

## *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*

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### THE MEANING OF CULTURE

Culture, for a society, a group, or a person, is a continual process of sustaining an identity through the coherence gained by a consistent aesthetic point of view, a moral conception of self, and a style of life which exhibits those conceptions in the objects that adorn one's home and oneself and in the taste which expresses those points of view. Culture is thus the realm of sensibility, of emotion and moral temper, and of the intelligence, which seeks to order these feelings.

Historically, most cultures and social structures have exhibited unity, although there have always been small groups expressing esoteric, deviant, usually libertine values. Classical culture expressed its unity through the fusion of reason and will in the pursuit of virtue. Christian culture exhibited consistency in the replication of the ordered ranks of society and the ordered ranks of the church with the hierarchies of heaven and hell, in the quest for salvation both in its social and aesthetic representations. In early modern times, bourgeois culture and bourgeois social structure fused a distinct unity with a specific character structure around the theme of order and work.

Classical social theory (I use the word "classical" here to denote the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century masters) also saw culture as unified with the social structure. Marx, as I have said, argued that the

mode of production shaped all the other dimensions of a society. Culture as ideology reflected a substructure and could not have an autonomy of its own. Moreover, in bourgeois society, culture was tied to the economy because culture, too, had become a commodity, to be evaluated by the market and bought and sold through the exchange process. Max Weber argued that thought, conduct, and societal structure were highly integrated, in that all its branches—science, economy, law, and culture—were predominantly rationalistic. Even the modes of art were predominantly rationalistic. For Weber, this was true in a double sense: the cosmological aspects of Western thought and culture were characterized by the elimination of magic (in Schiller's phrase, the "disenchantment of the world"); and the structure and formal organization, the stylistics of the arts, were rational. Weber's particular example was Western harmonic chordal music, which rested on a scale that permitted a maximum of ordered relations, unlike primitive and non-Western music.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Pitirim Sorokin, in his *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, argued that cultures were integrated by mentalities ("the central principle, 'the reason'"), which unite thought and meaning and permeate all aspects of a society. Contemporary society is sensate, in that it is empirical, materialistic, extraverted, oriented to technique, and hedonistic.

Against these views, what I find striking today is the radical disjunction between the social structure (the techno-economic order) and the culture. The former is ruled by an economic principle defined in terms of efficiency and functional rationality, the organization of production through the ordering of things, including men as things. The latter is prodigal, promiscuous, dominated by an anti-rational, anti-intellectual temper in which the self is taken as the touchstone of cultural judgments, and the effect on the self is the measure of the aesthetic worth of experience. The character structure inherited from the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on self-discipline, delayed gratification, and restraint, is still relevant to the demands of the techno-economic structure; but it clashes sharply with the culture, where such bourgeois values have been completely rejected—in part, paradoxically, because of the workings of the capitalist economic system itself. . . .

### FROM THE PROTESTANT ETHIC TO THE PSYCHEDELIC BAZAAR

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 from a kind of dialogue with, or rebellion against, previous ideas and forms. But changes in cultural practices and life-styles necessarily interact with social structure, since works of art, decoration, records, films, and plays are bought and sold in the market. The market is where social structure and culture cross. Changes in culture as a whole, particularly the emergence of new life-styles, are made possible not only by changes in sensibility, but also by shifts in the social structure itself. One can see this most readily, in American society, 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 sustained the traditional value system of American bourgeois society. It is the breakup of this ethic and temper, owing as much to changes in social structure as to changes 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 are responsible, in good part, for the sense of disorientation and dismay that marks the public mood today. What I propose to do here is to take my general argument about modernism and bourgeois society and trace out the effects more specifically in American society, which has been the exemplar of the bourgeois mode.

### The Small-Town Life

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 post-modernist 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. This is the source of the contradiction of capitalism in American life.

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 or-

ganization up to the early decades of the twentieth century was the small town."<sup>2</sup> The life and character of American society were shaped by the small town, and its religions. They were necessary to enforce strong codes of community sanctions in a hostile environment; they provided meaning and justification for work and restraint in subsistence economics.

If the core values of American society are summed up by the terms "Puritan temper" and "Protestant ethic," they are represented by the two men who stand as exemplars of the early American spirit, Jonathan Edwards as the Puritan and Benjamin Franklin as the Protestant. The thought and homiletics of these two men laid down the specific virtues and maxims of the American character. . . .

The Puritans had signed a covenant which committed each man to an exemplary life. But no person—or doctrine—can live at a fever pitch of intensity for prolonged periods, especially when it means maintaining a life of stern discipline over the springs of impulse. Calvinism, even in the early American colonies, was constantly being nibbled away as new doctrines, such as Arminianism (the basis of Wesley's Methodism), tried to replace absolute predestination with conditional election. What Jonathan Edwards did was to provide a renewal of the Absolute and a psychological mechanism whereby the individual could scrutinize himself and hold himself to account. In *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758), Edwards attacked those who would relax Calvinism. He argued that depravity is inevitable because the identity of consciousness makes all men one with Adam. He believed in a privileged elect, not of those bearing the outward sign of work but of those who experienced saving grace by some inner illumination, by a transforming experience.

If Jonathan Edwards was the aesthetic and intuitive Puritan, Benjamin Franklin was the pragmatic and utilitarian Protestant. He was a practical man who looked at the world with an unblinking eye, intent mainly on "getting ahead" by frugality, industry, and native shrewdness. Franklin's life exemplified that fundamental American characteristic, self-improvement. Trying to imitate the manner of Addison's *Spectator*, Franklin wrote his own paragraphs, compared them with his mentor, and rewrote them, thus acquiring a vocabulary and fashioning a style of his own. Doggedly, he taught himself French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin. To relieve the "itch" of youthful passions, he entered into a common-law union with his landlady's daughter and had two children by her.

The key word in Franklin's vocabulary was "useful." His one book, the *Autobiography*, was begun as something that might be useful to his son; that purpose served, the book was never finished. He invented a stove, founded a hospital, paved the streets, established a city police force, for all these were useful projects. He believed it was useful to believe in God, for God rewards virtue and punishes vice. In *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1732-1757), Franklin pilfered the world's store of aphorisms and adapted them as homilies for the poor. "As Poor Richard says" became a phrase that gave weight to all the right virtues. There were, Franklin said, 13 useful virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, chastity, and humility. There is perhaps no better inventory of the American creed. Franklin wrote that he gave to each a week's strict attention, setting down in a notebook the measure of daily success achieved in its practice. And thus he went through "a course complete in thirteen weeks and four courses a year."<sup>3</sup>

Yet all this was partly cunning, and perhaps even deceit. While Franklin was thrifty and industrious, his success, like that of many a good Yankee, came from his capacity to make influential friends, an uncanny ability to advertise himself, and the charm and wit reflected in his person and his writing. (Even the "itch" proved renewable, for he sired two more illegitimate children.) He amassed a modest fortune, retired to pursue his interest in natural philosophy and electricity, and for six years Franklin used his leisure for disinterested study before being drawn into public life.

Two images have come down to us as the essence of the American character: the piety and torment of Jonathan Edwards, obsessed with human depravity, and the practicality and expedience of Benjamin Franklin, oriented to a world of possibility and gain. Again, it is Van Wyck Brooks who best portrayed this dualism, writing almost 60 years ago:

So it is that from the beginning we find two main currents in the American mind running side by side but rarely mingling—a current of overtones and a current of undertones—and both equally unsocial: on the one hand, the transcendental current, originating in the piety of the Puritans, becoming a philosophy in Jonathan Edwards, passing through Emerson, producing the fastidious refinement and aloofness of the chief American writers, and resulting in the final unreality of most contemporary American culture; and on the other hand, the current of catchpenny opportunism, originating in the practical shifts of Puritan life, becoming a philosophy in Franklin, passing through the American

humorists and resulting in the atmosphere of our contemporary business life. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the irrational mystery at the foundation of Puritan theology, the community itself was ruled by a rational morality in which the moral law was a cold and righteous necessity. The core of Puritanism, once the theological husks are stripped away, was an intense moral zeal for the regulation of everyday conduct, not because the Puritans were harsh or prurient, but because they had founded their community as a covenant in which all individuals were in compact with each other. Given the external dangers and psychological strains of living in a closed world, the individual had to be concerned not only with his own behavior but with the community. One's own sins imperiled not just oneself but the group; by failing to observe the demands of the covenant, one could bring down God's wrath on the community.

The terms of the covenant committed each person to an exemplary life. But the very explicitness of the covenant—and the intimacy of village life—made everyone aware of the sins of temptation and the temptations of the flesh.<sup>5</sup> This made the members more self-scourging, and after being sinners—for there was a considerable amount of illicit sexual activity and a bucolic realism about sex—they were also great repenters. The ritual of confession was at the heart of Puritanism both in New England and, later, in the Midwestern revivalist communities which carried the moral scourging, if not the theology of Puritanism, across the country.

The towns that were established, first in the wilderness and then in the prairies, faced the problem of maintaining some social order among a population that often had a high proportion of social misfits and ne'er-do-wells. A town of a few hundred families could not jail those who deviated from its code, or drive them all out. A system of social control by gossip or shaming, by public confession and repentance, became the means of preventing large-scale break-down in many communities. The idea of respectability—the distrust of light-heartedness, pleasure, drink—became so deeply ingrained that it persisted long after the initial material necessity was gone. If, in the beginning, work and riches were the signs of election, in the next century they became the badges of respectability.

### Puritanism as an Ideology

A value system is often diffuse and inchoate. When it is organized into a specific code and formulated as a set of religious dogmas, an explicit covenant, or an ideology,

it becomes a means of mobilizing a community, of enforcing discipline or a set of social controls. Why an ideology lingers on and grows even stronger, long after its initial congruence with a social movement has disappeared, is a complicated instance of the sociology of domination: witness the hold of Mormon theology, which grew out of the antinomian doctrine of progressive revelation yet today functions as a source of conservatism; or the ideology of egalitarian Communism in the Soviet Union, half a century after the revolution, to justify the rise of a new class. In such situations, the ideology carries with it the authority and sanctity of the past; it has been instilled into the child and becomes the only conceptual map of the world as well as of the moral norms of conduct. Often, though the original rhetoric and symbols remain, the content has been subtly redefined, over time, to justify the established social codes and social controls that buttress the social power of the predominant class.

This is the *functional* component of an ideology. But there is a cognitive or intellectual component as well. It is in the character of ideologies not only to reflect or justify an underlying reality but, once launched, to take on a life of their own. A truly powerful ideology opens up a new vision of life to the imagination; once formulated, it remains part of the moral repertoire to be drawn upon by intellectuals, theologians, or moralists as part of the range of possibilities open to mankind. Unlike economies or outmoded technologies, they do not disappear. These "moments of consciousness," as Hegel termed them, are renewable; they can be called upon and reformulated throughout the history of a civilization. Thus an ideology gnawed at, worried to the bone, argued about, dissected, and restated by an army of essayists, moralists, and intellectuals becomes a force in its own right.

This was the fate of Puritanism. Long after the harsh environment that fostered the initial ideology had been mitigated, the force of the belief remained. As Van Wyck Brooks once noted so pungently: "When the wine of the Puritans spilled, the aroma became transcendentalism, and the wine itself commercialism." . . .

### The New Liberation

The major intellectual attack on Puritanism came in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century from the realm of culture and from the Young Intellectuals, a Harvard College group that included Walter Lippmann, Van Wyck Brooks, John Reed, and Harold Stearns.<sup>6</sup> . . .

There were several facets to the attack on Puritanism. First, there was the desire, expressed principally by Brooks, for a more inclusive culture reflecting the America of the immigrant, the Negro, and the urban scene. If America was to come of age, its culture had to be more cosmopolitan and reflect the vitality of the society. And second was the demand for sexual freedom. "A Puritan," Harold Stearns wrote, "was a sexually inadequate person who, unable to enjoy himself, derived his only satisfaction from interfering with the enjoyment of others." The children of the upper middle class flocked into Greenwich Village to create a new Bohemia. "They had read Nietzsche and Marx and Freud and Krafft-Ebing," Brooks wrote in retrospect. "Many of them wished to try out new ideas of sex, which had hitherto been kept in the cellars of young people's minds. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

The exuberance of life was summed up in a series of catchwords. One of them was "New." There was the New Democracy, the New Nationalism, the New Freedom, the New Poetry, and even the *New Republic* (which was started in 1914). A second was *sex*. Even to use the word openly sent a *frisson* through the readers of the press. Margaret Sanger, in 1913, coined the term "birth control." Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist, argued that marriage should not be a matter of legal or economic compulsion. Emma Goldman, the anarchist, lectured on homosexuality, the "intermediate sex." Floyd Dell celebrated free love, and many of the Young Intellectuals lived in ostentatious unmarried monogamy. And a third catchword was *liberation*. Liberation, as the movement self-consciously called itself, was the wind blowing from Europe, a wind of modernism come to the American shore. In art it was the Fauves and cubism, shown principally in the Armory Show of 1913. In the theater it meant symbolism, suggestion and atmosphere, the acceptance of the nonrealist influence of Maeterlinck, Dunsany, and Synge. In literature there was a vogue for Shaw, Conrad, and Lawrence. But the greatest influence was in "philosophy," where the currents of irrationalism, vitalism, and instinct, refracted through Bergson and Freud, spread rapidly in vulgarized form. . . .

The Young Intellectuals, in their very attack on Puritanism and a crabbed way of life, preached an ethic of hedonism, of pleasure and play—in short, a consumption ethic; yet, ironically—or is it not the trajectory of such "rebellion"—the consumption ethic was to be realized less than a decade later by a capitalism that, without self-consciousness, called itself (was it in faint echo of the "rebellion") the "new capitalism."

If the intellectual justifications of Puritanism had evaporated, its social practices gained new strength in the small towns precisely because of the fear of change. Change in this instance meant the rise of a new way of life—the life of the big cities, turbulent, cosmopolitan, and sinful. A definition of respectability was at stake, and this found its symbol in the idea of Temperance.

A style of life is justified by a set of values, regulated by institutions (church, school, family), and embodied in character structure. Where this style is expressed by a homogeneous set of persons, there exists what sociologists call a “status group.” The style of life symbolized by the Temperance movement, though it developed later than Puritanism, had its source in the Protestant doctrines of industry, thrift, discipline, and sobriety; its institutional foundation in the Fundamentalist churches; and its character emphasis in the idea of restraint.

The norm of abstinence had become part of the public morality of American society. It was a device for assimilating the immigrant, the poor, and the deviant into middle-class status, if not into middle-class economic fact. But by the end of the nineteenth century it was no longer voluntary; instead, it was the coercive weapon of a social group whose own style of life was no longer ascendant. For if the new urban groups would not willingly accept temperance as a way of life, then it would have to be imposed by law and made a matter of ceremonial deference to the values of the traditional middle class. . . .

But something else was going on, and this was the transformation of the American social structure, and the end of small-town dominance of American life as a social fact. There was, first, the continuing demographic change, which resulted in the growth of urban centers and the shift in political weight. But more broadly, a consumption society was emerging, with its emphasis on spending and material possessions, and it was undermining the traditional value system, with its emphasis on thrift, frugality, self-control, and impulse renunciation. Integral to both social changes was a technological revolution which, through the automobile, the motion picture, and the radio, broke down rural isolation and for the first time fused the country into a common culture and a national society. This social transformation was responsible for the end of Puritanism as a set of practices that could support the traditional value system. . . .

### **The Transparent Life**

The cultural transformation of modern society is due, singularly, to the rise of mass consumption, or the diffu-

sion of what were once considered luxuries to the middle and lower classes in society. In this process, past luxuries are constantly redefined as necessities, so that it eventually seems incredible that an ordinary object could ever have been considered out of the reach of an ordinary man. For example, because of problems of temperature, homogeneity, and transparency, large windowpanes were once expensive luxuries and rare; yet after 1902, when the Frenchman Fourcault introduced a workable industrial means for manufacturing window glass by extrusion, they became commonplace items in city storefronts or country homes, creating a new range of display and vista.<sup>8</sup>

Mass consumption, which began in the 1920s, was made possible by revolutions in technology, principally the application of electrical energy to household tasks (washing machines, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and the like), and by three social inventions: mass production on an assembly line, which made a cheap automobile possible; the development of marketing, which rationalized the art of identifying different kinds of buying groups and whetting consumer appetites; and the spread of installment buying, which, more than any other social device, broke down the old Protestant fear of debt. The concomitant revolutions in transportation and communications laid the basis for a national society and the beginnings of a common culture. Taken all together, mass consumption meant the acceptance, in the crucial area of life-style, of the idea of social change and personal transformation, and it gave legitimacy to those who would innovate and lead the way, in culture as well as in production.

The symbol of mass consumption—and the prime example of the way technology has revolutionized social habits—is, of course, the automobile. Frederick Lewis Allen has observed how hard it is for us today to realize how separate and distant communities were when they depended wholly on the railroad and horse-and-wagon for transportation. A town not near a railroad was really remote. For a farmer who lived five miles out of the county seat it was an event to take the family to town for a Saturday afternoon; a trip to a friend ten miles away was likely to be an all-day expedition, since the horse had to be rested and fed. Each small town, each farm, was dependent mainly on its own resources for amusement and company. Horizons were close, and individuals lived among familiar people and familiar things.

The automobile swept away many sanctions of the closed small-town society. The repressive threats of nineteenth-century morality, as Andrew Sinclair has observed, relied in large measure on the impossibility of

escaping from the place, and consequences, of misbehavior. By the middle of the 1920s, as the Lynds observed in Middletown, boys and girls thought nothing of driving 20 miles to dance at a roadhouse, safe from the prying eyes of neighbors. The closed car became the *cabinet particulier* of the middle class, the place where adventurous young people shed their sexual inhibitions and broke the old taboos.<sup>9</sup>

The second major instrument of change in the closed small-town society was the motion picture. Movies are many things—a window on the world, a set of ready-made daydreams, fantasy and projection, escapism and omnipotence—and their emotional power is enormous. It is as a window on the world that the movies have served, in the first instance, to transform the culture. “Sex is one of the things Middletown has long been taught to fear,” the Lynds observed when they revisited Middletown ten years later, and “its institutions . . . operate to keep the subject out of sight and out of mind as much as possible.” Except in the movies, to which the youngsters flocked.

Adolescents not only enjoyed the movies but went to school there. They modeled themselves after movie stars, repeated movie jokes and gestures, learned the subtleties of behavior between the sexes, and thus developed a veneer of sophistication. And in their efforts to act out this sophistication, to resolve their baffled uncertainties and perplexities by outwardly confident action, the pattern was “not so much . . . the lives of their own cautious parents as . . . the alternative other worlds about them.” Films glorified the cult of youth (girls wore bobbed hair and short skirts), and middle-aged men and women were advised “to make hay while the sun shines.” The idea of “freedom” was exemplified by the legitimacy of the speakeasy and one’s readiness to cut loose at wild parties. “The mockery of ethics, of the old ‘inner goodness’ of the film heroes and heroines,” writes Lewis Jacobs, “was paralleled by the new regard for material things.”

The automobile, the motion picture, and radio are technological in origin; advertising, planned obsolescence, and credit are all sociological innovations. David M. Potter has commented that it is as hopeless to understand a modern popular writer without understanding advertising as it would be to understand a medieval troubadour without understanding the cult of chivalry, or a nineteenth-century revivalist without understanding evangelical religion.

The extraordinary thing about advertising is its pervasiveness. What marks a great city if not its lighted signs? Passing over in an airplane one sees, through the

refractions of the night sky, the clusters of red, orange, blue, and white signs shimmering like highly polished stones. In the centers of the great cities—Time Square, Piccadilly, the Champs-Élysées, the Ginza—people gather in the streets under the blinking neon signs to share in the vibrancy of the milling crowd. If one thinks about the social impact of advertising, its most immediate, yet usually unnoticed, consequence has been to transform the physical center of the city. In redoing the physical topography, replacing the old *duomos* or municipal halls or palace towers, advertising has placed a “burning brand” on the crest of our civilization. It is the mark of material goods, the exemplar of new styles of life, the herald of new values. As in fashion, advertising has emphasized glamour. A car becomes the sign of the “good life” well lived, and the appeal of glamour becomes pervasive. A consumption economy, one might say, finds its reality in appearances. What one displays, what one shows, is a sign of achievement. Getting ahead is no longer a matter of rising up a social ladder, as it was in the late nineteenth century, but of adopting a specific style of life—country club, artiness, travel, hobbies—which marks one as a member of a consumption community.

In a complex, multi-group, socially mobile society, advertising also takes on a number of new “mediating” functions. The United States was probably the first large-scale society in history to build cultural change into the society, and many status problems arose simply because of the bewildering rapidity of such change. Few societies, in fact, can absorb quick change. The major social institutions—family, church, educational system—were set up to transmit established habits of the society. A society in rapid change inevitably produces confusions about appropriate modes of behavior, taste, and dress. A socially mobile person has no ready guide for acquiring new knowledge on how to live “better” than before, and his guides become the movies, television, and advertising. In this respect, advertising begins to play a more subtle role in changing habits than merely stimulating wants. The advertising in the women’s magazines, the house-and-home periodicals, and sophisticated journals like the *New Yorker* was to teach people how to dress, furnish a home, buy the right wines—in short, the styles of life appropriate to the new statuses. Though at first the changes were primarily in manners, dress, taste, and food habits, sooner or later they began to affect more basic patterns: the structure of authority in the family, the role of children and young adults as independent consumers in the society, the pattern of morals, and the different meanings of achievement in the society.

All of this came about by gearing the society to change and the acceptance of cultural change. Once mass consumption and a high standard of living were seen as the legitimate purpose of economic organization. Selling became the most striking activity of contemporary America. Against frugality, selling emphasized prodigality; against asceticism, the lavish display.

None of this would have been possible without that revolution in moral habit, the idea of installment selling. Although it had been practiced fitfully in the United States before World War I, installment selling had two stigmas. First, most installment sales were to the poor, who could not afford major expenditures; they paid weekly sums to a peddler who both sold the goods and made the weekly collection. Installment selling was thus a sign of financial instability. Second, installment selling meant debt to the middle class, and going into debt was wrong and dangerous. As Micawber would say, it was a sign of living beyond one's means, and the result would be misery. Being moral meant being industrious and thrifty. If one wanted to buy something, one should save for it. The trick of installment selling was to avoid the word "debt" and emphasize the word "credit." Monthly charges were billed by mail, and the transactions were thus handled on a businesslike basis.

Saving—or abstinence—is the heart of the Protestant ethic. With Adam Smith's idea of parsimony or frugality, and Nassau Senior's idea of abstinence, it was firmly established that saving multiplied future products and earned its own reward by interest. The denouement was the change in banking habits. For years, such was the grim specter of middle-class morality that people were afraid to be overdrawn at the bank, lest a check bounce. By the end of the 1960s, the banks were strenuously advertising the services of cash reserves that would allow a depositor to overdraw up to several thousand dollars (to be paid back in monthly installments). No one need be deterred from gratifying his impulse at an auction or a sale. The seduction of the consumer had become total.

Van Wyck Brooks once remarked about morality in Catholic countries that as long as heavenly virtues are upheld, mundane behavior may change as it will. In America, the old Protestant heavenly virtues are largely gone, and the mundane rewards have begun to run riot. The basic American value pattern emphasized the virtue of achievement, defined as doing and making, and a man displayed his character in the quality of his work. By the 1950s, the pattern of achievement remained, but it had been redefined to emphasize status and taste. The culture was no longer concerned with how to work and

achieve, but with how to spend and enjoy. Despite some continuing use of the language of the Protestant ethic, the fact was that by the 1950s American culture had become primarily hedonistic, concerned with play, fun, display, and pleasure—and, typical of things in America, in a compulsive way.

The world of hedonism is the world of fashion, photography, advertising, television, travel. It is a world of make-believe in which one lives for expectations, for what will come rather than what is. And it must come without effort. It is no accident that the successful new magazine of the previous decade was called *Playboy* and that its success—a circulation of 6 million by 1970—is due largely to the fact that it encourages fantasies of male sexual prowess. If, as Max Lerner once wrote, sex is the last frontier in American life, then the achievement motive in a go-go society finds its acme in sex. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the cult of the Orgasm succeeded the cult of Mammon as the basic passion of American life.

Nothing epitomized the hedonism of the United States better than the State of California. A cover story in *Time*, called "California: A State of Excitement," opened:

California is virtually a nation unto itself, but it holds a strange hope, a sense of excitement—and some terror—for Americans. As most of them see it, the good, godless, gregarious pursuit of pleasure is what California is all about. The citizens of Lotusland seem forever to be lolling around swimming pools, sautéing in the sun, packing across the Sierra, frolicking nude on the beaches, getting taller each year, plucking money off the trees, romping around topless, tramping through the redwoods and—when they stop to catch their breath—preening themselves on-camera before the rest of an envious world. "I have seen the future," says the newly returned visitor from California, "and it plays."<sup>10</sup>

Fun morality, in consequence, displaces "goodness morality," which stressed interference with impulses. Not having fun is an occasion for self-examination: "What is wrong with me?" As Dr. Wolfenstein observes: "Whereas gratification of forbidden impulses traditionally aroused guilt, failure to have fun now lowers one's self-esteem."<sup>11</sup>

Fun morality centers, in most instances, on sex. And here the seduction of the consumer has become almost total. The most tell-tale illustration, I believe, was a double-page advertisement by Eastern Airlines in the *New York Times*, in 1973, saying: "Take the Bob and Carol, Ted and Alice, Phil and Anne Vacation." The blatant theme was a takeoff on *Bob and Carol and Ted and*

*Alice*, a sniggering film about the fumbling attempts of two friendly couples to engage in wife-swapping. Here was Eastern Airlines saying, in effect: "We will fly you down to the Caribbean. We will rent you a cabana. Fly now, pay later." Eastern does not tell you *what* you pay, but you can postpone the money (and forget the guilt) and take the Bob and Carol, Ted and Alice, and (for further titillation another couple is added) Phil and Anne vacation. Compare this with Franklin's 13 useful virtues, which included temperance, frugality, tranquility, and chastity. At the turn of the century, a church in the Midwest might have property on which a brothel was located. And one could then at least say: "Well, we are losing bodies, but we are earning money to save souls." Today, when one sells bodies, one is no longer also saving souls.

What this abandonment of Puritanism and the Protestant ethic does, of course, is to leave capitalism with no moral or transcendental ethic. It also emphasizes not only the disjunction between the norms of the culture and the norms of the social structure, but also an extraordinary contradiction within the social structure itself. On the one hand, the business corporation wants an individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification—to be, in the crude sense, an organization man. And yet, in its products and its advertisements, the corporation promotes pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and letting go. One is to be "straight" by day and a "swinger" by night. This is self-fulfillment and self-realization! . . .

We are now in a position to sum up the process. The erosion of traditional American values took place on two levels. In the realm of culture and ideas, the withering attack on small-town life as constricting and banal was first organized in the 1910s by the Young Intellectuals as a self-consciously defined group, and this attack was sustained in the next decade 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: the change in the motivations and rewards of the economic system. 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 crucial 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. Yet such parvenu classes could distance themselves from the rest of society, and such social transformations 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 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 value system to replace the old, and the result was disjunction.

In one respect what we see here is an extraordinary historic change in human society. For thousands of years, the function of economics was to provide the daily necessities—the subsistence—of life. For various upper-class groups, economics has been the basis of status and a sumptuary style. But now, on a mass scale, economics had become geared to the demands of culture. Here, too, culture, not as expressive symbolism or moral meanings but as life-style, came to reign supreme.

The "new capitalism" (the phrase was first 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 temper might be described most simply by the term "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. A 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 HINGE OF HISTORY

. . . What is striking about the rise and fall of civilizations—and it was the basis of the philosophy of history of the talented Arabic thinker Ibn Khaldun—is that societies pass through specific phases whose transformations signal decline. These are the transformations from simplicity to luxury (what Plato, who wrote about this in Book 2 of *The Republic*, called the change from the healthy city to the fevered city), from asceticism to hedonism.

It is striking that every new, rising social force—be it a new religion, new military force, or new revolutionary movement—begins as an ascetic movement. Asceticism emphasizes non-material values, renunciation of physical pleasures, simplicity and self-denial, and arduous, purposeful discipline. That discipline is necessary for the mobilization of psychic and physical energies for tasks outside the self, for the conquest and subordination of the self in order to conquer others. As Max Weber remarked: “Discipline acquired during wars of religion was the source of the unconquerableness of both the Islamic and Cromwellian cavalries. Similarly, inner-worldly asceticism and the disciplined quest for salvation in a vocation pleasing to God were the sources of the virtuosity in acquisitiveness characteristic of the Puritans.”<sup>12</sup>

The discipline of the old religious “warriors of God” was channeled into military organization and battle. What was historically unique about the Puritan temper was the devotion of this-worldly asceticism to an occupational calling and to work and accumulation. Yet the end of the Puritan’s being was not primarily wealth. As Weber remarked, the Puritan got nothing out of his wealth for himself but the proof of his own salvation.<sup>13</sup> And it was this furious energy that built an industrial civilization.

For the Puritan, “the most urgent task” was to destroy spontaneous, impulsive behavior and bring order into the conduct of life. Today one finds asceticism primarily in revolutionary movements and revolutionary regimes. Puritanism, in the psychological and sociological sense, is to be found in Communist China and in the regimes which fuse revolutionary sentiment with Koranic purposes, as in Algeria and Libya.

In the scheme of Khaldun, reflecting in the fourteenth century the vicissitudes of Berber and Arabic civilizations, the sequences of transformation went from the Bedouin to the sedentary to the hedonistic life, and from there, in three generations, to the decline of the society. In the hedonistic life, there is a loss of will and fortitude. More importantly, men become competitive with one another for luxuries, and lose the ability to share and

sacrifice. There then follows, says Khaldun, the loss of *asabiyyah*, that sense of solidarity which makes men feel as brothers to one another, that “group feeling which means (mutual) affection and willingness to fight and die for each other.”<sup>14</sup>

The basis for *asabiyyah* is not only the sense of shared sacrifice and shared danger—the elements which hold platoons of fighting men or underground revolutionary cadres together—but also some moral purpose, a *telos* which provides the moral justifications for the society. At the start, the United States was held together by an implicit covenant, the sense that this was the continent where God’s design would be unfolded, a belief which underlay the deism of Jefferson. As this belief receded, what held the society together was a unique polity, an open, adaptive, egalitarian, and democratic system which was responsive to the many claimants that sought inclusion in the society and which respected the principles of law as embodied in the Constitution and abided by the decisions of the Supreme Court. Yet this responsiveness itself was possible largely because of the expansiveness of the economy, and the promise of material wealth as a solvent for social strains. . . . But the deeper and more difficult questions are the legitimations of the society as expressed in the motivations of individuals and the moral purposes of the nation. And it is here that the cultural contradictions—the discordances of character structure and the disjunction of realms—become central.

Changes in culture and moral temper—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 conceptions which undergird a society; the proximate sources are the reward systems and motivations (and their legitimations) which derive from the arena of work.

American capitalism, as I have tried to show, has lost its traditional legitimacy, which was based on a moral system of reward rooted in the Protestant sanctification of work. It has substituted a hedonism which promises material ease and luxury, yet shies away from all the historic implications of a “voluptuary system,” with all its social permissiveness and libertinism. The culture has been dominated (in the serious realm) by a principle of modernism that has been subversive of bourgeois life, and the middle-class life-styles by a hedonism that has undercut the Protestant ethic which provided the moral foundation for the society. The interplay of modernism as a mode developed by serious artists, the institutionalization of those played-out forms by the “cultural mass,” and the hedonism as a way of life promoted by the

marketing system of business, constitutes the cultural contradiction of capitalism. The modernism is exhausted, and no longer threatening. The hedonism apes its sterile japes. But the social order lacks either a culture that is a symbolic expression of any vitality or a moral impulse that is a motivational or binding force. What, then, can hold the society together?

This is joined to a more pervasive problem derived from the nature of modern society. The characteristic style of industrialism is based on the principles of economics and economizing: on efficiency, least cost, maximization, optimization, and functional rationality. Yet it is this very style that is in conflict with the advanced cultural trends of the Western world, for modernist culture emphasizes anti-cognitive and anti-intellectual modes which look longingly toward a return to instinctual sources of expression. 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 cultural crisis of all Western bourgeois society. This cultural contradiction is, in the longer run, the most fateful division in the society.

## ENDNOTES

1. See Max Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, ed. Don Martindale et al. (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958).
2. Page Smith, *As a City upon a Hill* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. vii.
3. In his magisterial work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber sees Franklin as the embodiment of both. He cites his "sermons," as he calls them ("... Time is money... Remember that credit is money. If a man lets his money lie in my hands after it is done, he gives me the interest..."), as marking the characteristic ethos of the "new man." Interestingly, Weber cites Franklin more often than he cites Luther, Calvin, Baxter, Bailey, or any of the other Puritan divines to describe the lineaments of the new ethic. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1930).
4. Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1958; orig. ed., 1915), p. 10.
5. Perhaps the most powerful literary illustration of these illicit impulses is Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," an oneiro-mantic vision of a black mass in the woods of Salem. In the story, Young Goodman Brown leaves his wife to go into the woods with the devil (who bears a serpent rod = phallus) to be baptized into the mysteries of sin. To his surprise and horror, he recognizes all the "good" people of the town joyfully moving toward the initiation ceremony, and recognizes, as well, his own young wife Faith. The ceremony and the music have the form of a religious liturgy, but the content is the flowers of evil. In the end it is never clear whether this was, for Goodman Brown, an actual event or a dream in which he was struggling with his own sinful impulses. But his life from then on was miserable. ("On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm he could not listen because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear...") He led a cankered and shriveled existence, and his dying hour was gloom. See "Young Goodman Brown," in *The Novels and Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), pp. 1033-1042.
6. For a discussion of the Young Intellectuals, see Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence*, pt. 3 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959). For a characteristic voice, see Harold Stearns, *America and the Young Intellectual* (New York: Doran, 1921).
7. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Confident Years: 1885-1915* (New York: Dutton, 1952), p. 487. The phrase "cellars of young people's minds" came from Ernest Poole's novel *The Harbor*, describing Princeton life in the early 1900s.
8. The illustration is taken from Jean Fourastie, *The Causes of Wealth* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), p. 127. Professor Fourastie's book, like Siegfried Gideon's *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), is a fascinating miscellany of examples of this process.
9. The Lynds quoted one Middle Western observer: "Why on earth do you need to study what's changing this country? ... I can tell you what's happening in just four letters: A-U-T-O!" Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), p. 251. In 1890 a pony was the wildest dream of a Middletown boy. By 1923, "the 'horse culture' of Middletown had almost disappeared." The first automobile appeared there in 1900. By 1906 there were "probably 200 in the city and county." At the end of 1923 there were more than 6,200 cars, one for every six persons, or roughly two for every three families. As the Lynds observed: "Group-sanctioned values are disturbed by the inroads of the automobile upon the family budget. A case in point is the not uncommon practice of mortgaging a home to buy an automobile" (p. 254).
10. *Time*, November 7, 1969, p. 60.
11. Martha Wolfenstein, "The Emergence of Fun Morality," in *Mass Leisure*, ed. Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyersohn (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958), p. 86.
12. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 203.
13. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 71.
14. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958). The crucial section is in vol. 1, chap. 3: the quotation above is from p. 313.