. The sharing of frailties, which was supposed to provide the basis for a real fraternity, didn't address (even as it fostered) a longing for strength. When the latter wasn't satisfied, the former seemed paltry.

Political movements initially overwhelmed Grau, giving him the emotional spark he sought. Eventually, though, they left him unhappy; when the cracks started to appear in their armor, which they always did, the spark was lost. The one successful relationship in the book stands out by contrast; in choosing nurturance over self-surrender, Grau finally found something like solace. Only by turning away from politics and the public altogether was Grau able to resolve his own tensions.

#### Looking Inward

Fittingly, Sennett's next novel, the poorly received *An Evening of Brahms*, was a more autobiographical take on a similar set of themes.<sup>34</sup> Here the protagonist is a cellist, Alexander Hoffman, who gradually learns the limits of his

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<sup>34</sup>Richard Sennett, *An Evening of Brahms*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

talents and the freedom that an awareness of limits can bring. Alexander is clearly modelled on Sennett himself; Sennett too was from Chicago, trained as a cellist, moved to New York, lived in an apartment with two cats and much music, had a failed first marriage. Alexander was a musical prodigy from age seven, first on piano and then on cello. "[H]e was as unyielding as a prima donna" in the service of his music; when he played, he felt that "[h]e was just the person he was supposed to be."<sup>35</sup>

Alexander achieved considerable professional success very early in New York, much to the discomfort of his wife, Susan, a pianist of some talent. In contrast to Alexander's careful, studious playing, Susan's style is ornate, pretty, shallow. Her specialty is 'ornaments,' or embellishments that players add to the score; ornaments allowed her to keep herself out of her music. Where Alexander was concerned with perfection, Susan was concerned with ease.

An ornament is more than the decoration of a musical surface; it's a comment on what is printed on the page. When you are in control enough to comment, you can step back, no longer a slave to the notes. It was so easy.<sup>36</sup>

Neither Alexander nor Susan could maintain the level of emotional and musical control they wanted. Susan fell ill with an unexplained series of cramps in her forearm (which Sennett intercut with a scholarly account of Schumann's

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<sup>35</sup>-----, 32, 25.

<sup>36</sup>-----, 113.

syphilis); shortly after that she cheated on Alexander, experimented with drugs, and was hit by a car. Alexander learned his own emotional emptiness upon Susan's death; his eulogy for her was bloodless, almost cold.

Characteristically, Alexander did not fully confront his own emotional brittleness until it was forced upon him by a musical challenge. He was drafted into conducting Brahms' *German Requiem*, a piece that requires both orchestra and choir. Alexander was a novice conductor anyway, and had never worked with vocalists; in the words of his former teacher, the performance was "unfortunate." He lost control of the singers, who got swept up in the music; gradually, he surrendered himself to the chaos. "Out of control that long, a person can hear what happens naturally."<sup>37</sup> Faced with the undeniable debacle of the performance, Alexander "had to let go."<sup>38</sup> He surrendered to the music, to the emotions provoked by the performance, and acted out his mourning for Susan. The evening of Brahms became a purgation of his feelings for her, but also of his need for perfection. The *Requiem* is about forgiveness; in the course of surrendering to his own limitations, Alexander learned to forgive Susan and himself.

It is easy to read Brahms as the midlife lament of the *enfant terrible*. Alexander, like Sennett, made an early

<sup>37</sup>-----, 208.

<sup>38</sup>-----, 210.

splash in a public field, and reacted by branching out into areas where he was likely to fail. The theme of forgiveness would come back repeatedly in his later work; the author is almost asking forgiveness for his failures as an author. What is more striking in this novel, though, is the radical unevenness of tone. The most heartfelt passages, weirdly, are the lengthy, technical descriptions of the music. Alexander's experience conducting the *Requiem* is much more fully rendered than any of his scenes with Susan, probably in part because Alexander was never able to lose himself in Susan. Whether self-consciously or not, Sennett's prose performed his theory; his was at his most expressive when he could discipline himself within an impersonal, external form.

#### Epistolary Sociology

The last in Sennett's trio of novels, *Palais-Royal*, is the most straightforwardly sociological of the group.<sup>39</sup> *Palais* is an epistolary novel set in mid-nineteenth century London and Paris. It is primarily about two brothers, Frederick and Charles Courtland, and their varying fortunes throughout the period. Frederick is an architect (and the son of an architect) who fantasizes about building great iron and glass monuments to Progress; he takes up with an

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<sup>39</sup>Richard Sennett, *Palais-Royal*. New York: Norton, 1994, orig. 1986.

actress in Paris, loses his way professionally, and dies shortly after the destruction of the Galerie d'Orleans. Charles, the older of the two, is a fallen priest who spends most of the novel passing judgment on others and writing little-read pieces in obscure journals.

*Palais* has very little in the way of plot; things happen, but not by necessity and not always clearly. Frederick never marries Anne Mercure, though he stays with her until his death; neither the reader nor the characters ever quite figure out why they never married. We are led to believe that Frederick's problem is that he is too grandiose; later, when Paxton's design is chosen over his for the Great Exhibition Hall at Hyde Park, we are led to believe that Frederick's design was not grandiose enough. Charles has a sort of affair with Anne's younger sister Adele, but it never goes anywhere and they may or may not meet again, chastely, at the end of the novel.

Charles rapidly becomes the most engaging character, as well as the most familiar; he seems to be the stand-in for the author. Charles is a young priest who leaves his flock when he realizes that they simply don't take him seriously; he stresses pure allegiance to the Bible, where they seek an older man of more worldly wisdom. He lets himself be talked into leaving Paris (his uncle Severus Rood reminds him why -- "Self, Sir, Self!"), and he quickly ensconces himself as a neglected, jaundiced observer of Parisian ways. Charles' articles, which are scattered throughout the narrative,

provide an outlet for Sennett's sociology, and a sort of thematic captioning for the novel as a whole Charles is a 'prig' (his word) who knows better; he relies on the public spaces of the city to mediate his warring sides. He is drawn toward skepticism, which he rightly regards as

...the most aristocratic of virtues...I saw that we might make an entire city in this manner, a more aristocratic city, a sceptical city...could we make a city in which men and women did not feel on trial for their lives...<sup>40</sup>

Charles finds solace in becoming "one amongst many," lost in a crowd.

Pascal imagined that in solitude we might finally come to know God with a pure faith. Within the solitude of a modern city, we may instead become better acquainted with the just proportions of our pain.<sup>41</sup>

He succeeds in losing himself in the crowd at the end of the book, a reverie sequence in which Charles, as an old man, spies Adele (Anne's sister, with whom he had a chaste affair many years before) in a coach. Charles' own bodily limitations dictate the conditions of their meeting (it appears to occur in a laudanum-induced dream), and perhaps constructed the dream itself. As with Alexander, Charles shifts over the course of the novel from a doctrinaire, overachieving prig to a more forgiving, more limited skeptic.

Frederick, the architect, is the stand-in for the

<sup>40</sup>-----, 84.

<sup>41</sup>-----, 86.

Party. he is the designer of grand edifices that never quite come off; his dreams consistently crash on the shoals of finance, intrigue, or simple talent. He attempts to impose a rational geometry on a determinedly irrational city, but the city forgives him his hubris even as it denies him professional success. His own failures eventually help him break free of his father, a (blinded) architect whose disability was itself the result of the hubris of the ideologue.

The novel resists summary, but that may be part of its point. It encompasses forty years, and embodies the sloppiness and complexity of change over time; the last chapter, Charles' final article, ends with an apology to the reader for the unfinished feel of it all -- again, forgiveness in place of closure. Both Charles/Sennett and the reader have to learn to accept incompleteness, messiness, complexity. We are asked to share frailties with the author, to wear our failures as signs of our common humanity.

#### Strolling with Hannah Arendt

Sennett tried to synthesize his warring sides in his 1990 opus, *The Conscience of the Eye*.<sup>42</sup> Conscience is a return to urban studies, but it bears the fruit of his

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<sup>42</sup>Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye*. New York: Norton, 1992, orig. 1990.

detour into fiction. In its form, it performs what it analyzes. It is a maddening book, frustratingly allusive and resistant to easy summary or even comprehension. It resists 'narrative closure,' relying instead on an almost aesthetic effect that it recommends for urban planning. Here Sennett calls for a new appreciation in cities of the value of things in themselves, what Christopher Lasch called 'transitional objects.'<sup>13</sup> In passages reminiscent of the New Criticism of the 1950s, Sennett invokes the power of repetition of objects to draw viewers out of themselves, the better to engage their powers of sympathy. He reads the painter Mark Rothko, for instance, as obsessed with the possibilities of self-distancing through formal repetition. The Rothko Chapel in Houston, which the artist did not live to see completed, is more disturbing than comforting. Most of Rothko's paintings are essentially the same -- rectangles lying on top of each other, each a different color, usually fading together at the borders. He painted hundreds of these rectangles over the course of two decades; why would anyone do such a thing?

By Sennett's account, Rothko wanted to use the sheer weight of repetition to force viewers out of themselves, to make them confront externally what they could not find internally. His chapel is not consoling, in the traditional Christian sense; it does not reassure the trembling child

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<sup>13</sup>See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*.

that a beneficent God will take care of everything. What consolation it offers is of a sterner sort.

Picking up on the themes of *The Fall of Public Man*, *Conscience* is an extended meditation on the limits of the Augustinian turn inwards. The mortification of the flesh characteristic of Augustinian Christianity manifested itself architecturally in the gradual valorization of the enclosed, private indoor space. The shadows of the sensual world are not to be trusted; by turning away from them and going inside oneself, one can eventually come to a true faith in God. One's Christian identity derived from the object of one's love, which was not visible in this world; the objects of this world were, at best, distracting. The Calvinists carried this line to its practical conclusion; all pleasures of the flesh (or even of the eye -- they distrusted color and eschewed bodily display) were suspect. Faith in God was evidenced by a 'worldly asceticism' (Weber) that justified the self in the process of denying it.

The emphasis on the inner self came at the expense of an "art of exposure," by which we could learn to cultivate and express sympathy across lines of difference. The neglect of the "art of exposure" accounts for the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing presence of difference and indifference in modern cities. The civic indifference of modern New York, for example, both allows for tremendous expression of difference and prevents people from connecting, either personally or politically. You don't

make eye contact on the street -- it might be misinterpreted.

For Sennett, whatever salvation there may be derives from works, not faith, and works must be works on or in some concrete medium.

There must be displacement across a border for the exposure to difference to begin, as in a compelling narrative, and then there must be a blockage and frustration to give the movement meaning, as in recognition scenes. The denouement of this process of exposure, to recur to the analogy of narrative once more, is not a satisfying catharsis but a concern for materials...the story of exposure ends in the love of things.“

The love of things indicated here is not consumerist materialism, but rather a concern for the integrity and autonomy of artistic media. Craftsmanship exercised in an artistic form requires a respect for the limits of the form; indeed, the freedom to create requires familiarity with the bounds of the possible. A musician, for example, must know what sounds are possible within a given key, if she hopes to make music. In the process of advancing her own creative expression, she learns to respect the boundaries of the form.

What does this concern for form have to do with urban planning? As in his earlier work, Sennett wants to attenuate the tendencies toward narcissism that gated suburbs and homogeneous communities foster. Here he tries to find possibility in the 'overlays' made possible by

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“Sennett, *Conscience*, 214.

cities. "Overlays" are the multiple layers of history (function, demographics of occupancy) that accrue in an area over time. The spatial expression of time that occurs in areas of "narrative overlay" like Fourteenth Street in New York helps cultivate an "art of exposure" by showing different people the porousness of their respective differences. Whether this actually works is another question; the shift in goals from class action to 'sympathy' certainly suggests limits to the project. The Sennett of *Conscience* is a walker in the city, a flaneur collecting impressions, but he's not a talker. He registers the presence of difference, but he does not engage it; he laments the fall, but he doesn't see a way around it. 'Fraternity' has become 'sympathy;' engagement, voyeurism; anger, resignation.

So what can Sennett's work teach us?

He offers us a funhouse mirror for our times; where society now is marked by the costs and temptations of secession, he calls attention to the costs and temptations of living with difference. I suggest that we can profit from the insights of *The Fall of Public Man*, particularly, given the recent vogue of 'identity' politics. The increasing tendency to define pure identities comes at the expense of the possibility of real communication; it may be no coincidence that the one group that seems to be winning now, by which I mean the truly wealthy, is utterly

unconcerned with purity.<sup>45</sup> The decline of political parties as mass organizations (and their potential rebirth as cheering sections for self-selected charismatic leaders) speaks to the problem, even as it exacerbates it; we are losing spaces, institutions, and mores necessary for democratic conversation and activity.

The recent vogue of academic postmodernism, which has taken its lumps lately, is a halfhearted reaction to the same dynamics. From the postmodernists we learn that universalism operates through flattening out or silencing differences.<sup>46</sup> Sennett offers a more attractive alternative reading; for him, especially in his early work, a particular kind of universalism actually enables the effective expression of differences.

His critique of universalism is based not on its abstraction, but on its terrible, compelling power. Broad, sweeping ideas can seduce their adherents, just as

<sup>45</sup>See Michael Lind, "To Have and Have Not: Notes on the Progress of the American Class War," in *Harper's*, June 1995, pp. 35-47. For a peculiar and disturbing counterpoint that grants the description of economic polarization but insists that the wealthy do have a vision of purity, see Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*.

<sup>46</sup>See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990; Zillah Eisenstein, *The Female Body and the Law*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; and especially Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routledge, 1991. In Haraway's work (and in Judith Butler's post-Beijing speeches) we see an unacknowledged turn to pragmatism as a way to maintain a political moment after the categories have been bracketed; Gayatri Spivak, revealingly, calls this move "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, *In Other Worlds*. New York: Routledge, 1988).

charismatic leaders can; the flourishing bazaar of the cosmopolitan city, founded on a certain civic indifference, nurtures decadence. Identity, especially masculine identity, is artificial, and cannot be 'purified' in any meaningful way; it can be a heavy burden, and the temptation to surrender it altogether can be great.

We are offered, then, a sort of tightrope. As he outlined in *The Uses of Disorder*, identity is founded on a false exclusion, but that false exclusion is a necessary step. Having founded an identity, the next stage in political and personal maturation is the complication of that identity through repeated, sustained exposure to difference. Finally, the newly porous identity must learn a certain "art of exposure" through which it can maintain a functional integrity without losing its consciousness of others.

#### The Fall, Part II

Sennett slips off the rope in his most recent book, *Flesh and Stone*.<sup>47</sup> The book opens with an anecdote that illustrates the problem of connection nicely. He and a friend see a gory war film in a suburban strip mall. His friend is a Vietnam vet who lost a hand in the war; in its place he has a conspicuously metallic mechanical substitute.

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<sup>47</sup>Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone*. New York: Norton, 1994.

They enjoy the movie, along with the rest of the audience -- the audience is particularly taken with the exploding viscera on screen. After the film, Sennett and the friend linger outside to smoke; the very audience that hooted at screen violence shrinks quietly from the man with the silver hand.

The book is an historical tour through great cities of the West in an effort to trace the development of "passive bodies."<sup>48</sup> Through vignettes of ancient Athens and Rome, medieval Venice, and modern London, D.C., and New York, among others, Sennett attempts to explain the roots of the audience's reaction to his friend -- why didn't they react with sympathy or concern?

Although it isn't really structured as an argument, the historical outline takes on a discernible pattern: each city developed a particular way of negotiating the flow of difference with the need for some sort of cohesion, but each solution unravelled (usually fairly quickly). In ancient Athens, for example, Sennett argues that the skills of public speaking developed in the agora lent themselves to a theatrical style of presentation, in which the assembly slowly metamorphosed into an audience. Participants gradually became spectators, and the change was both reflected and rooted in their bodies; in order to hear speakers better, they started sitting down to listen. A

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<sup>48</sup>Sennett, *Flesh*, 17.

democratic scene actually gave rise to passivity and a loss of real connection.

Similar swings occur throughout the book. In Paris, for example, the new medical beliefs about the necessity of 'circulation' for health led to a new emphasis on speed that, paradoxically, resulted in the militaristic grid designs of Baron Hausmann. In Greenwich Village in the twentieth century, where the book concludes, Sennett returns to Jane Jacobs, this time wistfully. The panorama of difference has only expanded since she wrote, but the civic engagement of her book is long lost (if, in fact, it ever really existed). Instead, he suggests, "[l]ife in Greenwich Village exemplifies perhaps the most we have been able to achieve: a willingness to live with difference, though a denial this entails a shared fate."<sup>49</sup> How to overcome this denial? We must unlearn the hubris of modern science, and come to accept our nature as beings that experience pain. Pain experienced in the context of faith defeats isolation and opens us up to others; in the realization of our own finitude, we are ready to reach out to the Other. "But the body can follow this civic trajectory only if it acknowledges that there is no remedy for its sufferings in the contrivings of society, that its unhappiness has come from elsewhere, that its pain derives from God's command to

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<sup>49</sup>-----, 370.

live together as exiles."<sup>50</sup>

The civic engagement of his early work has given way here to an escape to religion or aesthetics. Sennett's posture itself has changed in ways that his early work intimated; the monad wandering unattached through vibrant cities has ultimately withdrawn into himself, taking the exterior as his own interior writ large in the manner of Benjamin's flaneur.<sup>51</sup> The public man who derives his identity from (and surrenders his identity to) the city around him is eventually estranged from that city; monads are not citizens, even when they are in pain. Sennett's invocation of the frailties of the body is unconvincing because it misconstrues both pain itself and the nature of public interaction. As Elaine Scarry pointed out in her elegiac *The Body in Pain*, pain is the paradigmatic case of a purely internal experience.<sup>52</sup> The "fraternity" that relies on the sharing of frailties is too fleeting, too fragile for politics. To take Sennett farther than he takes himself, perhaps the value of exposure to difference is constructive, as well as destructive; while it may destroy false unities, it may also teach us that, despite ourselves, we can act politically. Perhaps the exposure to pain, to the limits of

<sup>50</sup>-----, 376.

<sup>51</sup>See Walter Benjamin, "The Flaneur," in Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. Harry Zohn. London: Verso, 1976.

<sup>52</sup>Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

the self, will allow a fuller appreciation of the possibility of intersubjective effort, of democratic politics. Perhaps learning our own limits will help us recognize our need for others; perhaps realizing the fragility of the self will teach us not to surrender it to others. We may learn, through confronting the temptation of surrender, to bear burdens successfully.

Autonomy Reconsidered  
Masculinity and Power in Postwar America

**"But everything is men's studies!"**

So goes the standard feminist objection to inquiries of this type. The conservative response is even less interesting; from their perspective, it is heresy even to suggest that anything is fundamentally awry. Whatever pathologies we may identify derive, almost by definition, from deviations from the timeless truths; all that is needed is a return to the insights of the founding moment. Masculinity is the real, and the real is rational.

This project started by moving beyond those ideological blinders. It is indebted to feminist theory, to be sure, but more for its methods than for substantive specifics. Indeed, this project, as I conceive it, is not fundamentally hostile to certain aspects of masculinity, as it is broadly understood in late-century North America. Rather, it is an attempt to resituate discussions of masculinity and politics in the history of the American political economy.

I contend that many of the less pleasant manifestations of masculine swagger in our culture have emerged as reactions to the loss of the preconditions for meaningful autonomy. I hope here to begin to rehabilitate a particular kind of autonomy for the left, one that relies on institutional autonomy from the logic of the marketplace.

This position is informed by the social critics

examined earlier, but different from each. For Riesman, autonomy was a character type, vaguely resembling the indifferent aristocrat; moreover, it was available to anybody of sufficient gravitas, even if educated professionals seemed the likeliest to achieve it. For Lasch, autonomy (or what he called craftsmanship) was backwards-looking and forever lost; at most, we can mourn its passing. For Sennett, 'autonomy' was a charade engaged in by managers as a way to cow underlings; alternately, autonomy could be an adolescent illusion that would be broken by the complex realities of city life.

All three of these men started their inquiries by tying character type to the political economy, but all three backed off the latter and wound up with varying prescriptions (or laments) for the former. I propose bringing the economy back in. Rather than speculating about what the ideal man might look like in some unspecified future, I will outline the economic circumstances that have brought us where we are, and will suggest some changes in those circumstances that would at least make room for different, and possibly less destructive, modes of masculinity.

### Autonomy and Community

Much left and communitarian thought of late has been devoted to limning the limits of autonomy as an ideal.

Amitai Etzioni issues paeans to lost community spirit, Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor suggest that liberalism errs in a "possessive individualism" of the spirit, Benjamin Barber reminds us of Rousseau's stress on the mutuality of democracy.<sup>1</sup> More productively, Barbara Ehrenreich and William Julius Wilson draw our attention to the loss of middle-class jobs in the inner cities, and the consequent inability of many minority men to fulfill the 'provider' ideal, even given the desire.<sup>2</sup> By these accounts, the individualist ideology of the capitalist Right comes home to roost in the individualist ideology of urban survivalism (and its close cousin, urban nihilism).

There is much to be said for these analyses. Particularly in the cases of Ehrenreich and Wilson, we have the beginnings of an attempt to connect abstract understandings of masculinity with the concrete lived experience of those on the underside of the political economy. It is certainly true that the individualism espoused by the Reagan/Kemp wing of the Republican party, replete with the masculine swagger of the cowboy and the quarterback, functions primarily as ideological camouflage

<sup>1</sup>See Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community*. New York: Crown, 1993; Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1989; Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>2</sup>See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*. New York: Pantheon, 1989. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

for unilateral class warfare, but that doesn't necessarily condemn a certain form of autonomy as an ideal. Jack Kemp is not the end of autonomy.

Leftish communitarianism has gained a new hero of late, though without any real theoretical advance. Robert Putnam, in his widely-cited article "Bowling Alone" and his APSA lecture of 1995, has offered simply the latest in a long line of attacks on individualism in the name of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Putnam argues that 'social capital,' a term he borrowed from Jane Jacobs, has been in decline for two generations in the United States, and the culprit is television.<sup>4</sup> The baby boomers and their offspring are spending their evenings at home watching television, instead of joining bowling leagues or syndicalist communes. Ominously, Putnam intones, the trend is generational, rather than age-based; in other words, the boomers won't simply grow out of it. As the last

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone, Revisited" in *The Journal of Democracy* 6(1) and "Tuning In, Tuning Out" in *PS*, 27 (4).

<sup>4</sup>Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage, 1962. It is instructive to contrast Putnam's vision of community interaction with Jacobs'. For Putnam, community interaction is the meeting of likes with likes, usually in safe, structured settings -- bowling leagues, PTA meetings, Elks' clubs. For Jacobs, by contrast, the really important kind of interaction is between unlikes, such as the panoply of differences that greets the pedestrian in Greenwich Village. The pedagogical value of interaction is correspondingly different; for Putnam, it reassures, consoles, comforts; for Jacobs, it humbles, titillates, confuses. Putnam wants to extend the comforts of home to the neighborhood; Jacobs wants the neighborhood to offer what home can't. It takes a Village, perhaps, but the kind of village is much at issue.

remaining sociable generation fades into its dotage, democratic politics fades with it. Only a reinvigoration of social capital, brought about by an agent Putnam left unspecified, can save democracy in America.

Monads, Kudzu, and Carol Gilligan

First, a few clarifications. I am concerned with autonomy, rather than libertarian individualism. The latter is a corrupted version of the former, parasitic on it and eventually fatal to its host. Individualism is Ayn Randian; I got mine, you get yours. It suffers many of the flaws identified by Etzioni, Sandel, and the like -- it cloaks predatory behavior in the drapery of higher morality, it licenses the strong to exploit the weak, and it ignores or denies history. It is also spreading like kudzu, as the agents of corporate capitalism have found it an effective tool for the containment of dissent. It works both to lionize the powerful and to discredit their opponents; "entrepreneurs" are heroic individualists, dissenters are "lone nuts."

Autonomy is different. Autonomy is not unique to predators, nor does it particularly reward predatory behavior. It is, instead, the standing necessary for effective behavior on one's own behalf. It is material as well as social; in the popular argot, it is often called 'adulthood.'

Autonomy has been gendered in the Western tradition, but there is no particular reason that it needs to be gendered, and, I will suggest, the great historical gain offered by feminism is the possibility of making autonomy available to women. Here I depart from the work of such feminist theorists as Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick, who have advocated drawing lessons from women's supposedly superior 'relational' skills.<sup>5</sup> The usual objection to Gilligan and Ruddick is that they simply reinscribe existing stereotypes from a different angle; this is true, but, to my mind, not very compelling.<sup>6</sup> Academics who invent theories out of whole cloth tend not to be terribly effective in the real world, and Gilligan and Ruddick want to be effective. The more compelling objection, I think, is that 'relational' skills are dependent on a prior standing. From the standpoint of those with less power, 'relational' skills take the forms of evasion, placating, and simple subservience.<sup>7</sup> Only once equal standing has been attained

<sup>5</sup>Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982; Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

<sup>6</sup>For a particularly effective example of this critique, see Katha Pollitt, "Marooned on Gilligan's Island," in Pollitt, *Reasonable Creatures*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>Indeed, this is, to my mind, the most telling objection to the "standpoint epistemology" school of feminism exemplified by Nancy Hartsock and Patricia Hill-Collins. Without the residual Marxian teleology smuggled in by Hartsock, the standpoint epistemology of the subaltern often more closely resembles the "slave morality" limned by Nietzsche; it is striking just how frequently the powerless embrace the analytic frames of the powerful. See Hartsock,

can 'relational' skills become a democratic good. Eighty years after it was written, Virginia Woolf's call for an income and a door with a lock on it still has much to recommend it.

The emptiness of 'relational' thinking is perhaps nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the efflorescence of 'sensitivity training' in large organizations. Starting from the accurate perception that terms like "hostile work environment" have different meanings to different people, many corporations and universities have mandated that employees or students undergo workshops designed to sharpen their social antennae, particularly on the legally actionable topics of race and sex. The goal, from the institution's perspective, is to devolve responsibility for clarifying the law to its employees. By forcing each employee to "take responsibility for" his or her actions, the corporation avoids responsibility. Note the affinity here between individualism and 'relational' thinking; it has become the responsibility of each employee to read the minds of her colleagues.

She can't, of course, so many of those in the lower reaches of the hierarchy adopt a defensive strategy of blandness. By studiously cultivating banality, they hope to avoid giving offense. Social capital, indeed.

Rather than placing my stock in clairvoyance, on the

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*Money, Sex, and Power* New York: Longman, 1983, and Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* New York: Routledge, 1991.

one hand, or acceding in the abuses of power of remarkably obtuse managers on the other, I propose a third option. Recall the context in which Carol Gilligan's work arose: *In a Different Voice* was a rebuttal to the work of the Kantian developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. For Kohlberg, following Kant, maturity involved the recognition of the principle of reciprocity in social interaction; it involved the lived recognition of ethics. Although 'ethics' is often used as a synonym for 'morality' in everyday speech, its original meaning was closer to 'habits.' Ethics were the rules for daily life, morality made concrete. They dictated the methods for reciprocity, and the parties with whom reciprocity held. Democratic ethics, logically, would hold that all members of society should be treated by the same rules, shown the same respect in concrete, daily terms.

But this presumes a prior step. To make a claim on equality, people need real standing. They need to be full adults in the terms of their society, and to be able to participate without fear of penury or arbitrary punishment. They need standing in both material and political terms.

Which returns us to the project at hand. I contend that changes in the political economy of the United States have made autonomy harder to attain for the vast majority, with baleful consequences for democratic politics. Specifically, and this may be hard to swallow at first, the decline of management autonomy has imperiled the social democratic project. I propose, further, that we understand

the increasingly strident, swaggering masculine cartoons of the right as exemplary of what Wendy Brown, following Nietzsche, has called a "state of emergency."<sup>8</sup> In the absence of real autonomy, fantasy projections become both more exaggerated and more necessary. Rather than 'deconstructing' those projections, which has been done to the point of diminishing returns elsewhere, I will begin to sketch some of the underlying conditions that have lent these projections their appeal. I will conclude with some tentative suggestions for reversing these trends, for making autonomy more, rather than less, attainable.

Technocrats, we hardly knew ye...

A quick turn to history. In the middle of the twentieth century, American academics were deeply confident in the beneficence of the effects of the technical/managerial corporate elite. In some ways, they had good reason to be. The Keynesian state had defeated the Third Reich, the Depression, and the (perceived) socialist threat from within. Economic growth had survived the War, which many did not expect it to do, the United States had become a 'superpower,' and the living standards of the working and middle classes were the highest in memory, and still climbing.

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<sup>8</sup>See Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 88.

While there were many factors underlying the postwar boom, one of them was the unique internal structure of the modern American corporation. The modern corporation, as portrayed by Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means in their influential *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* in 1932, had succeeded in cleaving ownership from control.<sup>9</sup> Owners, by which Berle and Means meant stockholders, were at a considerable distance from the day-to-day operations of the companies in which they owned stock; they were also, frequently, at considerable distance from each other. The power that an earlier generation of robber barons and self-made men could exert over their companies devolved, by default, to the company's management. Importantly, and contrary to prevailing economic theory, management's interests did not always coincide with stockholders'. Management, according to Berle and Means, was more concerned with protecting and enlarging its own prerogatives and perquisites than in maximizing stockholder returns. Where stockholders might want the company to have the fewest workers possible, management (or, at least, individual managers) gained prestige by having more people to manage. Where stockholders had an interest in minimizing labor costs, management was willing to pay 'economic rent' (with the stockholders' money) to unionized workers to maintain

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<sup>9</sup>Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967, orig. 1932.

uninterrupted production and workplace comity.

Such midcentury analysts as David Riesman, William Whyte and John Kenneth Galbraith placed faith in the newly empowered ranks of management to lead the way to a rationally planned, humanistic society.<sup>10</sup> Management, they reasoned, was insulated from the profit motive (by virtue of the separation of ownership from control), so it was free to attend to other concerns. More importantly, especially from Riesman's and Galbraith's perspectives, management was highly educated. Educated people, by which they meant college or university graduates, had been exposed to a humanizing, broadening influence in their formative years, and had been trained to have a faith in the abilities of experts.<sup>11</sup> It seemed reasonable to expect those graduates to carry that faith and that humanism into the modern corporation.

This is not to say that all was well in corporate culture. Riesman and Whyte, particularly, expressed concern over the 'conformism' that, they argued, ran rampant in

<sup>10</sup>See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*; William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956; and John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958; and *The New Industrial State*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967.

<sup>11</sup>Of course, the correlate was also true. Riesman and his colleagues distrusted the uneducated, seeing them as easy prey for "demagogues." For the apotheosis of this position, see Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* 1955, rev. 1963. For a detailed rebuttal of the Bell et. al. hypothesis of the McCarthyite masses, see Michael Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967.

corporations and slowly trickled down to the culture at large. For Riesman, the independent, yeoman worker of the nineteenth century had been replaced by the yes-man of the twentieth; in his terms, the 'inner-directed' character was supplanted by the 'other-directed' one. While the 'other-directed' character had clear virtues, particularly in the areas of tolerance and affability, he could not be depended on to swim against an ill tide. With only slight exaggeration, we may see Adolf Eichmann as paradigmatic of the other-directed character. Eichmann sought welcome and approval, and gave little thought to the ethical import of his actions.

The other-directed character flourished in the modern corporation for a number of reasons. For one, the nature of the work performed called on a different set of skills than earlier work had. In a small operation or a factory, grim determination and persistence are at a premium. In a large, bureaucratic corporation in a large city, by contrast, 'people skills' are far more important. As Riesman put it, standing out was less important than fitting in; shmoozing with clients was central, not peripheral, to the job descriptions of the new urban workers.

Not surprisingly, the advent of this new world of employment precipitated a cultural crisis. Men who had been raised with the "inner-directed" ideal found the white-collar workplace vaguely unsatisfying, disturbing, even emasculating. The "Organization Man" didn't have to perform

the physical labor traditionally associated with 'real' work, and, at night, he retreated to the female-dominated suburbs.<sup>12</sup> His world was becoming 'feminized,' as he understood the term.

For Riesman, this wasn't entirely a bad development. The 'other-directed' character, after all, was more tolerant than his inner-directed forebears. He was typically more cosmopolitan, less provincial, more willing to engage difference. The problem was that his tolerance was a function of his vacuity. Without any core values, there was no reason to take offense.

While it is easy to scoff at Riesman's relatively confident and unidimensional typology now, we still need to explain the peculiar resonance it had at the time. Riesman was the Robert Putnam of his day; he made the cover of *Time* magazine, his book became a mass-market bestseller, and his typology entered the popular parlance. How could this be? What did he offer that so many wanted to hear?

### Having it All

As foreign as it may sound now, Riesman's other-directed character captured an important moment in American political culture. "Ideology" as such, which was the stock-

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<sup>12</sup>Whyte's "Organization Man" was essentially interchangeable with Riesman's other-directed character, or, for that matter, with Sloan Wilson's "Man in the Gray Flannel Suit."

in-trade of the inner-directed character, had fallen into disrepute; in the wake of fascism and communism, this was to be the era of the "end of ideology."<sup>13</sup> The economic boom period of the postwar period, particularly the sixties, was also a boom period for the American left, in part because affluence disarmed the opposition. The cost of egalitarianism was at an all-time low; for a brief historical window, elites could cede ground without giving up anything of value. Friction, under those conditions, was simply unnecessary; if you insisted on it, you were either behind the times or simply a bad character.

While this may seem overstated, the contrast to the present climate is plain. What is so striking about the postwar period, in retrospect, is the pervasiveness of the egalitarian ethos. In the realm of the state, the Great Society and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts passed overwhelmingly. In the realm of civil society, the rules for social interaction changed rapidly. Racial epithets quickly became verboten in polite company, and gender relations underwent a sea-change. In the realm of the family, of course, feminism (working in half-conscious partnership with consumerism) radically recast domestic power relations. Most of these changes occurred within a remarkably brief period, and excited, by contemporary

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<sup>13</sup>Not to be confused with the "end of history," of course, which Francis Fukuyama declared in 1989. Interestingly, Fukuyama continued to publish anyway.

standards, remarkably little opposition.

In the popular culture, of course, this was the heyday of alternatives to the masculine norm. Without giving the flower children any more credit than they've already received, it is fair to say that they expanded the options for personal expression and created a political space in which the feminist and gay rights movements could move forward.

Part of the reason for the relative paucity of opposition to progressive change during this period was the insulation from the harsher side of the marketplace that managers and educated people felt. While he may have misplaced the causal factors, Riesman's constellation fit the actions of managers because the pressures they were under gave them interests coincident with many of the interests of social democrats. Managers, to the extent that their interests were separate from owners, wanted large, happy workforces and stable investment climates. In the international realm, of course, this often involved skulduggery of the first water, but domestically it lent itself to a truce with unions, equanimity in the face of racial integration, and acquiescence to a range of new regulatory imperatives, from environmental protection to workplace safety.

That managers acceded to much of the social democratic (and especially libertarian) agenda of progressive activists is not to attribute any great moral sense to managers, nor

is it to downplay or deny the sacrifices or strong moral sense of activists; it is, instead, an effort to explain activists' success in the larger population. A dedicated cadre is one thing; a dedicated cadre with a large popular following is quite another. It may well be true, as some recent historiographical work has contended, that many of the more dedicated ground workers for the New Left were motivated more by traditional Protestantism than by consumerism or Marxism; they are not my concern here. My concern here is the 'silent majority' that went along for the ride.

#### The Empire Strikes Back

By the 1970's, though, the class cleavages of cultural resonance were apparent. The 'angry white male' of 90's punditry can trace a direct lineage through George Wallace, Richard Nixon (by way of Kevin Phillips), Richard Daley, and, worst of all, Howard Jarvis; much of Lasch's work was done from a position similar to these, though with a leftish tint on economics. The 'hardhat-hippie' conflict is an oversimplification, to be sure, but it survives because it contains an element of truth. The 'hardhats' of the stereotype were working-class, and likely to be working-class for life; even in a period when unions were stronger than they are now, to be working-class meant to be subject

to the vicissitudes of both the market and the culture.<sup>14</sup>

The cultural cleavages of the 1970's have been, I believe, largely misunderstood, and largely at the peril of progressives. Much has been written, of course, about conflicts over busing, abortion, and affirmative action, and Sara Diamond recently published an excellent micro-history of the rise of various right-wing grassroots (and "astroturf") groups during this period.<sup>15</sup> Without taking anything away from these works, which are quite often excellent in their own ways, I want to reframe the discussion. To my reading, the seventies were as strange as they were because two styles, the upper-middle-class humanistic and the working-class machismo, were fighting to a draw. That the battle lines were drawn this way indicated that the left had, already, lost. Due, in part, to their willingness to ignore questions of economics (the "end of scarcity" was a popular essay topic of the late 60's), progressives alienated their working-class base for an uneasy home in the upper middle classes. Note the battles the left was able to win after the 1960's -- abortion, gay rights. These were not primarily economic issues. The social democratic side of left activism disappeared, ceding progressivism to the libertarians. What few victories the

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<sup>14</sup>See Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*.

<sup>15</sup>See Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*. New York: Guilford Press, 1995.

libertarians could win were due to their fit with the interests of the upper middle class.

By the late 1960's, the tension between the professional base of the left and its putative constituency in the working class was sufficiently great for the right to exploit it. A left that had adopted 'other-direction' (sensitivity) as an ideal didn't have much to say to folks still working in jobs that fostered 'inner-direction,' and, indeed, some of the more outre elements seemed to enjoy tweaking the middling classes simply for the sheer joy of it. Wallace, Nixon, Jarvis, and Reagan were able to harness the cultural resentments of the working class on behalf of the economic elite, and were more than happy to watch progressives mire themselves in a cultural morass.

Still, the educated professionals (whom Barbara Ehrenreich took to calling the 'professional-managerial class,' and Irving Kristol called the 'New Class') could at least hold their own against the working classes. The PMC had entrenched itself sufficiently in non-market based institutions (and cartelized professions, such as law) that it could, temporarily, survive the loss of its working-class base. Without working-class support, it could not win, but it was able to hold its ground as long as its beachhead in eleemosynaries and cartels held. This was, more or less, what happened in the 1970's, creating a mutually-

unsatisfying stalemate forever remembered as 'malaise.'<sup>16</sup> Only a direct, frontal assault on the preconditions of professional autonomy could dislodge the PMC and restore shareholder power.

To be brief, that assault has happened. The common denominator underlying developments as disparate as the restoration of tax regressivity, the job crisis in education, attacks on the social wage, 'public-private partnerships,' NAFTA (or Maastricht), HMO's, and the meteoric rise in mutual funds is the resurgence of the 'callous cash-nexus.' In every case, alternatives to the 'logic' of the marketplace have been starved out. A glance at the rise of mutual funds may be illustrative.

#### Hamilton Returns

Recall the earlier discussion of the separation of ownership from control in Berle and Means. They asserted that the wide dispersal of stock among thousands of stockholders effectively cancelled itself out, leaving

<sup>16</sup>For the record, Jimmy Carter never actually used that word. Still, the cultural products of the time do give off a distinctive flavor. For the most compelling example of (and diagnosis of) the stalemate of the time, see Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*. Interestingly, a school of left critics of the professions started to emerge in the seventies: Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor*. New York: Vintage, 1971, Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage, 1979, orig. 1975, Lasch. I suggest here that we may be sowing what they reaped.

management in charge by default; in Madisonian terms, multiplying factions tends to control their effects. Mutual funds offer owners a way around this Madisonian dilemma. By aggregating the stock of thousands of individual owners in a single entity, a fund manager can wield tremendous influence over the stock price of a firm, and, by extension, over the firm's management. Even granting the general lack of interest mutual funds have in day-to-day management, their power over stock prices alone is sufficient to strike fear in the hearts of struggling managers.

The mutual fund explosion of the early 1980's (fueled particularly by money-market funds, which are high-return, short-term investments) was enabled by the deregulation of financial institutions carried out by the Reagan administration early in its first term. In the name of "getting government off your back," Reagan lifted restrictions on the interest rates banks could offer depositors. To afford the new, higher rates, banks had to start moving into riskier, more predatory financial markets; the savings-and-loan bailouts of the late 1980's testify to their success.

The professionals' beachheads, then, were subjected to a two-pronged assault that simply proved too powerful. On one side, of course, the state started cutting support; it had to pay for those tax cuts somehow. Progressives at the time were relatively aware of this, if also relatively powerless to stop it. On the other, and this is what

progressives at the time ignored, the private sector became far more demanding. The logic of the marketplace was extended mercilessly, undercutting the autonomy of professionals and managers.

If this hypothesis is right, we would expect to see a greater short-term profit orientation among corporate managers, a shift from basic research to immediately-applicable research, and a general attack on job security and fringe benefits, especially the more expensive ones. In fact, this is exactly what we see. We would also expect organizations dependent in part on corporate philanthropy to be struggling; again, this is the case. We would expect to see increases in predatory behavior in everyday life; judging by rates of prison construction, this seems to hold. Finally, we would expect to see the gradual disappearance of life options other than incorporation into the predatory sector; a quick glance at the state of masculinity in America now suggests that this may be the case.

#### Kurt and Courtney

In the popular culture, of course, we see two related, if distinctive, developments. On the one side, we see the emergence of the "generation X" and "slacker" stereotypes as ways of coming to grips with the inability of young, educated whites to break back into the middle class from which they sprung. As the bottom has fallen out of the wage

scale for young people, and as non-predatory, non-market based institutions (*eleemosynary*, in economists' jargon) have simply withered on the vine, those who don't fit in the predatory mold have, in their various ways, started simply opting out. These are folks who, in the not-too-distant past, could have found niches in relatively secure unionized labor or protected professions, but who find those options closed to them now. Rural militias are probably the most spectacular form of opting out, of course, but there are others; the heroes of Coupland's *Generation X* left for Mexico, and Kurt Cobain left altogether.<sup>17</sup>

The second development, and, to my mind, the more disturbing one, has been the replacement of the humanist ideal on the left with efforts at out-masculinizing the bad guys. The logic of the marketplace has so infiltrated the life-world of the young that any alternatives are simply unthinkable. Instead, some of the angrier young misfits have embraced a strategy (if that's the right word) of inversion. In brief, the shift from flower children to riot grrrls should give us pause.<sup>18</sup> Courtney Love may be a compelling stage presence, but she is a dreadful model for political actors. The left, perhaps out of desperation, has

<sup>17</sup>Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1991.

<sup>18</sup>Riot Grrrls are a brand of female neo-punks, recognizable by their "post-feminist" rantings, multiple body piercings, black wardrobes, black lipstick, and devastating right hooks. Courtney Love is their spiritual leader.

started trying to co-opt the very machismo of the enemy; in so doing, of course, they have further constricted the universe of live options.

So where does this leave us?

I would hope that the sketch I have started here would suggest a useful strategy for progressives of all flavors -- social democrats, feminists, whatever. Personal autonomy, which I take as a desirable alternative to the passivity/predatory binary we're stuck in now, rests on institutional autonomy. In the absence of the latter, those who reject the logic of the marketplace simply have no place to go. We need to preserve, and to create, institutional spaces separate from the market sector, and we need to make sure that these spaces are as self-replicating as possible. This means "civil society" in Putnam's sense, a thousand points of light and all that, but, more importantly, it also means re-evaluating our positions on corporate power and ownership. Like it or not, these institutions currently define the limits of the possible in our political culture. As long as the alternatives facing the young (like Putnam, I argue that this change is generational, rather than age-based; in other words, those who retire aren't being replaced) are to drop out or to attack, any sort of constructive autonomy will face a daunting uphill battle. As anachronistic as it sounds, I am advocating a self-conscious program of constructing and preserving institutions that respond to logics other than that of the

marketplace. Only in a climate of institutional autonomy can we reasonably expect positive cultural alternatives to flourish. I return, then, to the methods of the men I have examined here, but to a different end; rather than outlining the ideal type and mourning its absence, I outline the circumstances in which an ideal type could emerge. What it would look like, I hope someday to see.

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