The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism

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I

The relationship between a civilization's socioeconomic structure and its culture is perhaps the most complicated of all problems for the sociologist. A nineteenth-century tradition, one deeply impregnated with Marxist conceptions, held that changes in social structure determined man's imaginative reach. An earlier vision of man — as *homo pictor,* the symbol-producing animal, rather than as *homo faber,* the tool-making animal — saw him as a creature uniquely able to prefigure what he would later "objectify" or construct in reality. It thus ascribed to the realm of culture the initiative for change. Whatever the truth of these older arguments about the past, today culture has clearly become supreme; what is played out in the imagination of the artist foreshadows, however dimly, the social reality of tomorrow.

Culture has become supreme for two complementary reasons. First, culture has become the most dynamic component of our civilization, outreaching the dynamism of technology itself. There is now in art — as there has increasingly been for the past hundred years — a dominant impulse towards the new and the original, a self-conscious search for

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(This essay is an abridgment of two chapters from a book, tentatively titled The Divided Society: On the Disjunction of Culture and Social Structure, *to be published by Basic Books in 1972. In this version, much of the supporting argument and footnote citation necessarily have been heavily reduced. The book expands the historical argument and tries to delineate a sociological theory of culture. This book was written during my tenure as a Visiting Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation. — D.B.)*

future forms and sensations, so that the *idea* of change and novelty overshadows the dimensions of actual change. And secondly, there has come about, in the last fifty years or so, a legitimation of this cultural impulse. Society now accepts this role for the imagination, rather than — as in the past — seeing it as establishing a norm and affirming a moral-philosophic tradition against which the new could be measured and (more often than not) censured. Indeed, society has done more than passively accept — it has provided a market which eagerly gobbles up the new, because it believes it to be superior in value to all older forms. Thus, our culture has an unprecedented mission: it is an official, ceaseless searching for a new sensibility.

It is true, of course, that the idea of change dominates the modern economy and modern technology as well. But changes in the economy and technology are constrained by available resources and financial cost. In politics, too, innovation is constrained by existing institutional structures, by the veto power of contending groups, and to some extent by tradition. But the changes in expressive symbols and forms, difficult as it may be for the mass of people to absorb them readily, meet no resistance in the realm of culture itself.

What is singular about this "tradition of the new" (as Harold Rosenberg has called it) is that it allows art to be unfettered, to break down all genres and to explore all modes of experience and sensation. Fantasy today has few costs (is *anything* deemed bizarre or opprobrious today?) other than the risk of individual madness. And even madness, in the writings of such social theorists as Michel Foucault and R. D. Laing, is now conceived to be a superior form of truth! The new sensibilities, and the new styles of behavior associated with them, are created by small coteries which are devoted to exploring the new; and because the new has value in and of itself, and meets with so little resistance, the new sensibility and its behavior-styles diffuse rapidly, transforming the thinking and actions of larger masses of people.

Along with this emphasis on the new has come the ideology, self-consciously accepted by the artist, that art will lead the way, will serve as the avant-garde. Now the very idea of an avant-garde — an advance assault team — indicates that modern art or culture would never permit itself to serve as a "reflection" of an underlying social structure, but rather would open the way to something radically new. In fact, as we shall see, the very idea of an avant-garde, once its legitimacy is accepted, serves to institutionalize the primacy of culture in the fields of manners, morals, and ultimately politics.

The first major formulation of this conception of the avant-garde was by the man who, ironically, has come to serve as the symbol of technocratic rule, Henri de Saint-Simon. For all his vision of the engineer as the driving force of the new society, Saint-Simon knew that men were in want of inspiration, that Christianity itself was worn out, and that a new cult was needed. He found this new cult in the cult of art itself. The artist would reveal to society the glorious future, exciting men with the prospect of a new civilization. In a dialogue between an artist and a scientist Saint-Simon gave the phrase its modern *cultural* — rather than its earlier military — meaning:

> It is we, artists, who will serve you as *avant-garde*: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid. When we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas; . . . and in that way above all we exert an electric and victorious influence. We address ourselves to the imagination and to the sentiments of mankind, we should therefore always exercise the liveliest and most decisive action. . . .
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> What a most beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising over society a positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties in the epoch of their greatest development! This is the duty of artists and their mission. . . .

The commonplace observation that today there is no longer a significant avant-garde — that there is no longer a radical tension between a new art which shocks and a society that is shocked — merely signifies that the avant-garde has won its victory. A society given over entirely to innovation, in the joyful acceptance of change, has in fact institutionalized an avant-garde and charged it — perhaps to its own eventual dismay — with constantly turning up something new. In effect, "culture" has been given a blank check, and its primacy in generating social change has been firmly acknowledged.

DISCRETIONARY SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

This changeover creates a new and peculiar set of historic tensions in the society. The social structure today is ruled by an economic principle of rationality, defined in terms of efficiency in the allocation of resources; the culture, in contrast, is prodigal, promiscuous, dominated by an antirational, anti-intellectual temper. The character structure inherited from the nineteenth century — with its emphasis on self-discipline, delayed gratification, restraint — is still relevant to the demands of the social structure; but it clashes sharply with the culture, where such bourgeois values have been completely rejected — in part, as we

shall see, and paradoxically, because of the workings of the capitalist economic system itself.

Our prevailing social theories are utterly confounded by the new currents in our culture. Pitirim Sorokin's idea of the modern world having a "sensate mentality" — empirical, materialistic, technological — is contradicted in good part by the rise of hallucinogenic and psychedelic experience, the search for community, and the rejection of "material possession" by a significant section of the new culture-bearing elites. Rather than conform to Max Weber's theory of the special appropriateness of rational forms of thought and behavior to twentieth-century society, we see in all the arts a breakup of rational cosmology: of foreground and background in painting; of sequence, beginning, middle, and end in narrative; of melody and harmonic tonalities in music. Against the classical theories of distinguishable disciplines, we find the breakup of genres and an emphasis on "total environments," i.e., so-called "anti-art" movements which erase the distinction between art and everyday experience. And contrary to Marx's idea of culture "reflecting" an economy, integrally tied to it through the exchange process, two distinct and extraordinary changes are taking place. Art has become increasingly autonomous, making the artist a powerful taste-maker in his own right; the "social location" of the individual (his social class or other position) no longer determines his life-style and his values.

These changes — the search for new aesthetic experience, the breakup of formal genres, and the detachment of life-styles from a fixed social base — have become most evident in the last decade, and create the most perplexing problems for social analysis. As a discipline, sociology assumes that variations in behavior of persons or groups in the society are attributable to their class or some other strategic position in the social structure, and that individuals so differentially placed will vary systematically in their interests, attitudes, and behavior on the basis of distinct social attributes: e.g., common age, sex, occupation, religion, urban-rural location, and the like. The presumption is that these attributes cluster in specific ways — usually identified in social-class terms — so that voting behavior, buying habits, child-rearing, vary systematically on a class basis, and are predictable.

For the majority of the society, and for many aspects of social life (e.g., voting), this general proposition may still hold true. But it is increasingly evident that for a significant proportion of the population the relation of social position to cultural style — particularly if one

thinks in gross dimensions such as working class, middle class, and upper class — no longer holds. The question of who will use drugs, engage in orgies and wife-swapping, become an open homosexual, use obscenity as a political style, enjoy "happenings" and underground movies, is not easily related to the "standard variables" of sociological discourse. Age and education may be more relevant discriminators; but in the expansion of mass higher education, even education alone is no longer an easy predictor of behavior. One finds many children of upper-middle-class families joyfully embracing what they think is the "freedom" of working-class or black, lower-class life-styles — and others who do not. There is a significant leveling in patterns of child-training, which was one of the major indicators of different class styles in the past.

Just as in the economy the growth of what economists call *discretionary income* — income above that necessary for the fulfillment of basic needs — allowed individuals to choose many varied items to exemplify a different consumption style (swimming pools, boats, travel), so the expansion of higher education and the extension of a permissive social atmosphere has widened the scope of *discretionary social behavior.* The more idiosyncratic aspects of personal experience and life-history — personality attributes, or somatic body-type constitution, positive or negative experience with parents, experience with peers — become increasingly more important than patterned social attributes in shaping a life-style for a person. As the traditional class structure dissolves, more and more individuals want to be identified, not by their occupational base (in the Marxist sense), but by their cultural tastes and life-styles.

THE ARTIST MAKES THE AUDIENCE

A change has been taking place, as well, in the relation of the artist to the public. The familiar image, a product of nineteenth-century romanticism, was that of a coterie of artists, engaged in difficult experimental work to which the smug middle-class audience responded with scorn and outrage. This was the fate of the Impressionist painters, who appeared first in the *Salon des Refusés* (1863) to emphasize their own disgust with the regnant taste and who had to wait twenty years for the *Salon des Independants* for the same freedom to exhibit. The avant-garde artist identified this rejection with freedom, and he depended on such tension with the audience to articulate his own work. This well-known pattern came to be regarded as a congenital condition of modern art. But as James Ackerman writes, "within the last decade

[this pattern] was broken by one of history's most abrupt and radical changes in the relationship of art and its public . . . the new era became recognizable first in the ultimate reception of the work of the New York School of artists in the mid- and late 1950s."[1] Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, David Smith, the men responsible for what Clement Greenberg called "abstract expressionism" (and Harold Rosenberg "action painting"), were preoccupied with problems of structure and medium — breaking away from the easel, using paint itself as a subject for art, involving the person of the artist in the painting — of a special and esoteric nature outside the experience of the layman. Professor Ackerman observes that "Their art was so difficult to approach that even the majority of approving professional critics missed the mark and praised it for irrelevant reasons." In fact, the immediate incredulous public response was to call it a sham. But *within half a decade* the major figures in the school had been acclaimed, and their paintings dominated the museums and the galleries. Their conceptions of art now set the taste for the public.

Perhaps the change in this case is not as abrupt as Professor Ackerman makes it seem. There had been earlier and similar changes in the role of "difficult" art, in Paris decades earlier, when Picasso and Matisse began to shape public taste. But the general point stands. The middle-class audience, or even the buyer alone, no longer controls art. In painting, in film (perhaps less so in advanced music), the artist, and usually the avant-garde artist, now dominates the cultural scene. It is he who swiftly shapes the audience and the market, rather than being shaped by them.

THE "ADVERSARY CULTURE"

This change is related, I believe, to the dissociation of social location and cultural style. Ackerman also writes:

> If one's position in society implies no determinate base of judgment in areas outside one's competence, one has a choice between having no opinion or accepting the opinion of the expert, and the most available expert is the professional manufacturer of opinion. The altered response to the arts is, I believe, a product of public deference to museums, commercial galleries, and the news media.

Whether there is now a general habit of "trusting the experts" is de-

[1] James Ackerman, "The Demise of the *Avant Garde:* Notes on the Sociology of Recent American Art," *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* Vol. 11, No. 4 (October 1969), pp. 371-84, esp. p. 378.

batable. In politics, there has been a notable populist reaction against the expert or technocrat. But the situation in art is different. Here we see, not the victory of the expert, but of "culture" itself. The culture of the past hundred years, that of the "modern movement," has triumphed over a society that in its social structure — economics, technology, and occupational bases — remains bourgeois. The culture has become detached, and self-determining. Yet with all that, the culture (as exemplified in the modern movement) feels itself under attack — does not understand or accept its victory — and remains, as Lionel Trilling has called it, an "adversary culture."

"Any historian of the literature of the modern age," Trilling writes, "will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the actual subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing — he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that has produced him."[2]

The legend of modernism is that of the free creative spirit at war with the bourgeoisie. Whatever the truth of such a view when, say, Whistler was accused of having "flung a pot of paint in the public's face," in our time the idea is a caricature. Who in the world today, especially in the world of culture, defends the bourgeoisie? Yet in the domain of those who think themselves serious about culture, and of their widespread and trailing *epigoni,* the legend of the free creative spirit now at war, no longer merely with bourgeois society, but with "civilization" or "repressive tolerance" or some other agency that curtails "freedom," still sustains an adversary culture.

The impulses of that artistic and intellectual culture have not changed from that of seventy years ago. In terms of programmatic vigor and technical innovation, it reached its apogee in the first quarter of this century (in the work of Eliot, Pound, Proust, Joyce, Picasso, Braque, Schoenberg, Webern). But, as with any successful "movement," what starts out with small coteries begins to diffuse throughout the society. While there is no longer anything intrinsically novel in what is produced, these ideas appeal now to a larger and larger group in the society — so much so, that it has become a reigning ideology and the flag of a dominant cultural class.

The adversary culture has come to dominate the social order, and this is why the hierophants of the culture — the painters, the writers, the

[2] Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), p. xiii.

film-makers — now dominate the audience, rather than vice-versa. And, indeed, the subscribers to this adversary culture are sufficiently numerous to form a distinct cultural class. In numbers, compared to the society as a whole, the membership in this class is not large. No statistical estimates are possible, and the figure could vary from a few hundred thousand to a couple of million. But size alone is meaningless for, compared to the past, three extraordinary changes are evident.

First, in size, there has been an evident change of scale. Even though tiny in comparison with the numbers of the total society, the present size is large enough for these individuals no longer to be outcasts, or a bohemian enclave, in the society. They function institutionally as a group, bound by a consciousness of kind.

Second, while minority life-styles and cultures have often conflicted with those of the majority, what is striking today is that the *majority* has no intellectually respectable culture of its own — no major figures in literature (the best is James Gould Cozzens), painting (except, perhaps, Andrew Wyeth), or poetry — to counterpose to the adversary culture. In this sense, bourgeois culture has been shattered.

Third, and perhaps most important: the protagonists of the adversary culture, despite their sincere and avowed subversive intentions, do substantially influence, if not dominate, the cultural establishments today — the publishing houses, museums, galleries; the major news, picture, and cultural weeklies and monthlies; the theater, film, and the universities.

Today, each new generation, starting off at the benchmarks attained by the adversary culture of their cultural parents, declares in sweeping fashion that the status quo represents a state of absolute repression, so that, in a widening gyre, new and fresh assaults on the social structure are mounted. This, I believe, has been happening in the last two decades.

II

The historic process that I have been sketching has deep roots in the past. It has remarkable cultural drive and continuity. Much of that drive was obscured in the 1950s which was, essentially, a decade of conservatism and cultural bewilderment. Yet in retrospect, it seems clear that the 1950s was an aberrant decade — and that in the 1960s, a radicalism endemic to the society had resumed its historic drive.

Politically, the 1950s was a period of disillusionment. It witnessed the final rupture of the intellectuals from Stalinism, a shattering of the belief that the Soviet Union was "progressive" merely because it called itself socialist. The crucial events were Krushchev's secret speech before

the 22nd Congress of the Russian Communist Party, in February 1956, when he admitted Stalin's brutal murder of former Communist leaders; the burst of political independence in Poland following these revelations; and, more spectacularly, the Hungarian Revolution, which was put down by Soviet tanks and ended in the murder of the Hungarian Communist Party leader, Ferenc Nagy. A number of sociologists — Raymond Aron, Edward Shils, S. M. Lipset, and myself — thus came to view the 1950s as characterized by an "end of ideology." By this we meant that the older political ideas of the radical movement had become exhausted and no longer had the power to compel allegiance or passion among the intelligentsia.[3]

But, although there was a widespread disillusionment with the chiliastic promises of political radicalism, there was almost no positive viewpoint to take its place. The welfare state and the mixed economy were not the sort of goals that could capture the passions of the intelligentsia. Moreover, even if radical political hopes were momentarily shattered, the basic cultural stance remained the same: the rejection of bourgeois values. Indeed, *the continuity of radicalism in the 1950s was possible not through politics but through the culture.*

The experience of the 1940s had traumatized the intelligentsia of the 1950s, and reflection on that decade determined their cultural concerns. The pervasive cultural theme of the era was the depersonalization of the individual and atomization of society. World War II was horrible, of course. But war, even the mass bombing of cities, had been prefigured in the imagination and, curiously, once something has been imagined, it loses some of its capacity to arouse complete indignation or fear. But concentration camps enfolding tens of millions, and death camps that processed millions of individuals through a slaughterhouse like cattle had never been imagined.

The culture of the 1950s — the writers who were read and studied as exemplars of the contemporary spirit — reflected that incomprehension of totalitarian terror. The primary literary figure was Franz Kafka, whose novels and stories, written thirty years before, were found to have anticipated that dense, bureaucratic world where justice could not be located and where the torture machine inflicted a horrible death on its

[3] I should point out that the analysis of the "end of ideology" did *not* assume that all social conflict had ended and that the intelligentsia would foreswear the search for new ideologies. In fact, as I wrote in 1959: "The young intellectual is unhappy because the 'middle way' is for the middle-aged, not for him; it is without passion and is deadening. . . . In the search for a 'cause' there is a deep desperate, almost pathetic anger," etc. See *The End of Ideology* (Free Press paperback), p. 404.

victims. The writings of Kierkegaard were "discovered," perhaps because he counselled that no rational belief in ultimate meanings was possible, only the leap of faith. The neo-orthodox theology of Barth and Niebuhr was pessimistic about man's ability to transcend the sinfulness inherent in human pride. Simone Weil's writings dealt with the desperate search for grace. Camus scrutinized the moral paradoxes of political action. In the "theater of the absurd," Ionesco wrote plays in which objects, like *The Chairs,* came to have a life of their own, as if the reified things of the world had actually drawn the spirit out of man and taken over his will. In the theater of silence, such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* the confusions of time and self were played out in a minimal rectangle of reality.

The sociology of the 1950s was similarly concerned with the theory of "the mass society" and the rediscovery of "alienation." The theory of the mass society saw in the modern world the shattering of the traditional primary-group ties of family and local community; it saw traditional orders replaced by the "mass," in which each person lived in atomistic or anomic fashion. The rediscovery of alienation — and it was a *re*discovery, for though it has been associated with Marxism, the first generation of Marxist writers (Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin) had never used the term — had a double source. On the one hand it was associated, principally through the writings of Max Weber, with the sense of powerlessness that individuals felt in the society. Marx's emphasis on the worker "separated" from the means of production became, in Weber's perspective, one special case of a universal trend in which the modern soldiers are separated from the means of violence, the scientist from the means of inquiry, and the civil servant from the means of administration. On the other hand, it was a theme put forward by Marxist revisionists, principally the post-Stalinist generation, which hoped to find the sources of a new humanism in Marx's early writing, mainly the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts.* In both instances, the theory of mass society and the theme of alienation, what was involved were critical cultural judgments on the quality of life in modern society.

On a more mundane level, the most popular book of sociology in the 1950s was David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd,* which described a major change in character structure in contemporary society — from an individual who was self-disciplined and self-motivated (in short, the historic bourgeois man) to one who was responsive primarily to his peer group and the pressure of "others." The very title of the book conveyed a judgment about the change. Similarly, the prototypical book of the

emerging youth culture in the 1950s was J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye,* whose narrator, Holden Caulfield, epitomized a new kind of almost "autistic" generation. The "beats," led by Allan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, harbingers of the youth movement of the 1960s, had already "dropped out" of the society.

In short, though political ideas had become exhausted — and political life was dominated by the threat of a foreign communist foe — the cultural intelligentsia brooded on themes of despair, *anomie,* and alienation — themes which were to achieve a political incarnation in the 1960s.

THE "MIDDLEBROWS" OF THE 1950s

The affluence of middle-class America in the 1950s had its counterpart in a widespread "middlebrow" culture. The term itself reflected the new style of cultural criticism. In effect "culture," as it came to be conceived in the mass middle-class magazines, was not a discussion of serious works of art but a style of life that was organized and "consumed." Following suit, cultural criticism became a snob's game, played by advertising men, magazine illustrators, home decorators, women's magazine editors, and East Side homosexuals as one more fashionable amusement. The game of "high-low-and-middle" became *démodé* once the middlebrows caught on — to be quickly replaced by the new game of "in-and-out." To be "in" meant to be well ahead of the crowd in fashion, or, perversely, to like what the vulgar masses liked (the New York *Daily News,* fast-paced grade-B movie thrillers, big popular jazzy dance halls), rather than what the pretentious middle classes liked. When in-and-out was replaced by "camp," the game was the same, except that fashion had become high fashion.

But even though cultural criticism became a game, it was also a serious problem for the intellectual, who was now invited to play a role in a culture he had always mocked. The writers for *Partisan Review* now came to dominate *The New Yorker,* a magazine that was scorned in the 1930s and 1940s. Writers for *Commentary* were invited to write in the *Sunday Times* magazine section. Even the *Saturday Evening Post* began running articles on "Adventures of the Mind," by such writers and critics as Randall Jarrell and Clement Greenberg. Many of the radical writers felt that the mass media invited them in order to provide prestige for the mass magazines; and an even more sinister motive of the "taming" of radical criticism altogether was suspected. What was not realized was that society itself had lost its cultural moorings.

The relationship of the serious critic and intellectual to the burgeoning

mass culture of the 1950s became a discrete problem in itself and the source of many a lengthy essay and symposium. The fundamental response of the radical intellectual was a wide-ranging attack on middle-class culture. For the serious critic, the "real" enemy, the worst *kitsch,* was not the vast sea of trash but middlebrow culture; or, as Dwight MacDonald labeled it, "Midcult." In "Masscult," MacDonald writes, "the trick is plain — to please the crowd by any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them."[4] To critics like MacDonald, the special danger of "Midcult" was that, in the upgrading of American taste and standards, the lines between high culture and Midcult become blurred, and Midcult standards, precisely because they seem to advance culture, would predominate. "We are now in a more sophisticated period. . . . Since 1900, American culture has moved culturally in a direction that on the whole appears to be up," Mr. MacDonald wrote.

> Maxfield Parrish's *Day Dreams* is replaced on the living-room wall by van Gogh's *Sunflowers* or even a Picasso print. . . . Midcult is a more dangerous opponent of High Culture because it incorporates so much of the avant-garde. The four Midcult works noticed above (i.e., those of Hemingway, Wilder, MacLeish, and Benet) were more advanced and sophisticated for their time, than were the novels of John Galsworthy. They are, so to speak, the products of lapsed avant-gardists who knew how to use the modern idiom in the service of the banal. . . . Hollywood movies aren't as terrible as they once were, but they aren't as good either; the general level of taste and craftsmanship has risen but there are no more great exceptions like Griffith, von Stroheim, Chaplin, Keaton. . . .

Hannah Arendt, a thoughtful and disquieting social critic, took the classical argument one step further and blended with it a historical-Marxist analysis. She argued that bourgeois "society" — she here means the relatively homogeneous community of educated and cultivated persons — had always treated culture as a commodity and had gained snob values from its exchange, that there has always existed a certain tension between "culture" (i.e., the producers of art) and "society" (which consumed it).[5] But for her there were two crucial differences between the

[4] Mr. MacDonald's idiom itself needs explaining. In the early 1930s, the "tough" phase of American radicalism, a Bolshevik habit of compressing words — such as *politburo* for the political bureau of the Party, or *orgburo* for the organization bureau — caught on. Thus, the vogue of proletarian literature was known as *proletcult.* Mr. MacDonald adopted this jargon for his own sardonic style.

[5] Hannah Arendt, "Society and Culture," in *Culture for the Millions,* pp. 43-53. The argument is elaborated in *Between Past and Future* (New York, 1961), pp. 197-226.

past and the present. In the old days, individualism flourished or was made possible through an escape *from* society, often into rebel or bohemian worlds. ("A good part of the despair of individuals under conditions of mass society is due to the fact that these avenues of escape are, of course, closed as soon as society has incorporated all the strata of the population.") Moreover, though "society" in the past coveted culture largely for its snob appeal, it did not *consume* culture, even if it abused or devaluated it and turned "cultural things into social commodities." Mass society, "on the contrary, wants not culture, but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just as are any other consumer goods."

In sum, though in the 1950s there was a burning out of the radical political will, this radical will — the distancing of self from the society — was maintained in the culture and through cultural criticism. When new political impulses arose in the 1960s, radicalism found the values of the adversary culture — the attack on society through such themes as alienation — as the Ariadne's thread which allowed it to emerge into a bright, new radical era.

III

We come to an extraordinary sociological puzzle. A single cultural temper, mood, movement — its very amorphousness or protean nature precludes a single encapsulating term — has persisted for more than a century and a quarter, nourishing renewed and sustained attacks on the social structure. Perhaps the most inclusive term for this cultural temper is *modernism:* the self-willed effort of a style and sensibility to remain in the forefront of "advancing consciousness." What is the nature, then, of this sentiment that, antedating even Marxism, has been attacking bourgeois society and has been able to sustain such a program? Why has it so captured the artistic imagination that it can preserve itself through generations, and have fresh appeal for each new cohort of the intelligentsia?

Modernism pervades all the arts. Yet if one looks at the individual examples, there seems to be no single unifying principle. It includes the new syntax of Mallarmé, the dislocation of forms of Cubism, the stream of consciousness in Virginia Woolf or Joyce, the atonality of Berg. Each of these, as it first appeared, was "difficult" to understand. In fact, as a number of writers have suggested, original difficulty is a sign of a modernist movement. It is willfully opaque, works with unfamiliar forms, is self-consciously experimental, and seeks deliberately to disturb

the audience — to shock it, shake it up, even to transform it as if in a religious conversion. This very difficulty is clearly one source of its appeal to initiates, for esoteric knowledge — like the special formula of the magi or the hermeticism of ancient priests — gives one an enhanced sense of power over the vulgar and unenlightened.

Modernism is a response to two social changes in the nineteenth century, one on the level of sense perception of the social environment, the other of consciousness about the self. In the everyday world of sense impressions, there was a disorientation of the sense of space and time derived from the new awareness of motion and speed, light, and sound, which came from the revolutions in communication and transport. The crisis in self-consciousness arose from the loss of religious certitude, of belief in an afterlife, in heaven or hell, and the new consciousness of an immutable boundary beyond life and the nothingness of death. In effect, these were two new ways of experiencing the world and often the artist himself was never wholly aware of the sources of disorientation in the social environment which had shaken up the world and made it seem as if there were only pieces. Yet he had to reassemble these pieces in a new way.

For the second half of the nineteenth century, then, an ordered world was a chimera. What was suddenly real, in molding the sense perception of an environment, was movement and flux. A radical change in the nature of aesthetic perception had suddenly occurred. If one asks, in aesthetic terms, how modern man differs from the Greeks in experiencing sensations or emotions, the answer would have to do not with the basic human feelings, such as friendship, love, fear, cruelty, and aggression, which are common to all ages, but with the temporal-spatial dislocation of motion and height. In the nineteenth century, for the first time in history, men could travel faster than on foot or on an animal, and gain a different sense of changing landscape, a succession of images, the blur of motion, which he had never before experienced. Or one could, first in a balloon and later in a plane, rise thousands of feet in the sky and see topographical patterns that the ancients had never known.

What was true of the physical world was equally true of the social. With the growth of numbers and density in the cities, there was greater interaction among persons, a syncretism of experience that provided a sudden openness to new styles of life — a geographical and social mobility — that had never been available before. In the canvases of art, the subjects were no longer the mythological creatures of the past or the

stillness of nature, but the promenade and the *plage,* the bustle of city life, and the brilliance of night life in an urban environment transformed by electric light. It is this response to movement, space, and change which provided the new syntax of art and the dislocation of traditional forms.

In the classical premodern view, art was essentially contemplative; the viewer or spectator held "power" over the experience by keeping his aesthetic distance from it. In modernism, the intention is to "overwhelm" the spectator so that the art product itself — through the foreshortening of perspective in painting, or the "sprung rhythm" of a Hopkins in poetry — imposes itself on the spectator in its own terms. In modernism, genre becomes an archaic conception whose distinctions are ignored in the flux of experience. In all this, there is an "eclipse of distance," so that the spectator loses control and becomes subject to the intentions of the artist. The very structural forms are organized to provide immediacy, simultaneity, envelopment of experience. Power has moved from the spectator, who could contemplate the picture, the sculpture, or the story, to the artist, who brings the viewer into his own field of action. The eclipse of distance provides a stylistic unity, a common syntax for painting, poetry, narrative, music, and becomes a common structural component — a formal element — across all the arts.

All of this was reflected in the explosive burst of artistic energy in the forty years before World War I. In the Impressionists' experiments with light, the capture of motion by the Futurists, the spatial dislocation of form in Cubism, then a bit later in the anti-art of Dadaism — in which everyday objects and "readymades" are pasted together on a canvas — one sees the bewildering succession of efforts to catch the swiftness of change through new kinds of painting. The modernist effort to capture this flux gives full meaning, I think, to Irving Howe's citation of Virginia Woolf's gnomic remark: "On or about December 1910, human nature changed." As Howe comments, in this there is a "frightening discontinuity between the traditional past and the shaken present . . . the line of history has been bent, perhaps broken."

In making this break, in the emphasis on the *absolute present,* both artist and spectator are forced to make and remake themselves anew each moment. With the repudiation of unbroken continuity, and the belief that the future is in the present, one loses the classical sense of wholeness or completeness. The fragment replaces the whole: one finds a new aesthetic in the broken torso, the isolated hand, the primitive

grimace, the figure cut by the frame. And in the mingling and jostling of styles, the very idea of genre and boundary, of principles appropriate to a genre, is abandoned. One might say, in fact, that aesthetic disaster itself becomes an aesthetic.

ENTER NOTHINGNESS AND SELF

The sense of movement and change — the upheaval in the mode of confronting the world — established vivid new conventions and forms by which people judged their sense perceptions and experience. But more subtly, the awareness of change prompted a deeper crisis in the human spirit, the fear of nothingness. The decline of religion, and especially of belief in an immortal soul, provoked a momentous break with the centuries-old conception of an unbridgeable chasm between the human and the divine. Men now sought to cross that gulf and, as Faust, the first modern, put it, attain "godlike knowledge," to "prove in man the stature of a god" or else confess his "kinship with the worm."

As a consequence of this superhuman effort, in the nineteenth century, the sense of the self comes to the fore. The individual comes to be considered as unique, with singular aspirations, and life assumes a greater sanctity and preciousness. The enhancement of the single life becomes a value for its own sake. Economic meliorism, antislavery sentiment, women's rights, the end of child labor and cruel punishments became the social issues of the day. But in a deeper metaphysical sense, this spiritual enterprise became the basis for the idea that men could go beyond necessity, that they would no longer be constrained by nature but could arrive — in Hegel's phrase — at the end of history, in the kingdom of perfect freedom. The "unhappy consciousness" of which Hegel wrote is the realization of a divine power and status which man must strive to achieve. The deepest nature of modern man, the secret of his soul as revealed by the modern metaphysic, is that he seeks to reach out beyond himself; knowing that negativity — death — is finite, he refuses to accept it. Behind the chiliasm of modern man, is the megalomania of self-infinitization. In consequence, the modern hubris is the refusal to accept limits, the insistence on continually reaching out; and the modern word proposes a destiny that is always *beyond* — beyond morality, beyond tragedy, beyond culture.[6]

[6] Compare these powerful statements by two contemporary writers. In Malraux's *Man's Fate* (1933) Old Gisors describes the Baron de Clappique and his desires:

To be more than a man in a world of men. To escape man's fate. [To be] not powerful: all powerful. The visionary disease, which the will to power is

THE TRIUMPH OF WILL

In Western consciousness there has always been tension between the rational and the nonrational, between reason and will, between reason and instinct, as the driving forces of man. A basic triadic distinction was made by Plato, who divided the soul into the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. But whatever the specific distinctions, rational judgment was traditionally thought to be superior in the hierarchy, and this order dominated Western culture for almost two millennia.

Modernism dirempts this hierarchy. It is the triumph of the spirited, of the will. In Hobbes and Rousseau, intelligence is a slave to the passions. In Hegel, the will is the necessary component of knowing. In Nietzsche, the will is fused with aesthetic mode, in which knowledge derives most directly ("apprehended, not ascertained," as he says in the first line of *The Birth of Tragedy*) from intoxication and dream. And if the aesthetic experience alone is to justify life, then morality is suspended and desire has no limit. Anything is possible in this quest of the self to explore its relation to sensibility.

The emphasis of modernism is on the present, or on the future, but never on the past. Yet when one is cut off from the past, one cannot escape the final sense of nothingness that the future then holds. Faith is no longer possible, and art, or nature, or impulse can erase the self only momentarily in the intoxication or frenzy of the Dionysian act. But intoxication always passes and there is the cold morning after, which arrives inexorably with the break of day. This inescapable eschatological anxiety leads inevitably to the feeling — the black thread of modernist thought — that each person's own life is at the end of time. The sense of an ending, the feeling that one is living in an apocalyptic age, is, as Frank Kermode has observed, "as endemic to what we call modernism as apocalyptic utopianism is to political revolution. . . . Its recurrence is a feature of our cultural tradition."[7]

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only the intellectual justification, is the will to godhead: every man dreams of being god.

In Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) old Sammler reflects:

> You wonder whether . . . the worst enemies of civilization might not prove to be its petted intellectuals who attacked it at its weakest moments — attacked in the name of proletarian revolution, in the name of reason and in the name of irrationality, in the name of visceral depth, in the name of sex, in the name of perfect and instant freedom. For what it amounted to was limitless demand — insatiability, refusal of the doomed creature (death being sure and final) to go away from this world unsatisfied. A full bill of demand and complaint was therefore presented by each individual. Non-negotiable. Recognizing no scarcity of supply in any human department.

[7] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 98.

In discussing modernism, the categories of "left" and "right" make little sense. Modernism, as Thomas Mann phrased it, cultivates "a sympathy for the abyss." Nietzsche and Yeats, Pound and Wyndham Lewis were politically far to the right. Gide was a pagan, Malraux a revolutionist. But whatever the political stripe, the modern movement has been united by rage against the social order as the first cause, and a belief in the apocalypse as the final cause. It is this trajectory which provides the permanent appeal and the permanent radicalism of that movement.

IV

Traditional modernism, in Frank Kermode's term, sought to substitute for religion or morality an aesthetic justification of life; to create a work of art, to be a work of art — this alone provided meaning in man's effort to transcend himself. But in going back to art, as is evident in Nietzsche, the very search for the roots of self moves the quest of modernism from art to psychology: from the product to the producer, from the object to the psyche.

In the 1960s, a powerful current of post-modernism has developed which has carried the logic of modernism to its farthest reaches. In the theoretical writings of Norman O. Brown and Michel Foucault, in the novels of William Burroughs, Jean Genet, and to some extent Norman Mailer, and in the porno-pop culture that is now all about us, one sees a logical culmination of modernist intentions.

There are several dimensions to the post-modernist mood. Thus, against the aesthetic justification for life, post-modernism has completely substituted the instinctual. Impulse and pleasure alone are real and life-affirming; all else is neurosis and death. Moreover, traditional modernism, no matter how daring, played out its impulses in the imagination, within the constraints of art. Whether demonic or murderous, the fantasies were expressed through the ordering principle of aesthetic form. Art, therefore, even though subversive of society, still ranged itself on the side of order and, implicitly, of a rationality of form, if not of content. Post-modernism overflows the vessels of art. It tears down the boundaries and insists that *acting out,* rather than making distinctions, is the way to gain knowledge. The "happening" and the "environment," the "street" and the "scene," are the proper arena for life.

Extraordinarily, none of this is in itself completely new. There has always been an esoteric tradition within all Western religion which has sanctioned participation in secret rites of release, debauch, and total freedom for those — the "gnostics" — who have been initiated into

secret sects through secret knowledge. Gnosticism in its intellectual formulations has provided the justification for the attacks on restraints that every society has imposed on its members. Yet in the past, this knowledge was kept hermetic, its members were secretive. What is most striking about postmodernism is that what was once maintained as esoteric is now proclaimed as ideology, and what was once the property of an aristocracy of the spirit is now turned into the democratic property of the mass. The gnostic mode has always beat against the historic, psychological taboos of civilization. That assault has now been made the platform of a widespread cultural movement.

The postmodern temper, looked at as a set of loosely associated doctrines, itself goes in two directions. One is philosophical, a kind of negative Hegelianism. Michel Foucault, who is now very much "in," sees man as a short-lived historical incarnation, "a trace on the sand," to be washed away by the waves. The "ruined and pest-ridden cities of man called 'soul' and 'being' will be 'de-constructed.' " It is no longer the decline of the West, but the end of all civilization. Much of this is modish, a play of words pushing a thought to an absurd logicality. Like the angry playfulness of Dada or Surrealism, it will probably be remembered, if at all, as a footnote to cultural history.

But the postmodern temper, moving in another direction, does carry a much more significant implication. It provides the doctrinal spearhead for an onslaught on the values and motivational patterns of "ordinary" behavior, in the name of liberation, eroticism, freedom of impulse, and the like. It is this, dressed up in more popular form, which is the real importance of the postmodernist doctrine. For it means that a crisis of middle-class values is at hand.

DEATH OF THE BOURGEOIS

The bourgeois world-view — rationalistic, matter-of-fact, pragmatic; neither magical, mystical, nor romantic; emphasizing work and function; concerned with restraint and order in morals and conduct — had by the mid-nineteenth century come to dominate, not only the social structure (the organization of the economy), but also the culture, especially the religious order and the educational system which instilled "appropriate" motivation in the child. It reigned triumphant everywhere, opposed only in the realm of culture by those who disdained its unheroic and antitragic mood, as well as its orderly attitude towards time.

The last hundred years has seen an effort by antibourgeois culture to achieve *autonomy* from the social structure, first by a denial of bourgeois

values in the realm of art, and second by carving out enclaves where the bohemian and the avant-gardist could live a contrary style of life. By the turn of the century the avant-garde had succeeded in establishing a "life-space" of its own, and by 1910-1930 it was on the offensive against traditional culture.

Today, in both doctrine and life-style, the antibourgeois has won. This triumph means that, in the culture today, antinomianism and anti-institutionalism rule. In the realm of art, on the level of aesthetic doctrine, no one opposes the idea of boundless experiment, of unfettered freedom, of unconstrained sensibility, of impulse being superior to order, of the imagination being immune to merely rational criticism. There is no longer an avant-garde, because no one in our postmodern culture is on the side of order or tradition. There exists only a desire for the new.

The traditional bourgeois organization of life — its rationalism and sobriety — no longer has any defenders in the culture, nor does it have any established system of culture meanings or stylistic forms with any intellectual or cultural respectability. To assume, as some social critics do, that the technocratic mentality dominates the cultural order is to fly in the face of every bit of evidence at hand. What we have today is a radical disjunction of culture and social structure, and it is such disjunctions which historically have paved the way for more direct social revolutions.

In two fundamental ways, that revolution has already begun. First, the autonomy of culture, achieved in art, now passes over into the arena of life. The postmodernist temper demands that what was previously played out in fantasy and imagination must be acted out in life as well. There is no distinction between art and life. Anything permitted in art is permitted in life as well.

Second, the life-style once practiced by a small *cénacle,* whether the cool life-mask of a Baudelaire or the hallucinatory rage of a Rimbaud, is now copied by a "many" — a minority in the society to be sure, but nonetheless large in number — and dominates the cultural scene. This change of scale gives the culture of the 1960s its special power, plus the fact that a bohemian life-style once limited to a tiny elite is now acted out on the giant screen of the mass media. Woodstock — both the event and the movie — gives us a clear sense of what's happening.

The combination of these two changes adds up to the beginning of a major onslaught by the "culture" against the "social structure." When such attacks were launched before — say, André Breton's surrealistic proposal in the early 1930s that the towers of Notre Dame be replaced

by an enormous glass cruet, one of the bottles filled with blood, the other with sperm, the church itself becoming a sexual school for virgins — they were understood as heavy-handed japes, perpetrated by the licensed "fools" of society. But the rise of a hip-drug-rock culture on a popular level, and the "new sensibility" of black-mass ritual and violence in the arena of culture, are a set of cultural actions that undermine the social structure itself by striking at the motivational and psychic-reward system which has sustained it. In this sense, the culture of the 1960s has a new and perhaps distinctive historic meaning.

V

Changes in cultural *ideas* have an immanence and autonomy because they develop from an internal logic at work within a cultural tradition. In this sense, new ideas and forms derive out of a kind of dialogue with, or rebellion against, previous ideas and forms. But changes in cultural *practice and life-styles* necessarily interact with social structure, since works of art, accoutrements, records, films, and plays are bought and sold in the market. The market is where social structure and culture cross. Changes in culture — particularly the emergence of new life-styles — are made possible, not only by changes in sensibility, but by shifts in the social structure itself. One can see this most readily, in the contemporary instance, in the development of new buying habits in a high consumption economy and the resultant erosion of the Protestant Ethic and the Puritan Temper, the two codes which once sustained the traditional value system of our society. It is the breakup of this ethic and temper, owing as much to changes in social structure as in the culture, that has undercut the beliefs and legitimations that sanctioned work and reward in American society. It is this transformation and the lack of any rooted new ethic, that is responsible, in good part, for the sense of disorientation and dismay that marks the public mood today.

The "Protestant Ethic" and the "Puritan Temper" were codes that emphasized work, sobriety, frugality, sexual restraint, and a forbidding attitude toward life. They defined the nature of moral conduct and social respectability. The postmodernist culture of the 1960s has been interpreted, because it calls itself a "counter-culture," as defying the Protestant Ethic, heralding the end of Puritanism, and mounting a final attack on bourgeois values. This is too facile. The Protestant Ethic and the Puritan Temper, as social facts, were eroded long ago, and they linger on as pale ideologies, used more by moralists to admonish

and by sociologists to mythologize than as behavioral realities. The breakup of the traditional bourgeois value system, in fact, was brought about by the bourgeois economic system — by the free market, to be precise.

FROM THE PROTESTANT ETHIC TO THE PSYCHEDELIC BAZAAR

The Protestant Ethic and the Puritan Temper in the United States were the world view of an agrarian, small-town, mercantile, and artisan way of life. In the United States, as Page Smith reminds us, "if we except the family and the church, the basic form of social organization up to the early decades of the twentieth century was the small town."[8] The life and character of American society were shaped by the small town — and especially by its religions. The erosion of traditional (i.e., small-town) American values took place on two levels. In the realm of culture and ideas, a withering attack on small-town life as constricting and banal was first organized, in the period between 1910 and 1920, by the Young Intellectuals, a self-consciously defined group, including such figures as Van Wyck Brooks and Harold Stearns, who sought a new and more inclusive vision of American culture. This attack was sustained in the journalistic criticism of H. L. Mencken and in the sketches and novels of Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis.

But a more fundamental transformation was occurring in the social structure itself. There was, first, the enormous expansion of the cities in response to industrialism. Equally important, if not more so, was the change in the motivations and rewards of the system itself. The rising wealth of the plutocracy, becoming evident in the Gilded Age, meant that work and accumulation were no longer ends in themselves (though they were still critical to a John D. Rockefeller or an Andrew Carnegie) but means to consumption and display. Status and its badges, not work and the election of God, became the mark of success.

This is a familiar process of social history, with the rise of new classes, though in the past it was military predators whose scions went from spartan to sybaritic living. Because the parvenu classes could distance themselves from the rest of society, such social changes often developed independently of changes in the lives of the classes below. But the real social revolution in modern society came in the 1920s, when the rise of mass production and high consumption began to transform the life of the middle class itself. In effect the Protestant Ethic as a social reality

[8] Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. vii-viii.

and a life-style for the middle class was replaced by a materialistic hedonism, and the Puritan Temper by a psychological eudaemonism.

But bourgeois society, justified and propelled as it had been in its earliest energies by these older ethics, could not easily admit to the change. It promoted a hedonistic way of life furiously — one has only to look at the transformation of advertising in the 1920s — but could not justify it. It lacked a new religion or a value system to replace the old, and the result was a disjunction.

The "new capitalism" — the phrase was used in the 1920s — continued to demand a Protestant Ethic in the area of production — that is, in the realm of work — but to stimulate a demand for pleasure and play in the area of consumption. The disjunction was bound to widen. The spread of urban life, with its variety of distractions and multiple stimuli; the new roles of women, created by the expansion of office jobs and the freer social and sexual contacts; the rise of a national culture through motion pictures and radio — all contributed to a loss of social authority on the part of the older value system.

The Puritan Ethic might be described most simply by the phrase "delayed gratification," and by restraint in gratification. It is, of course, the Malthusian injunction for prudence in a world of scarcity. But the claim of the American economic system was that it had introduced abundance, and the nature of abundance is to encourage prodigality rather than prudence. The "higher standard of living," not work as an end in itself, then becomes the engine of change. The glorification of plenty, rather than the bending to niggardly nature, becomes the justification of the system. But all of this was highly incongruent with the theological and sociological foundations of nineteenth-century Protestantism, which was in turn the foundation of the American value system.

THE ABDICATION OF THE CORPORATE CLASS

The ultimate support for any social system is the acceptance by the population of a moral justification of authority. The older justifications of bourgeois society lay in the defense of private property, which itself was justified on the grounds, elaborated by Locke, that one infused one's own labor into property. But the "new capitalism" of the twentieth century has lacked such moral grounding, and in periods of crisis it has either fallen back on the traditional value assertions, which have been increasingly incongruent with social reality, or it has been ideologically impotent.

It is in this context that one can see the weakness of corporate capital-

ism in trying to deal with some of the major political dilemmas of the century. Political — and value — conflicts in the United States can be looked at from two different perspectives. From one, there have been economic and class issues which divided farmer and banker, worker and employer, and led to the functional and interest-group conflicts which were especially sharp in the 1930s. Along a different sociological axis, one can see the politics of the 1920s, and to some extent that of the 1950s within the framework of "tradition" versus "modernity," with the rural, small-town Protestant intent on defending his historic values against the cosmopolitan liberal interested in reform and social welfare. The issues here are not primarily economic but sociocultural. The traditionalist defends fundamentalist religion, censorship, stricter divorce, and anti-abortion laws; the modernist is for secular rationality, freer personal relations, tolerance of sexual deviance, and the like. These represent the political side of cultural issues, and to the extent that culture is the symbolic expression, and justification, of experience, this is the realm of symbolic or expressive politics.

In this respect, the great symbolic issue of American politics was Prohibition. It was the major — and almost the last — effort by small-town and traditionalist forces to impose a specific value, the prohibition of liquor, on the rest of the society; and, initially, of course, the traditionalist won. In a somewhat different sense, McCarthyism in the 1950s represented an effort by some traditionalist forces to impose a uniform political morality on the society through conformity to one ideology of Americanism and a virulent form of anti-Communism.

Now, the curious fact is that the "new capitalism" of abundance, which emerged in the 1920s, has never been able to define its view of these cultural-political issues, as it had of the economic-political conflicts. Given its split character, it could not do so. Its values derive from the traditionalist past, and its language is the archaism of the Protestant Ethic. Its technology and dynamism, however, derive from the spirit of modernity — the spirit of perpetual innovation, and of the creation of new "needs" on the installment plan. The one thing that would utterly destroy the "new capitalism" is the serious practice of "deferred gratification."

When members of the corporate class have taken a stand on cultural-political issues, they have often divided on geographical lines. Midwesterners, or Texans, or those coming from small-town backgrounds, display traditionalist attitudes; Easterners, or products of Ivy League schools, are more liberal. More recently, the division has been based on

education and age rather than region. But the singular fact remains. The new capitalism was primarily responsible for transforming the society, and in the process undermined the Puritan Temper, but it was never able to develop successfully a new ideology congruent with the change, and it used — and often was trapped by — the older language of Protestant values.

The forces of modernity, which had taken the lead against the traditionalists on these social and cultural issues, have been a mélange of intellectuals, professors, welfare- and reform-minded individuals (though, paradoxically, the Prohibition movement at its inception was allied with the reformers against the evils of industrialism and city life), joined, for political reasons, by labor leaders and ethnic politicians who represented urban forces. The dominant philosophy has been liberalism, which included a critique of the inequalities and social costs generated by capitalism.

The fact that the corporate economy has no unified value system of its own, or still mouthed a flaccid version of Protestant virtues, meant that liberalism could go ideologically unchallenged. In the realm of culture, and of cultural-social issues — of political philosophy, in short — the corporate class had abdicated. The important consideration is that, *as an ideology,* liberalism had become dominant over these past decades.

VI

From a *cultural* point of view, the politics of the period of the 1920s to the 1960s was a struggle between tradition and modernity. In the 1960s a new cultural style appeared. Call it psychedelic or call it, as its own protagonists have, a "counter-culture." It announced a strident opposition to bourgeois values and to the traditional codes of American life. "The bourgeoisie," we are told, "is obsessed by greed; its sex life is insipid and prudish; its family patterns are debased; its slavish conformities of dress and grooming are degrading; its mercenary routinization of life is intolerable. . . ."[9]

What is quixotic about such pronouncements is the polemical and ideological caricature of a set of codes that had been trampled on long ago — beginning sixty years earlier, with the Young Intellectuals. Yet such a caricature is necessary to make the new counter-culture seem more daring and revolutionary than it is. The new sensibility, with its empha-

[9] Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 13.

sis on psychedelic experience, sexual freedom, apocalyptic moods and the like, thinks of itself as being against "bourgeois" culture. But in truth, bourgeois culture vanished long ago. What the counter-culture embodies is an extension of the tendencies initiated sixty years ago by political liberalism and modernist culture, and represents, in effect, a split in the camp of modernism. For it now seeks to take the preachments of personal freedom, extreme experience ("kicks," and "the high") and sexual experimentation, to a point in *life-style* that the liberal culture — which would approve of such ideas in *art* and *imagination* — is not prepared to go. Yet liberalism finds itself uneasy to say why. It approves a basic permissiveness, but cannot with any certainty define the bounds. And this is its dilemma. In culture, as well as in politics, liberalism is now up against the wall.

Liberalism also finds itself in disarray in an arena where it had joined in support of capitalism — in the economy. The economic philosophy of American liberalism had been rooted in the idea of growth. One forgets that in the late 1940s and 1950s Walter Reuther, Leon Keyserling, and other liberals had attacked the steel companies and much of American industry for being unwilling to expand capacity and had urged the government to set target growth figures. Cartelization, monopoly, and the restriction of production had been historic tendencies of capitalism. The Eisenhower administration consciously chose price stability over growth. It was the liberal economists who instilled in the society the policy of the conscious planning of growth through government inducements (e.g., investment credits, which industry, at first, did not want) and government investment. The idea of potential GNP and the concept of "short-fall" — the posting of a mark of what the economy at full utilization of resources could achieve compared to the actual figure — was introduced in the Council of Economic Advisors by the liberals. The idea of growth has become so fully absorbed as an economic ideology that one realizes no longer, as I said, how much of a liberal innovation it was.

The liberal answer to social problems such as poverty was that growth would provide the resources to raise the incomes of the poor.[10] The

[10] More technically, it was based on the welfare economics theorem of Pareto optimality, namely that one should seek a condition where some people would be better off without anyone being worse off. The direct redistribution of income is politically difficult if not impossible. However, from new or added national income, a higher proportion of the gains can be used to finance social welfare programs; and this was, as Otto Eckstein pointed out in "The Economics of the Sixties," *The Public Interest*, No. 19, Spring 1970, precisely what Congress was willing to do when economic growth was resumed in the Kennedy administration.

thesis that growth was necessary to finance public services was the center of John Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society.*

And yet, paradoxically, it is the very idea of economic growth that is now coming under attack — and from liberals. Affluence is no longer seen as an answer. Growth is held responsible for the spoliation of the environment, the voracious use of natural resources, the crowding in the recreation areas, the densities in the city, and the like. One finds, startlingly, the idea of zero economic growth — or John Stuart Mill's idea of the "stationary state" — now proposed as a serious goal of government policy. Just as the counter-culture rejects the traditional problem-solving pragmatism of American politics, it now also rejects the newer, liberal policy of economic growth as a positive goal for the society. But without a commitment to economic growth, what is the raison d'être of capitalism?

TWO CRISES

American society faces a number of crises. Some are more manifest — the alienation of the young, the militancy of the blacks, the crisis of confidence created by the Vietnam war. Some are structural — the creation of a national society, a communal society, and a post-industrial phase — which are reworking the occupational structure and the social arrangements of the society.[11] These are all aspects of a political torment in the social system. Yet these crises, I believe, are manageable (not solvable; what problems are?) if the political leadership is intelligent and determined. The resources are present (or will be, once the Vietnam war is ended) to relieve many of the obvious tensions and to finance the public needs of the society. The great need here is *time,* for the social changes which are required (a decent welfare and income maintenance system for the poor, the reorganization of the universities, the control of the environment) can only be handled within the space of a decade or more. It is the demand for "instant solutions" which, in this respect, is the source of political trouble.

But the deeper and more lasting crisis is the cultural one. Changes in moral temper and culture — the fusion of imagination and life-styles — are not amenable to "social engineering" or political control. They derive from the value and moral traditions of the society, and these cannot be "designed" by precept. The ultimate sources are the religious con-

[11] For a detailed discussion of some of the "structural revolutions" which underlie the more manifest crises, and for a discussion of political dilemmas of liberalism, see my essay "Unstable America" in the June 1970 issue of *Encounter* (London).

ceptions which undergird a society; the proximate sources are the "reward systems" and "motivations" (and their legitimacy) which derive from the arena of work (the social structure).

American capitalism, as I have sought to show, has lost its traditional legitimacy which was based on a moral system of reward, rooted in a Protestant sanctification of work. It has substituted in its place a hedonism which promises a material ease and luxury, yet shies away from all the historic implications which a "voluptuary system" — and all its social permissiveness and libertinism — implies.

This is joined to a more pervasive problem derived from the nature of industrial society. The characteristic style of an industrial society is based on the principles of economics and economizing: on efficiency, least cost, maximization, optimization, and functional rationality. Yet it is at this point that it comes into sharpest conflict with the cultural trends of the day, for the culture emphasizes anticognitive and anti-intellectual currents which are rooted in a return to instinctual modes. The one emphasizes functional rationality, technocratic decision-making, and meritocratic rewards. The other, apocalyptic moods and anti-rational modes of behavior. It is this disjunction which is the historic crisis of Western society. This cultural contradiction, in the long run, is the deepest challenge to the society.

Ed. note: All page references to Bell in the following articles are to this *JAE* reprinting.