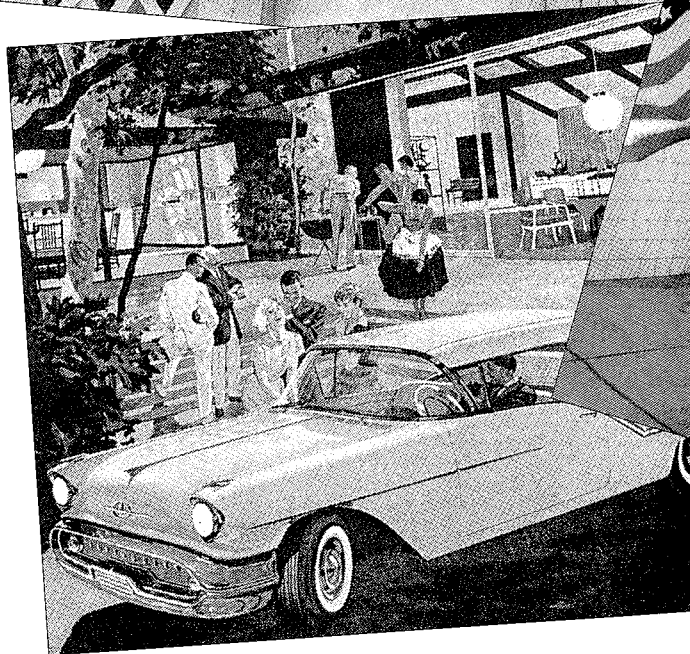
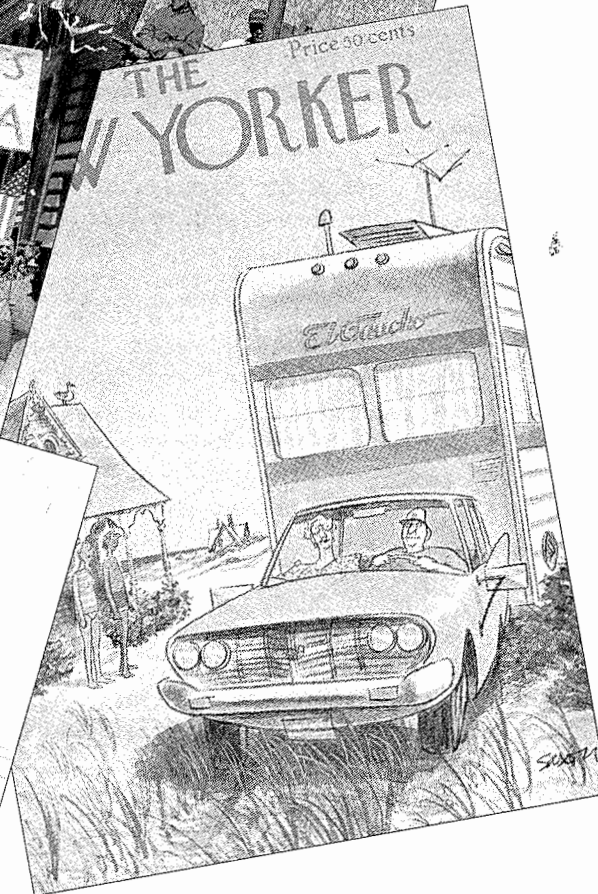
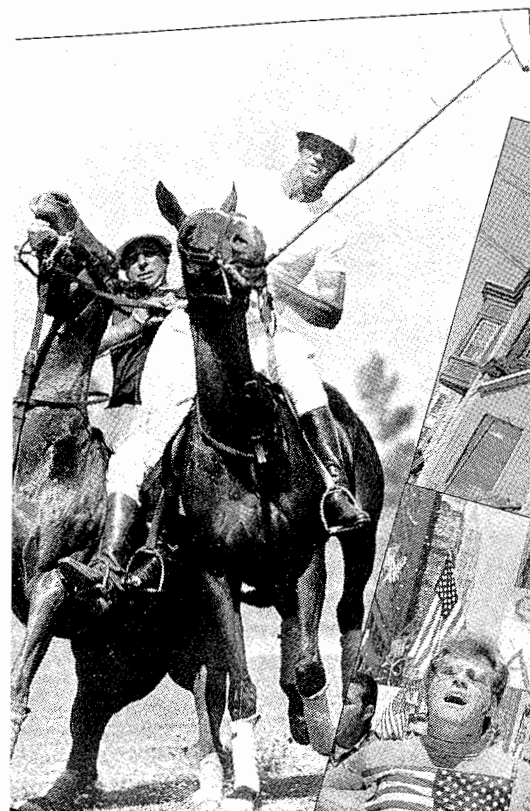


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# The New Politics of Class in America

*Judging by the nightly news, class conflict in America has been reduced to a tussle over the tax code: Are the rich paying their "fair share" of the nation's taxes? To press the question of class much beyond such dollars-and-cents discussions is to evoke a distinct feeling of unease in most Americans. Yet as our three essayists argue, the nation's social classes have undergone a transformation. During the past 30 years, the moral status attached to being poor, middle class, or rich has been drastically altered. And these changes are directly responsible for many of today's most furious political battles—over gay rights, welfare, and other issues.*





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# The Poor Pre-eminent

BY LAWRENCE M. MEAD

**W**hen the problem of entrenched poverty suddenly appeared on the public agenda during the mid-1960s, it transformed the character of political debate in America. Since then we have seen nothing less than a sea change in our national politics.

From the turn of the century to the mid-1960s, the most contentious issues in American politics concerned how best to secure more of the good things of life for working Americans. The dispute was rooted in a conflict between economic classes. The central question was whether to accept the unequal rewards meted out by the marketplace or to try to equalize them by forcing wages higher or giving public benefits to workers and their families. The working class and its representatives, the labor unions, made the most divisive demands on government. In the new era that began three decades ago, however, the most highly charged issues concern the poor and dependent, most of whom do not work. The leading issue today is how to respond to the disorders of the inner city, including crime, welfare dependency, and homelessness.

Many of the older issues of class and economic interests survive, and new issues have emerged, but they do not occupy center stage. Even during the severe recessions of the late 1970s and early '80s, which crushed entire industries and drove unemployment to levels not seen since the Great Depression, workers and farmers were never able to capture Washington's undivided attention. The focus of politics is now on poverty instead of in-

equality, on conduct and not class. This represents a sharp break from American politics as it was practiced during most of the 20th century, and it helps explain two of our current perplexities: the rise of divided government, with Democrats dominating Congress and Republicans prevailing in the executive branch, and Americans' general disaffection with politics.

**A**merican politics during the first six decades of this century could be understood as a long-running debate about the proper size of government. This was the era of what I call progressive politics. Liberals and conservatives assumed that all Americans, rich and poor alike, were able to get ahead by seizing the opportunities that came their way. The debate was over how best to create those opportunities—through more government or less. The rhythms of national political life followed the ebb and flow of public opinion on this basic issue, with periods of liberal expansion punctuated by times of conservative consolidation, such as the 1920s and '50s.

This pattern of politics was disrupted during the early 1960s by the appearance of entrenched poverty as a national political preoccupation. The prosperity of the postwar era had made poverty seem an anomaly in need of explanation and redress. However, the entrenched poor of Appalachia, the rural South, and the northern inner cities seemed fundamentally different from the destitute of the Great Depression. According to Michael Harrington's landmark book of 1962, *The Other America*, these poor were "maimed in

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body and spirit" by lives of disadvantage and thus unable to "help themselves." Above all, they were incapable of meeting society's expectation that they work regularly. Their poverty was chronic rather than episodic, and it might persist for generations, even in the midst of prosperity. To many Americans, if not to Harrington, such destitution seemed to reflect the personal limitations of the poor themselves or a "culture of poverty"—even if these problems ultimately had their source in a historic lack of opportunity.

**O**f course, much of this "new poverty" was not really new at all. It merely became more visible to affluent Americans when black farm laborers and sharecroppers migrated from the rural South to northern cities, later followed by Puerto Ricans and others from Latin America. It is true that many of the new arrivals were able to follow members of earlier ethnic groups in the long climb out of the ghettos, but a larger share of blacks and His-

panics than earlier migrants remained behind, entangled in dependency and the other plagues of the inner city.

The otherness of the poor only increased with time. An economic boom and major civil-rights reforms during the mid-1960s led not to social peace but to riots in the ghettos, beginning with the Watts conflagration in Los Angeles in 1965. The riots were followed by a welfare boom. Between 1965 and '75, the number of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) more than doubled, jumping from 4.4 to 11.4 million, the result mainly of looser eligibility standards and an erosion of the stigma against welfare. During the same period, crime rates soared. The usual progressive mechanisms—enhancing opportunity and economic growth—no longer seemed sufficient to promote advancement by those at the bottom of society. The welfare surge occurred during good times, not bad, and it was greatest not in areas with the most hardship but in northern cities with the most liberal welfare policies.



*The poor whites of Appalachia loomed large in the public imagination when poverty was rediscovered in the 1960s. Today, while two-thirds of the poor are white, poverty is seen as largely a black problem.*

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The welfare boom sharply reduced work effort by the urban poor. In New York City, seven percent of all adults, or 318,000 people, were on welfare by 1970, and the massive growth of the welfare rolls between 1960 and 1973 coincided with the disappearance of as many as 65,000 people from the city's labor force. By 1988, according to Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D.-N.Y.), there were 64,000 adults living on welfare in New York City who had never worked at all, and 45 percent of the city's schoolchildren lived in welfare households. The trends were similar in the nation at large. In 1975, half of all heads of poor families did not work at all during the course of the year, up from 31 percent in 1959.

**M**uch of the decline in work effort was linked to the rising number of households headed by women, since poor single mothers seldom work. But work effort dropped among two-parent poor households as well. [See chart, p. 47.] Meanwhile, work levels rose among the nonpoor—including single mothers who were not on welfare. Nonworking poverty could no longer be excused by the idea that mothers were supposed to raise children without working. More than any other change, these trends in employment made poverty and dependency into explosive national issues.

Welfare enrollments reached a plateau during the mid-1970s, but attention shifted to a more disturbing manifestation of poverty: the underclass. The term refers to the urban poor who lead the most disordered lives, not only long-term welfare families but youths and men detached from both school and work, many of them high-school dropouts involved in street crime and drugs. From the beginning, it was clear that a lack of opportunity was not the chief handicap of the underclass but, as *Time* put it in 1977, the absence of "schooling,

skills and discipline to advance." The underclass is not large—at between two and eight million people, it constitutes only a fraction of the poor population of 36 million and at most 3.5 percent of the total national population.\* It may or may not be growing. But because of its immersion in crime and welfare, it has come to dominate Americans' image of the social problem.

During the 1980s, the homeless gave dysfunctional poverty a still more unsettling face. This group was even smaller than the underclass—600,000 or fewer by the best estimate—but even more painfully obtrusive. Now the poor no longer stayed, for the most part, in low-income areas. Middle-class Americans were forced literally to step over them as they passed through railroad and bus stations on their way home to the suburbs. Despite what advocates contend, the homeless are seldom "ordinary people down on their luck" who just need housing. Very few of them work—the immediate source of their homelessness—and many have serious personal problems, such as substance abuse and mental illness.

**T**he nonworking poor defied the basic assumptions of New Deal politics and the original welfare state. The Great Depression had lifted much of the moral taint from poverty by demonstrating that many of the poor were victims of economic forces beyond their own control. "Anybody who is unemployed isn't necessarily unemployed because he's shiftless," declared Gardner C. Means, an adviser to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace. The New Dealers established the notion that it was government's responsibility to manage the

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\*In recent years, the national poverty rate has been close to 14 percent. Poverty is a transient experience for most of the poor. But six to seven percent of Americans—and four or five percent of employable Americans—remain poor for more than two years at a stretch.

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economy so that jobs would be available to the unemployed, who, it was assumed, would jump at any opportunity.

But the Great Depression did not remove the taint from "relief." Although the public demanded that the jobless be put back to work, it remained powerfully averse to the idea of a dole. President Franklin D. Roosevelt hastened to replace his early emergency relief efforts with public-employment programs such as the Works Progress Administration, and even these were suspect. The permanent welfare programs that were created were hedged with moralizing restrictions. AFDC benefits, for example, were chiefly restricted to widows and their children, and AFDC was markedly less generous than programs that were funded by worker contributions, such as unemployment insurance and Social Security. The architects of the contributory programs—as well as the New Deal subsidies extended to agriculture, transportation, and other industries—assumed that the beneficiaries would receive their main support through employment. These benefits are sometimes called "middle-class welfare," but the New Deal programs never just *gave* people money. Instead, they raised the incomes of working people.

During the Depression, no more than a quarter of working Americans were jobless at any one time, but in four elections much of the middle class joined the working class to give FDR a mandate to reshape American society. The New Deal redistributed power and income and subjected business to unprecedented controls. Beginning in the 1960s, however, most Americans found much less to identify with in the plight of the less fortunate. "During the Depression, we were all more or less engulfed," recalled one artist quoted in Studs Terkel's oral history of the Great Depression, *Hard Times* (1970). "Today when people say poverty, they turn their head." Above all, it was the welfarism of the new poor that set them apart. The poor of the Depression "had to work 16 hours a day," remarked a restaurant owner, while the new poor were "paid by people that works [sic]." They were not

"guilty" about it, "just sick, mentally sick." The poor were no longer seen as workers in economic trouble but as people entirely outside workaday society, even a threat to it. The new poverty thus destroyed the alliance between the needy and better-off Americans that had sustained both the New Deal and the Democratic Party's dominance in presidential elections.

One great force behind the emergence of a new politics of dependency was the appearance of this new, more passive variety of poverty. The other was the failure of progressive-style reforms to overcome it. The earliest efforts followed in the progressive tradition. The "Kennedy tax cut" of 1964, along with growing federal spending, maintained full employment, while the civil-rights reforms opened up more opportunities to minorities who were employed or in school. These measures drove destitution down sharply, particularly among blacks, who were heavily represented among the working poor. The poverty rate among blacks fell from 55 percent in 1959 to only 30 percent in 1974.

But this turned out to be the last success of progressive reformism. Progress against poverty largely halted by the mid-1970s. A faltering national economy was partly to blame, but it was clear even during the 1960s that traditional reforms could not compensate for the rise of social maladies such as family breakup and withdrawal from the work force. Neither liberals nor conservatives could fully explain the decline of work. Liberals argued that the problem was a lack of jobs, low wages, or racial bias, while conservatives blamed welfare, which seemed to reward those who did not work or marry. But little evidence has been found to support these theories. The retreat from work seems to have its roots not in any lack of opportunity but in the demoralization of the poor in the face of their troubled histories as individuals and as a group—as well as government's failure to require welfare recipients to work.

The very ability of the poor to function

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increasingly became an issue. As early as 1965, in a speech at Howard University, President Lyndon Johnson declared that social policy had to move "beyond opportunity to achievement." It was not enough to secure equal rights for blacks if they did not have the capacity, because of the nation's racist legacy, to compete equally with whites. They had to be assured "not just legal equity but human ability." Widely applauded at the time, the speech nevertheless had sobering implications, for it amounted to an admission that the ability of the poor to seize opportunity could no longer be taken for granted.

This changed the face of social policy. The last American social programs with a progressive, redistributive cast were enacted in 1964–65: Medicare and Medicaid, which provided health care to the elderly and poor, and food stamps, which provided low-income Americans with coupons to buy groceries. The main purpose of LBJ's War on Poverty and the Great Society, rather, was to improve individual skills through programs such as Head Start and the Job Corps. The critical policy question was no longer whether to control or decontrol the economy, or how much to tax and spend, but rather how to restore order and effort among the poor themselves.

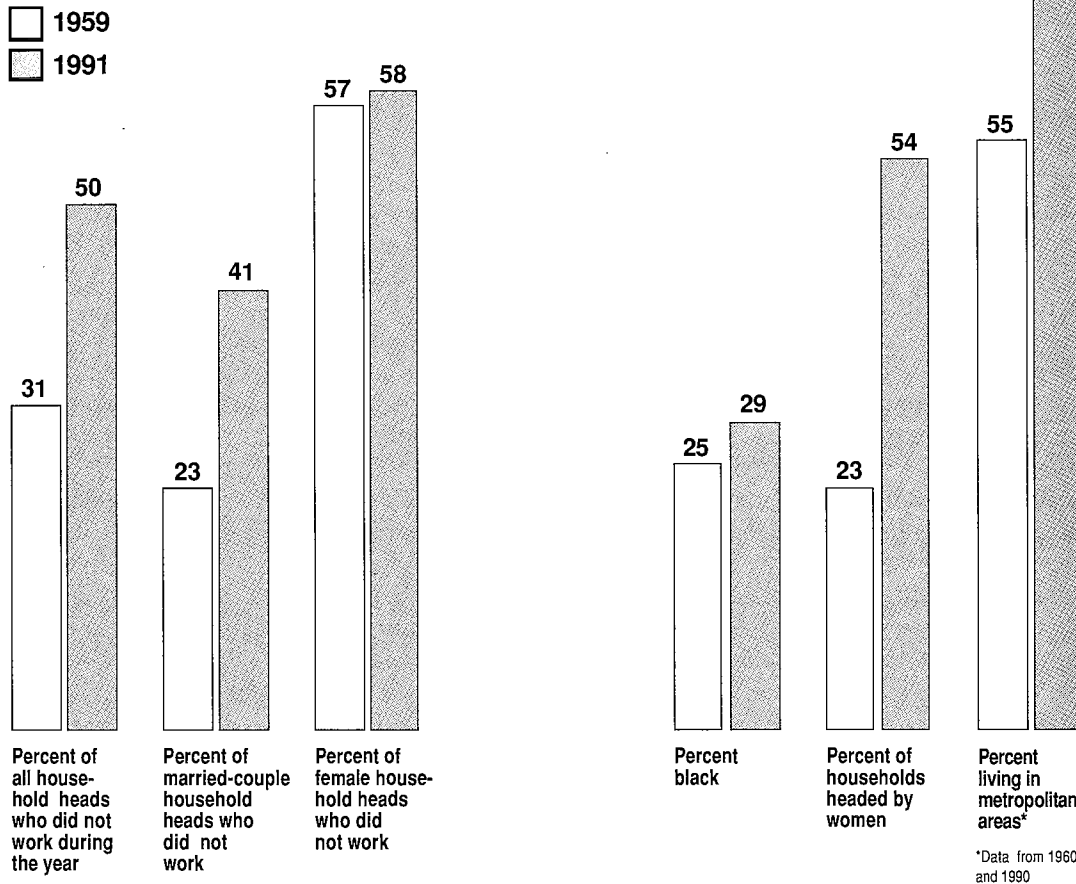
**B**y the late 1960s, it became obvious that LBJ's compensatory programs were having little effect. Federal planners briefly embraced the idea of defeating poverty by transferring more money to the poor through expanded benefit programs. Increased transfer payments did in fact help reduce poverty. Above all, rising Social Security benefits sharply reduced need among the elderly. But to try to help the nonworking, employable poor this way proved politically impossible. Presidents Nixon and Carter both proposed plans to expand the welfare system, but these were defeated, mainly because they did little to require welfare recipients to work. During the 1970s, various plans to extend health-care coverage or child-care also died. What discredited lib-

eralism was not so much the cost of these programs as the painfully apparent fact that benefits alone could not stem the tide of urban crime, dependency, and failing schools.

As the social problem festered, the public lost the faith in government it had acquired during the progressive era. The feeling was expressed not only in a turning to the Republicans but in signs of disillusionment with politics generally. Fewer American voters were willing to declare an allegiance to either major political party: Between 1960 and the '70s, the proportion of voters claiming to be independents rose from one quarter to over one third. Turnout in presidential elections dropped, from 63 percent of eligible voters in 1960 to little more than half in recent contests. These changes are sometimes blamed on the economic turmoil of the 1970s—the energy crisis, double-digit inflation, and "stagflation"—but they began in the prosperous 1960s.

Washington's inability to solve the poverty problem after 15 years and billions of dollars lent credence to Ronald Reagan's indictment of big government during the presidential campaign of 1980. As president, Reagan was able to win deep cuts in education and training programs for the poor. Indeed, many liberal analysts and congressional staff members had come to share his belief that such programs achieved little while isolating the poor in a separate world of agencies and care givers. But the poverty problem blocked Reagan's larger agenda just as it had stymied that of liberals before him. Congress, reflecting public opinion, was as unwilling to dismember the welfare state as it had been to expand it. Much as Americans resented the chaos in the cities, they were not about to force the poor to shift for themselves. Reagan was compelled to preserve a "safety net" for the poor, trimming AFDC, Medicaid, and food stamps only slightly. The modest cuts in antipoverty spending he did achieve—through 1985, social spending was 10 percent less than what had been projected—earned him more public censure than anything else he did. He was accused of heartlessly neglecting the

## The Changing Portrait of the Poor, 1959-91



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

*Between 1959 and '91, the poverty rate dropped from 22.4 percent to 14.2 percent, and the number of poor people fell from 39.5 million to 35.7 million, but the number of nonworking poor rose sharply.*

needy, and half of the American public believed, falsely, that he had left the poor entirely unprotected.

In the end, the Reagan Revolution's social policy was no more successful than the Great Society. The administration claimed that it was better to overcome poverty through economic growth than with government hand-outs. As John Kennedy had said, "A rising tide lifts all boats." During the eight-year boom that began in 1982, most working Americans did increase their income (though the rich claimed a larger share than the middle class). The poor benefited much less, however, because most of

them were no longer in the work force. Between 1982 and '89, unemployment fell by nearly half, from nearly 10 percent to just over five percent, but the poverty rate fell only from 15 to 13 percent. While a boom occurred in the rest of the country, the inner cities were devastated anew by the crack epidemic. The continuing deterioration of the ghetto discredited the idea of a smaller government just as it had the liberal hope of a larger one. By the end of the 1980s, there was talk in Washington of a need for a renewed effort to help the poor.

From the bankruptcy of the progressive reformism practiced by Left and Right a new



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politics arose. Some analysts say that the rise of poverty as a political issue has made the nation more conservative, but this is too simple. It is true that under Ronald Reagan and even the "kinder, gentler" George Bush, the poor received less attention from Washington than they did during the 1960s and '70s, but the nation did not move very far to the right in the traditional sense. For all of Ronald Reagan's persuasion, big government remained popular with voters, and overall social spending—for the poor and middle class alike—went right on growing during the Reagan years, albeit more slowly than before.

The weight of the poverty problem has changed the very meanings of Right and Left. The two sides now differ not so much over the scale of government as over how to use government to combat the dysfunctions of the ghetto. Conservatives still want smaller government, but they also want to use public authority to repress crime, require welfare recipients to work, and set stiffer standards for children in the schools. Liberalism still means bigger government, but above all it means resistance to enforcing "values." Liberals, too, deplore crime and welfare, but they seek to assuage the "underlying causes" of poverty with new benefits and services without trying to govern behavior.

The main bone of contention is no longer how much to do for the poor, but whether to require them to do anything *in return* for support. The question is, Should adult welfare recipients have to work or stay in school as a condition of aid? Typically, conservatives want work programs to be mandatory, while liberals want them to be voluntary. During the debates on the Family Support Act of 1988, Republicans and Democrats compromised their differences on cost and benefits but remained bitterly divided over work requirements. Democrats finally accepted stiffer standards for work programs only because President Reagan threatened to veto any bill that did not contain them.

The main reason Republicans have won most presidential elections since 1968 is that the voters are more conservative on dependency issues than they are on the economic issues of progressive politics. The public wants government used vigorously to restore order in the city. Many conservatives are willing to do that. Liberals, while regretting urban disorders, show greater tolerance for them. The only Democrats to win the White House recently—Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton—were well to the right of their party on crime and welfare. Clinton won the election of 1992 in part because the recession brought pocket-book issues to the fore, but also because he promised to "end welfare as we know it."

**T**he Clinton reform plan, still known only in outline, is to limit welfare recipients to two years on the rolls and to require them to work thereafter, in a government job if necessary. A proposal of this kind may prove politically unworkable because many Democrats in Congress will think it too severe, or it may be impractical because the cost of the public jobs would be high. But even to propose such a change is far removed from the spirit of the New Deal, or even the Great Society, when people still believed that extending opportunity was enough to overcome destitution.

The current trend is toward paternalism—a social policy that not only helps the poor but attempts to manage their lives. Under the 1988 Family Support Act, for example, states are required to involve rising proportions of clients in work programs; the operators of homeless shelters, meanwhile, are increasingly trying to regiment the lives of their clients. For the seriously poor, obligation, not freedom, seems to be the way forward. This is a radical departure from what both liberals and conservatives have advocated in the recent past. The debate over how to balance obligation and benefit in such programs is now the central issue in American politics.

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# Middle-Class Moralities

BY ALAN WOLFE

America was born the world's first bourgeois republic and has proudly defined itself ever since as, above all, a middle-class nation. Yet the 1992 election was the first in recent memory in which both parties wrapped themselves unambiguously in middle-class symbols. The Democrats, who once seemed to champion every group that was too poor (or too unconventional) to qualify as middle class, nominated a Southern Baptist of modest Arkansas beginnings for the presidency, and he, after carefully consulting with party elders, chose another Southern Baptist as his running mate. Neither, it seemed, was ever photographed without an American flag in the background. The Republicans, whose economic policies during the 1980s worked to the benefit of everyone above the middle class, fell into a Keystone Kops scramble to find an issue that would rally middle-class voters. And even as the two parties redoubled their efforts to woo the mighty middle, a Texas billionaire attracted millions of disaffected suburbanites to his quixotic campaign.

Middle-class anxieties about the economy, crime, and social issues seem certain to dominate American politics for years to come. Yet it has become very difficult to define clearly what it means to be middle class. The nation's images of bourgeois life are increasingly obsolete: yeoman farmer, small-town merchant, independent entrepreneur, male breadwinner, stay-at-home mom, well-paid factory worker, hard-working school teacher, self-employed lawyer, family physician. Is Zöe Baird, whose name was never mentioned without note of her \$500,000 income, middle class? Are the mostly blue-collar Reagan Democrats? Is a former executive

who is struggling to start a new business but in reality living on his wife's income as a social worker? Is anyone without health insurance, whatever his or her income? Are blacks who have made it to the suburbs? Korean grocers? Divorced mothers of small children? An assistant professor of anything? As we watch more Americans fall from the middle class, we ought to know at what point we should begin to roll out the nation's safety net. But even spelling out a formula in dollars and cents is nearly impossible. We cannot even decide at what point we consider people rich. Candidate Bill Clinton pledged to make the rich pay a larger share of the nation's taxes, but the definition of rich has bounced around. President Clinton's tax plan now calls for higher income taxes on couples earning more than \$140,000, and a special "millionaires'" surcharge on those earning more than \$250,000.

It may be hard to determine where the economic boundary lines of middle-class life should be drawn, but it is not that difficult to figure out what has happened to the core of the middle class during the 1980s and '90s. Most sensibly defined, a middle-class job is one that makes it possible to afford certain basics: a home of one's own, a car or two, and some child care. By this definition, middle-class jobs have most definitely disappeared over the past 15 years. There is much truth to the notion that the middle class, as economists Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane write, has been "hollowed out": More people have moved to points where the middle class blends into the class above or the class below.

This change has its roots in the economic turmoil of the 1970s. In 1973, the year the first

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oil crisis began, the country entered an era of slower economic growth, and in 1979 income inequality began a comparatively rapid increase. Because of this relatively clear turning point in time, one can picture two middle classes in America: one that rose to its status when economic growth was assumed and opportunity abundant, and one that achieved its status at a time when very little could be taken for granted. What divides these two groups is not how much money their members make but the different degrees of effort involved in making it. So different are the experiences of these two middle classes that, for all their economic similarity, they have little in common culturally or morally. There is no longer one thing called "the middle class" in America, and there is no longer a single middle-class morality. It is far more accurate to say that we have at least two middle-class moralities, each defined by different opportunities, expectations, and outlooks.

## II

For those whose income and status began to rise in the 1950s, passage into the middle class was nearly as automatic as the progress through the seven ages of man. Each step seemed preordained: the breadwinner's income rose, the family moved to a larger apartment, then bought its first house, along with a car, a television, and a few other accouterments of the good life. The children were sent off to college, perhaps the first in their families to go, and the parents could look forward to spending their retirement years in Florida or Arizona. Dad might have been a middle manager with Prudential, the owner of a small business, a salesman, or a shopkeeper with an expanding clientele. He might have worked incredibly hard or he might have worked nine to five, but the robust economy guaranteed at

least minimal affluence. Mom stayed home, though after the kids were grown she might have taken a job as a receptionist or gone back to school. Many people in this generation became middle class simply by being there. To be sure, one had to be of the right race. At least some initiative and hard work were needed—everyone knew people who were left behind. But for more Americans than ever before, the goal was in reach, and never before had so many reached it.

Money, for this generation, was always an awkward proposition. With the Great Depression never far from consciousness, income was something to be saved, not spent. Yet this generation was willing to share with those left behind some of the surplus generated by the economy. The Democrats did rather well during the go-go years of the 1960s, in part because middle-class prosperity was compatible with, if not fueled by, activist government. In neither lifestyle nor politics did this generation flaunt its good fortune, understanding very well how unreal its prosperity was. Anything won with so little effort could be lost with even less. *Security* became the watchword for the first postwar middle class, as if the right combination of public policy and private behavior could make permanent what was too good to be true.

The postwar generation maintained its liberalism through old age; the elderly living in Florida still vote on the basis of who will best protect the government programs that will guarantee them economic security until they die. At the same time, this generation passed on some aspects of its liberalism to its children. Although all of America turned more conservative in the 1980s, young urban professionals—those whose privileged educations or first home purchases were made possible by the advantages of their parents—remained culturally liberal. More tolerant than their parents—they came of age, after all, in

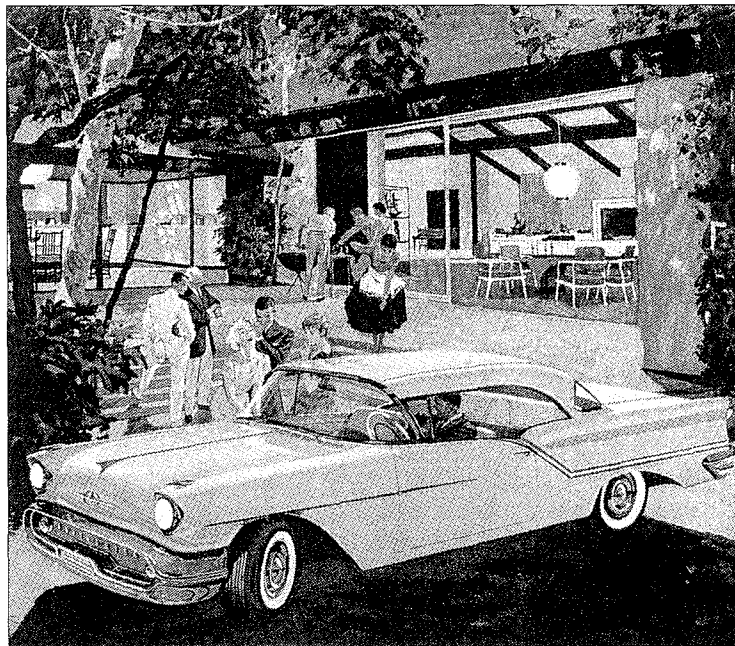
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the 1960s and after—the children of the immediate postwar bourgeoisie reacted against what they saw as the overly materialistic concerns of their parents' generation. What eventually became support for multicultural education, instinctive identification with feminism, and tolerance of diverse lifestyles had its origins in the committed cultural libertarianism of the 1960s. It was not that the younger generation's views on religion, the family, or love of country were well thought out. It was more that to many of its members, these were issues that never arose. One of the things that made being middle class so delightful during the 1960s was that you never had to think much about the obligations of community or the need to contain the libido for the sake of civilization.

The long national economic downturn that began around 1973 did not destroy the middle class, but it did halt the postwar escalator that automatically carried millions of fortunate Americans upward into affluence. Everyone knew someone who was no longer assured of the house in the suburbs, the new car, the good schools. Downward mobility was no longer merely a term in sociology textbooks. But just as large numbers of people saw the American Dream slip away, a surprising number of newcomers grabbed onto it. Some were urban white ethnics—policemen, civil servants, unionized blue-collar workers whose jobs were spared—who were driven from the cities by crime and who, with the aid of a second paycheck from the wife's new job, moved out beyond the established suburbs in search of a middle-class lifestyle they could afford. Others were freshly minted

graduates of the state universities and community colleges—vastly expanded during the good years—who took jobs in engineering, insurance, and other flourishing service industries. An unprecedented number of African Americans joined the middle class. The tide of upward mobility was powerful enough to transform neighborhoods and regions. In New York City, Asians pushed out into urban neighborhoods beyond Manhattan, bringing new vibrancy to once-thriving Jewish neigh-



*For two decades after World War II, America's vision of the good life was a palpable dream accessible to all, and the struggle to "keep up with the Joneses" was the only major social conflict most Americans experienced.*

borhoods such as Flushing. The middle-class accent of Miami became Spanish, while Iranians installed themselves in the tonier sections of Beverly Hills. The second postwar middle class, though smaller than the first, was certainly more diverse.

Middle-class status, when no longer automatic, became more of a commodity, something one purchased through hard work and sacrifice. The new arrivals came to see merit, rather than position on a growth curve, as the

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prerequisite for a middle-class lifestyle. Under such competitive conditions, money moved to the center of people's consciousness. A class once known for saving began to spend. Often there was little choice. Even with the two (often rather high) incomes needed just to purchase a house with access to decent schools, there was little left over to put away for the future. In some major cities, even people with six-figure incomes and boasting only the normal trappings of suburban life learned to live with a certain sense of precariousness about their existence. With less of the security that comes from having money in the bank, the middle class became much more wary of government-led altruism. The tax revolts and attacks on waste in government that began in the late 1970s were symptoms of a new politics of increased self-concern. It had taken some time, as well as a shift in generations, but finally the middle class was living up to the cliché that money breeds increased conservatism.

**T**his second middle class, like its predecessor, is moved by considerations of security, but its concerns are more psychological than economic. They try to save moral capital rather than economic capital. Uncertain that they can maintain their economic privileges, these newcomers to the American Dream are determined to hold on to their social and cultural ones. They look to government not to intervene in the economy to help workers and minorities get ahead but to reinforce the rules of civil order. The control of crime becomes more important than the control of business. Government, they believe, ought to regulate sexuality (teen access to abortion, for example) and the display of dirty pictures, and it ought to keep its own house in order as well. Even if families have trouble balancing their budgets, government should balance its own, and politicians had better not get the idea that they are better than the people who elected them or they will be humbled.

For those who achieved middle-class sta-

tus the hard way, the cultural enemy is the old middle class already encamped in the tonier inner suburbs, and especially those of its descendants in the baby-boom generation who have embraced far more liberal and culturally libertarian views: the "new class" of attorneys, journalists, managers, and other professionals who make their living by manufacturing and manipulating information. For its part, this more cosmopolitan middle class looks down its collective nose at the tastes and sensibilities of the newcomers in the tract homes and townhouses on the fringes of suburbia.

Hence ariseth the new class war.

### III

At a time when America lacks visible symbols of an upper class—who can believe that third- and fourth-generation Rockefellers embody monied evil?—it is not a struggle between classes over economics that shapes American politics but a struggle within one class over morality. The cultural war that now dominates American politics is a civil war within the middle class. This cultural war has become the defining feature of American political life. If the political parties at one time in the recent past took the middle class for granted, now they find themselves trying to appeal to one of its wings without alienating the other. As bourgeois prosperity wanes, bourgeois morality grows in importance. Each wing has a stake in defining membership in the middle class as a belief in its morality. This is what makes American politics in the 1990s so unforgiving. The economic surplus can always be divided up, but the moral symbols of society tend to be indivisible. The older middle class is tolerant of everything except the moral views of the newer middle class. And the moral views of the newcomers leave little room for the kind of relativism and skepticism that leads the older middle class to become Unitarians or to enlist in the American Civil Liberties Union.

Each middle class is moved by moral symbols, but each attaches dramatically differ-

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ent meanings to them. The following six symbols are hardly exhaustive, but they starkly illustrate how completely the middle-class worldview has been cut in two.

1. *Productivity.* Work is not only a way of making things but a way of making meaning. At least since the early 19th century, but probably originating some time before that, Americans have been attracted to ideologies of production as much as to production itself. In making things, they came to believe, people made themselves.

Classical republican ideals about production are the heart of the moral worldview of the more newly arrived middle class in America, an ideal strengthened, rather than weakened, by the increasing difficulty its members have in finding productive work. For those who believe in the sanctity of work, morality is defined by the perception that those who do not make things—lawyers, stockbrokers, “bureaucrats”—deserve a lower place in the moral hierarchy. This is as it has always been, but with one crucial difference: For over a century, the foil that helped define middle-class ideas about the importance of work was the idle rich, with their coupon-clipping frivolity and conspicuous consumption. Now that high society has all but disappeared from America’s consciousness, the urban underclass increasingly bears the burden of comparison. There, bourgeois propriety finds the same defining symbols: uncontrolled sexuality, flamboyant spending, money without work, and the appearance of government protection. Nothing is more certain to arouse the fury of the new middle class than the “welfare mother,” whose seemingly irresponsible behavior not only goes unpunished but is in fact rewarded with money taken from the pockets of hard-working taxpayers like themselves.

If one middle class believes in work, the other believes in career. These contrasting beliefs also imply different ways of thinking about time and space. Because work involves producing things, it takes place within boundaries. Not only is it tied to a specific neighbor-

hood, employer, or industrial quarter, it is time-bound and regulated by hours or weeks. Careers, by contrast, tend to be loosened from the constraints of space and time. People who have careers are prepared to move anywhere in search of the next stage, either within the firm or within the country. They are not, however, prepared to punch a clock. Process, not output, counts as the measure of success. Those who follow careers manage rather than produce. Indeed, one of the things they devote a great deal of time to managing is the transition to an economy that produces less.

Career-followers tend to view those bound to specific hours and places as slow-moving and backward, “time-servers” lacking in cosmopolitan sophistication. They work at jobs that pollute the environment and belong to hidebound unions that are bastions of conservatism and special privilege. Working people vote against the higher taxes needed to keep the local schools in the right loops for the right colleges. From the perspective of the wealthier middle class, Americans who produce things put tacky sculptures on their front lawns, ice cubes in their (sweet) white wine, pictures of their children on their walls, sugar in their (disgustingly weak) coffee, cigarettes in their ashtrays, and dirt bikes in their driveways. The career-followers are undisturbed by the decline of industrial America—old factories can be converted into attractive shopping malls and offices, after all—and tend to believe that given a choice the country would turn every industrial community into a Silicon Valley. Visions of postindustrial society may no longer preoccupy social scientists, but they lie behind the dreams of the older, more entrenched, middle class.

**U**nappreciative of productive work, this middle class is hardly prepared to insist that the underclass be required to submit to its rigors. Unlike the more recently arrived middle class, which tends to move to the outer suburbs, the older middle class lives closer to the city and even, on occasion, “gentrifies”

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urban neighborhoods in the city itself. From this position of greater proximity to the poor, being unproductive is seen not as a sin but as a condition. It can even, in more sophisticated understandings, be seen as a kind of career. Youngsters in the gang business, for example, work pretty hard at what they do. They, too, are liberated from the constraints of space and time—they certainly keep irregular hours—and often possess an entrepreneurial flair. Even welfare can be understood as a career. Welfare recipients, like many urban professionals, are creatures of the bureaucracy. And while they may not be producing anything at the moment, welfare is something like a career interlude, necessary before work can be resumed.

The virtue of productivity, once a crucial American symbol, is now contested. For those wishing no more than to say good-bye to all that, unproductive behavior, while not necessarily appealing, is also not especially threatening. But to those who labor in traditional jobs, urban loitering, always unforgivable, approaches anathema. The more Americans are forced to compete for a diminishing number of good jobs, the more they will also differ over the meaning of jobs themselves.

2. *Saving.* The Protestant ethic—the package of psychological and cultural attributes associated with the rise of capitalism—was long ago split along two often-conflicting dimensions. Nearly a century ago, Max Weber described the classic dispositions associated with early capitalism: hard work, a willingness to forego pleasure in the short run, and a focus on long-term results. But as capitalism matured, shifting its focus from production to consumption, a new set of values emerged, brilliantly analyzed by sociologist Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). An economy that required mass consumption in order to grow, Bell observed, fostered a new emphasis on immediate gratification, hedonistic pleasures, and short-term outlooks. A scholar looking for signs of the old Protestant rectitude today would have better luck looking at museum walls in New En-

gland than in the board rooms of Dallas and Los Angeles.

**T**hese two ethics describe rather well the cultural divide of the middle class with respect to saving and spending. Old-fashioned ideas about creating and preserving wealth no longer have much currency in the politically liberal mainline Protestant churches of the old middle class, which seem to view the making of money more as a source of shame than of virtue. Yet if mainline Protestants no longer sustain the Protestant ethic, some Protestant evangelicals do, as well as other recent arrivals to the middle class—including Catholics, Buddhists, and Muslims. The fact that the Protestant ethic flourishes today among Korean shopowners and merchants makes many white Americans ask why it is not as strong among inner-city blacks.

Homeownership has always been the most significant symbol of thrift, one more sign that it is not how much you make but what you do with your money that matters. Renting is understood as a temporary state, an impermanent and unfortunate condition. Yet homeownership is declining in America. Although mortgage rates have recently come down to levels not seen in decades, high prices and high taxes still make it difficult for young couples to purchase their first home. In the affluent suburbs of Westchester County near New York City or in DeKalb County outside Atlanta, no amount of scrimping and saving seems sufficient to accumulate a down payment. The loan provided by affluent (old middle class) parents has become the norm. The new middle class, which cannot obtain such help or can obtain only relatively small sums, must look elsewhere for its first homes, including places 60 to 100 miles from the cities they surround: Orange County (New York, not California), Prince William County, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., or Simi Valley, California, site of the first Rodney King trial. Time spent commuting to and from work can be used as a rough guide to the dividing line

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between America's two middle classes—although the standard has been reversed since the days when wealthier Americans were the ones who traveled great distances to the ex-urbs beyond the suburban fringe.

The symbols of saving are closely linked to those of productivity. Saving, like work, is time-bound; a certain amount per pay period adds up to a larger amount over time. Only one middle class in America uses such time-bound forms of saving as Christmas club accounts, U.S. savings bonds, and ordinary pass-book savings accounts. Traditionally one saved knowing full well that there were other ways of investing money that paid higher returns but also carried greater risks. Now the once-firm line between saving and speculation has been breached. Banking deregulation, by allowing banks to take greater risks with the money of depositors, has confused the moral compass of the more conservative middle class. America is awash with schemes to get rich quick, from Publishers Clearinghouse sweepstakes to state-sponsored numbers rackets. Convinced that the inner-city poor spend every cent that comes into their hands, the hard-working middle class now finds itself tempted by its own forms of speculation, hoping that a down payment might fall from the sky. Watching the loss of jobs, members of this class also watch the loss of savings accounts; both the Protestant ethic as they understand it and the economy that supported it seem to them to be giving way to a new economy and a new ethos, each of which seems alien to them. And, as in the case of the decline of productive work, the psychology

works in the opposite direction from the economics, intensifying the moral importance of precisely those economic practices that are disappearing.

3. *Children.* Thinking about the long-run is inevitably connected to children. It is for them that we save. Helping them grow up is the closest we mortals come to immortality. For as long as anyone can remember, middle-class morality has been about raising a family.

There have been two significant changes in the symbols associated with childhood in America during the past 30 years. One is that a large family is no longer the norm. Technology has made it possible to regulate family size, with the result that some families choose



*Vietnam and the counterculture split the middle class. In 1970, New Yorkers angered by antiwar protests staged a demonstration of their own.*



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to have many children while others choose to have few. The split runs right through the middle class.

**T**he career-minded tend to find the Clintons an attractive role model. Having one child enables them to join the American mainstream, while not having too many children permits careers to go forward without interruption, and even leaves enough money (and time) left over for evenings out, a cleaning woman, and possibly a February dash down to a sunny spot, as well as the usual August stay in the Vineyard. For those who want to find them, there are an unusually large number of practical reasons to limit family size: housing prices, the high cost of private school and college, balancing two careers, long working hours, delayed marriages, and the always-looming possibility of divorce. As often happens, a symbolic code emerges to rationalize the practical. Having too many children seems untidy—all those runny noses and scraped knees—and tacky, like linoleum floors or a Florida room. People should learn to control themselves better.

America's other middle class perceives the obstacles facing large families as another symptom of the decline of middle-class morality, similar to the disappearance of jobs and savings accounts. No matter how large their families eventually become, they nearly always seem too small. There are limits in the symbolic world of these people as well, for they react instinctively against those who have more children than they can support. Still, larger families ensure that life, like work, has a structured course, organized around the development of each child. Although the economic costs of large families are great, the psychological rewards more than compensate.

Public life for such people is organized around the schools. All politics for them is local because all schools are local. Civic activity means participation in little leagues and PTAs, not voting in elections or contributing to candidates for the state legislature. Except for

Catholics and some Jews, most members of the late-arriving middle class would like to keep their children in public schools; the option of buying out of inferior education through private schools is often not available to them. They worry more about crime, drugs, and sex in the schools than they do about declining academic standards, although they connect the latter with the former. (When it is their own boys who are found to be sexually active in school, however, often in ways that resemble the gang behavior they associate with the underclass, they tend to rally to the defense of their children.) Moving as far away from the city as possible vastly increases the time and money spent commuting, but it cuts the costs of schooling relative to private schools. Yet the fact that even as simple a matter as sending one's child to school is now filled with moral dilemmas and difficult choices is one more piece of evidence that the world is not like it was in the good old days.

**B**esides the large family's loss of status, at least one other significant change has occurred in the symbolic world of children. Homosexuality, once barely mentionable, now is routinely discussed on the evening news and in newspapers. As it is, middle-class Americans are asked virtually every day to reflect on whether the world can properly be understood to revolve around the needs of children anymore. Gays tend to be as middle class as anyone—indeed they are more likely to be middle class if income is the definition of class status. And there are, of course, many gay parents—even if it is not generally as parents that gays demand political and civil rights. Despite all of these considerations, however, gay liberation challenges bourgeois propriety at its most essential point: that marriage is about restraining desire for the sake of the next generation. No wonder gay rights is an issue that divides the middle class.

The more liberal wing of the American middle class understands such demands as the logical next step in an expansion of civil

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rights that began with the legislation of the 1960s. America is a big enough place for all kinds of people, lifestyles, and choices. Besides, gay people are suffering from a horrendous pandemic and are entitled to all our altruism and support.

**N**ot so fast, one can hear America's other middle class saying. We never voted on whether homosexuals deserve special protection against discrimination. Civil rights for racial and ethnic minorities is something else. To be sure, we have our reservations there too, but we have accepted the idea that America should strive for colorblindness. (That is why we have our doubts about affirmative action.) But homosexuals choose their lifestyle. The idea that what they do is sinful is not one we are fully prepared to dismiss, in part because we want to retain at least some religious ideas in an overwhelmingly secular age. We do not want to have our young children taught about sex at all, let alone about sodomy. Like everyone else, we are moved deeply by the tragic deaths of so many young people, which is why we have allowed our tax dollars to be spent in surprisingly generous amounts on AIDS treatment and research. But when we are forced to make a choice, we think families with children should stand higher in the moral hierarchy than gay couples living in New York and San Francisco.

Increasingly, even the middle-class idea of the family, once incontestable, seems under siege. The American middle class is asked to give recognition not only to homosexual couples but to step-families of every shape and description. The federal government, meanwhile, grants more of its largesse to the elderly, who stopped caring for children long ago, than to hard-working middle-class parents with small children, and it steps in and provides welfare when fathers in poor families fail to live up to their responsibilities. This middle class agrees that abortion ought to be permitted under some circumstances, but it views the broad acceptance of abortion as one more sign

of how we devalue children. More traditional families are not viewed by those who live within them as one alternative among many. From their point of view, economics, culture, and moral relativism have ganged up to make the traditional family seem obsolete. America's moral world will not be made right again, they believe, until a place is found within it for children to be children.

4. *God.* According to some interpreters, such as sociologist James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia, America's cultural wars are at bottom religious wars of a new kind. Once Americans fought over doctrine: Protestants, Catholics, and Jews each had a different vision of humanity's relationship with God. Now the battle lines cross theological boundaries, as liberal Protestants join liberal Catholics and Jews in contests with their more conservative brethren. And these new religious fault lines, it turns out, closely parallel the divisions between the two middle classes.

God remains a meaningful symbol for both groups, but in different ways. Those who moved to the suburbs in the 1950s and '60s did not so much give up religion as they gave up orthodoxy. They still wanted to have their children experience the structure that organized religion can provide, but they also wanted the advantages of secular modernity. Fortunately for them, America pioneered "lite" religion: quasi-secular beliefs that merged ideas born in sectarian quarters with a generalized belief in America, modernity, and progress. The God that was produced by this mixture was not an especially fearsome one. His teachings constituted a set of moral beliefs rather than a moralistic code, the "10 suggestions" rather than the 10 commandments, as fundamentalists like to charge. Growing up at a time when theology was on the backburner, the fortysomethings of the liberal middle class believe that people of different faiths can live together, which makes America different from the rest of the world.

Old-time religion, by contrast, conveys all the distasteful symbolic imagery of the world

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left behind in the quest for middle-class status. From the standpoint of those who rose into the middle class in the 1950s and '60s, neither the Lubavitchers nor the Bakkers are the kind of people one would want as neighbors. They are both, in their own ways, stamped with the features of a specific place: the Lubavitchers with the city neighborhoods from which escape to the suburbs became necessary, the Bakkers with a distinct regionalism that is at odds with the homogenized mobility of American middle-class life. Fundamentalists, moreover, are too literal-minded to understand the moral ambiguities that make middle-class life tolerable. They take their religion too seriously. How, after all, can one bring up children to respect their parents but also to be popular among their friends without recognizing that a little hypocrisy can go a long way? The thing about religion is to take its commands seriously in public while ignoring them in private, a balancing act the overly devout consistently fail to appreciate.

**B**eyond the comfortable inner suburbs, however, religion lives a very different life. While fundamentalist churches sprout along the roads where the new malls go up, Korean Baptists have converted former synagogues into churches and Protestant evangelicals have found new converts among the Hispanics of Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Newer arrivals to the middle class are far less likely to view fundamentalism as antagonistic to their moral objectives. They may even be willing to be led by fundamentalist activists on some issues, as were the opponents of the plan by New York City schools chancellor Joseph Fernandez to teach greater tolerance of homosexuality as part of a new "rainbow curriculum." The newer middle class is quite disturbed by what it perceives to be the immorality of secular humanism run rampant. Religion, for it, is only partly a matter of personal belief; it is also about the character of American life. If the schools paid a little more attention to God, there would be less criminality

and homosexuality, two trends vaguely linked in their minds. The troubles of the inner city are surely due to lack of faith. A more God-fearing society would pay more attention to hard work and its rewards.

While this longing for a little more religious backbone in American life persists, passage to middle-class status, even today, means leaving behind unforgiving moral strictures and increasingly awkward rituals. This middle class is uncertain about whether it would want America to be a theocracy; most of its members, to the degree that they reflect on this issue, believe it should not be. Its alliance with fundamentalism, then, is most likely a temporary one that could easily fall apart once a proper balance between faith and freedom is re-established.

Neither middle class has yet found the right line between church and state. The ways in which each balances the spiritual and the secular are not dissimilar in principle; each simply prefers to draw the line in a different place. It is even possible to imagine that the distance between these lines will shrink at some point. But there are still two lines; God remains real for one of America's middle classes, even while He is understood more symbolically by the other.

5. *Politics.* The political differences between the two middle classes can be only partly understood in the conventional sense of Left versus Right. The more important political division between the two occurs not over questions of government regulation or economic policy but over the purpose and meaning of politics itself.

Many of those who move to the far suburbs are fleeing crime, crowding, poverty, and the other dangers and irritants of the city. One of those other irritants is politics. Traditionally, city neighborhoods were organized by party machines that provided favors in return for various tokens of obligation from citizens, from voting to illegal contributions. While the machines today are largely defunct, their legacy remains powerful. As corrupt as they may have been, such organizations provided

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a public structure that complemented private life. Urban life brought people together for the expression of collective purpose. So long as America was chiefly an urban nation, it was also a political nation: People voted and candidates mattered.

**T**he escape from the public is one of the great temptations of middle-class life in America, and the two middle classes have dealt with it differently. Suburban politics is diffused and irregular. It does not ask for support in return for favors. The favors—good schools, pothole-free roads, regular trash collection, sewers—are viewed as entitlements, irrespective of whether people vote or even pay taxes. In a suburban world, therefore, individuals can easily elevate the private over the public. So long as they can drive to work, educate their children, and afford occasional vacations, the political system works for them. They tend to be unconcerned with what happens in other parts of the country, let alone in Bosnia or Somalia. If Jefferson once opined that government is best that governs least, many Americans believe that politics is best when it politicizes least.

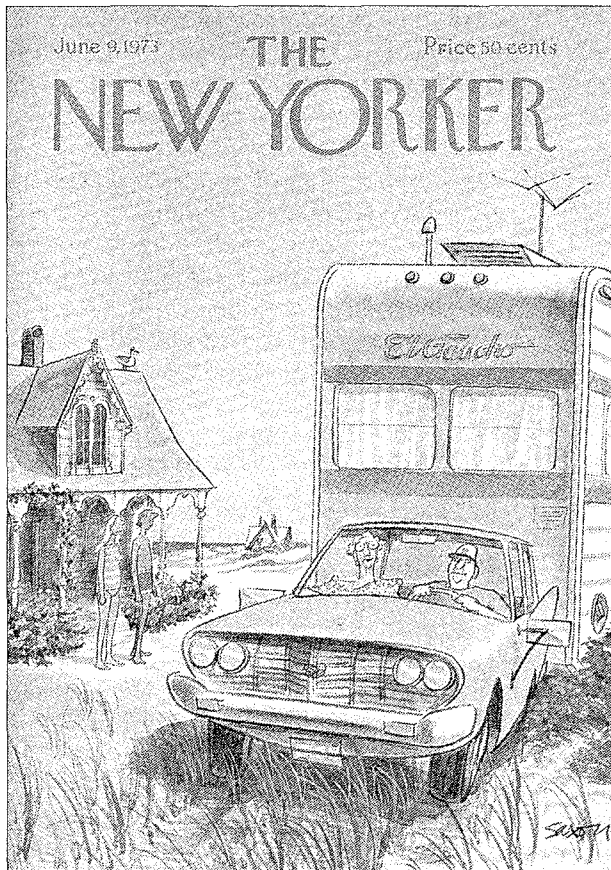
By and large, these apolitical Americans are members of the new middle class. To them, political activists and ideologues look much like fundamentalists do to the old middle class: They seem to take their beliefs too seriously. Political “causes” of any sort, conservative or liberal, are suspect. One gets one’s political cues as well as one’s ideas and the language for expressing those ideas from television. The mass media are an almost perfect invention from the standpoint of middle-class privatism. They offer an opportunity to feel as if one is in touch with the world without ever leaving one’s couch—a truly irresistible combination. People who leave politics behind therefore do not necessarily leave political opinion behind. Indeed, they may have stronger opinions the more removed they are from political realities—much as immigrants often hold more violent opinions about poli-

tics in their native country than those who stayed behind. When they feel moved to express themselves, they expect a political system to be in place to respond to their views. Otherwise, they generally fail to pay much attention to the civic virtues, including active involvement with issues once thought essential to the cultivation of a healthy political system.

The inner suburbs of the old middle class tend to be not only more liberal, but also more politically active and concerned. In his important book, *The United States of Ambition* (1991), journalist Alan Ehrenhalt points out that many conservative states contain some remarkably liberal counties. Politicians in these areas are often single or have grown children. Policy wonks fascinated by the techniques of getting things done, they provide in time what they often lack in personal fortune. As Ehrenhalt points out, those who believe in using government to promote the good life have an advantage in politics. They win elections, even when their neighbors may be more conservative than they, because they outhustle everyone else. It is as if their political zeal is a by-product of energy displaced from their private dissatisfactions. If one wing of the middle class finds happiness in private life and the public realm a chore, the other finds liberation in the public sphere and private existence confining.

**T**hese differences over the meaning and purpose of politics give politics a liberal bias. Noting the result, conservatives have begun to mobilize around causes that move their particular middle-class constituency, especially opposition to gay rights. Yet conservative activists probably face a more uphill struggle, for their middle class wants above all else to be left alone, and joining together with others in order to be left alone is a difficult contradiction to overcome. One form of middle-class morality will always tend to view politics apolitically, the other professionally. The differences between them are unlikely to be overcome soon.

6. *Country*. Since everything associated



*Worlds in collision: The New Yorker, long the arbiter of old-middle-class taste, is one of the few places in America where class differences (and biases) are allowed out of the closet.*

with what it means to be a middle-class American seems to be up for grabs, it can hardly be surprising that the meaning of America itself is too. Loyalty to country and its duties inevitably means very different things to people whose fundamental perspectives on place and time are as different as those of the careerist old middle class and work-oriented new bourgeoisie are. Loyalty means above all else the acceptance of spatial constraints. This is where we are. This place has meanings that no other place has. To be loyal to it means that we cannot wish we were somewhere else, nor can it mean that we bring somewhere else here. The only alternative to liking it is to leave it.

Symbols of national unity are far more

important to those who believe that loyalty is a pre-eminent moral virtue. No other conflict could have posed more clearly for them the stakes in the cultural war than the issue that bedeviled the Clinton administration during its first 100 days: the question of gays in the military. The military remains for many Americans the unique symbol that makes all other symbols possible, and one therefore that ought to remain above conflict. In their mind, the controversy over homosexuals in the military is not really about fighting ability, AIDS, or the seduction of innocent teenagers. It is about the future of the one institution that ought to remain immune to divisiveness, for if the symbol of unity is divided, then everything else must be as well.

Ethnic allegiances throw an interesting twist into the idea of loyalty. Loyal members of middle-class America think they take their ethnicity seriously, making a great show of how proud they are to be Italian or Irish or Polish. But sociologists know better. Extraordinarily large numbers of Italian Americans cannot even speak a complete sentence in Italian. These Americans become Italian or Irish only when it is convenient. Chicago's fiercely anticommunist Polish-American enclaves, after all, did not empty out when communism fell, nor is it likely that Miami will become a ghost town when Cuba is out from under Fidel Castro.

**B**ecause their ethnicity is more symbolic than real, these members of the American middle class are not being hypocritical when they express opposition to bilingualism and some of the more exotic forms of multiculturalism favored by the Left. Only they know whether in their heart of hearts their opposition to Spanish-language instruction and Afrocentric curricula are inspired by racism. They would like to believe otherwise. Their Irish, Italian, and Jew-

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ish parents and grandparents were not taught by teachers who were Irish, Italian, and Jewish. They did not insist that the schools teach about what they left behind—why come to America just to get Jewish history? Learning English was often the crucial rite of passage that defined the family's new loyalties. Dual loyalty is, simply put, something such people cannot understand. If you are no longer living in Mexico or Puerto Rico, why do you think about going back? If you are black, would you not rather learn what it takes to make it here? We are not being racist, they proclaim. We would welcome black Americans who share our point of view; it is not our fault that there are so few who do. And we take pride in those minorities, especially those from Asia, who understand the struggle to become American the way we do.

If anything, the more established and more liberal middle class is even less ethnic than the one that came after it. Its ethnic identity, in fact, is so weak that it broadens into a lack of any identity at all, save for being middle class. When identity is relatively unimportant, one can, paradoxically, be more sympathetic to those who are asserting their identity. For the more liberal middle class understands that the struggles of gays, blacks, and others for public recognition is a cry of pain over exclusion, a demand to be acknowledged.

Not terribly concerned about symbols of national unity, this more-established group sees little wrong with allowing homosexuals to serve in the military. On the one hand, the military is not really a symbol of national unity at all; it is simply a large bureaucracy, even a source of possible careers. On the other hand, gays are anything but a symbol of disunity, and their agenda does not amount to a demand for special privileges. They are merely asking for their rights. Politics ought to be about rights, not about symbols. The trouble with loyalty is that its demands can trample on individual rights. By insisting on the right of gays to serve in the military, we are defending the rights of all people to be treated as

autonomous individuals by the institutions that frame their lives.

In a similar way, demands for recognition by the nation's ethnic and racial groups are not seen as especially troublesome symbolic attacks on national unity. If America is politically and economically pluralistic, why can it not be culturally pluralistic as well? No one is harmed if Hispanic children are taught in Spanish as well as English. If learning more about Africa instills pride in inner-city youth, who can object? America is capacious enough to include equal time for all. All this talk about symbols, from this modern and progressive point of view, sounds suspiciously anachronistic. And the last thing we should do at a time when we are about to enter a world in which capital and labor will flow freely across borders is to argue over the symbols that distinguish those on one side of a border from those on the other.

Some of America's cultural wars are struggles over the meaning of particular symbols. Both sides claim to believe in family, for example, but disagree over what a family is. But the struggle over country is a struggle over symbols themselves: how compelling they should be, how much they should override rational action, how inclusive or exclusive should be their meaning. The great sociologist Emile Durkheim once wrote that the soldier who dies for the flag is literally dying for the flag, not for the country the flag represents. The major difference between America's two middle classes is that one believes, like Durkheim's soldier, that symbols become synonymous with the things they represent, while the other believes that symbols are constructions to be accepted when convenient and replaced when obsolete.

## IV

Although both the Democrats and the Republicans have recognized that they can no longer afford to ignore the middle class, both have adopted flawed strategies for responding to

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middle-class moral concerns. Democrats seek the votes of people hurt by Reaganomics, but, if President Clinton's actions on gays in the military are any indication, they do not want to take the moral views of these people too seriously. Republicans, on the other hand, respond to the middle-class morality of the newly arrived but pursue economic policies that heighten their material insecurities.

**B**elieving that economics still matters most, both parties try to rationalize away the moral views that stand in inconvenient opposition to their economic programs—the Democrats through what might be called an ideology of modernization, the Republicans through a variety of populism.

Modernizers believe that history moves ineluctably toward greater enlightenment and that enlightenment is invariably associated with material prosperity. The politically incorrect moral views of the recently arrived middle class are, to them, unfortunate by-products of the incomplete transition from working-class or immigrant status to second- or third-generation suburbanite. People who think that homosexuality is a sin simply have not matured in their views. As they learn more about the world, they will come to see that all forms of bigotry are irrational prejudices. Time often takes care of such prejudices, and even if people do not themselves change, their children tend to be more liberal. Of course, we cannot rely only on time, for some forms of discrimination are so invidious that it is unjust to wait. We ought, therefore, to use the schools and, on occasion, the courts, to teach a more elevated morality. (When all else fails, there are always sensitivity groups.) But we can be fairly certain that views that strike us as racist, homophobic, sexist, or just plain backward will fall before the pressure of progress.

The problem with this point of view—which is to say one of the chief problems that has faced the Democratic Party since the 1960s—is that it can convey an unrelenting smugness and elitism. Dismissive of the

deeply held beliefs of large numbers of people, Democrats impose antidemocratic solutions, seeking to cut off debates about divisive moral issues and refusing to recognize that people can quite legitimately disagree over, say, whether condoms should be given out in schools or whether affirmative action is the best way to integrate society. When modernizers are unable to get what they want through undemocratic means, such as court orders or administrative decrees, they tend to lose, especially in popular referenda. It is always instructive when the majority votes against them to watch modernizers account for their defeat; they tend to blame everything but their own ideas.

Populists approach the problem of middle-class morality from the opposite point of view. Populists and pseudopopulists—George Bush eating pork rinds, Rush Limbaugh talking about anything—strive to convey the notion that they possess a gritty, reality-based morality. The views of ordinary people are genuine, from their perspective, precisely because they violate the conventions of what we are “supposed” to think and express what, in the privacy of their homes, people really do think. The populist sees human nature through a glass darkly: People are selfish, shortsighted, sometimes mean. The world is a Hobbesian battleground pitting us against them. The liberal elitists may not like it, but you cannot really change human nature. Those who manage to tap public anger, therefore, are not demagogues but practitioners of true democratic politics.

The modern Republican Party owes its success, at least in presidential elections, to its adoption of full-blown moral populism. Yet the populists' understanding of middle-class morality is no less flawed than the modernizers'. They do not, for example, understand their constituents as well as they claim to. Surely Patrick Buchanan and Marilyn Quayle thought they had the American people on their side during the Republican convention of 1992, yet they barely had their own party on their side. Populists think of themselves as tell-



*Some of America's newest arrivals are now the staunchest guardians of its oldest values. Among Asian Americans, the "model minority," many now enjoy far incomes above the U.S. average.*

ing it like it is, when in fact their politics are as artificially constructed as those of the modernizers. Despite Ronald Reagan's message of restraint and responsibility, the 1980s were years of free-spending hedonism. And most people know there are two sides to most issues. They feel that political leaders who speak as if there is only one are patronizing and not worthy of their trust, even when they lean toward the leader's views. Populists can only repeat what they think people want to hear, but not everyone wants to look in a mirror all the time.

**C**onfronted by two antagonistic world views, one might be tempted to find ways to reconcile them. Perhaps this temptation should be resisted, at least for a while. It is best if we face up to the major political and moral issues before us. We ought to do so not by siding with one side in its dismissal of the other but instead by stressing the importance of the processes and institutional arrange-

ments that can permit individuals with strong differences of opinion nevertheless to feel as if they belong to the same political system. The battle over middle-class morality presents a good opportunity to remember the importance of the rules that make politics possible.

One such rule is that neither side in the struggle is allowed to trump the other by appealing to fundamental constitutional principles. This is a rule that immediately suggests its own exceptions, for surely it would violate the Constitution to forbid one group to express its point of view. But with a new administration in power, we have a chance to stop using the Constitution as a weapon in the hands of one or the other side in our cultural wars. This will not be an easy task for Bill Clinton. Because the Republicans made opposition to abortion a litmus test for Supreme Court membership, for example, Democrats may well be tempted to turn the tables now that they have a chance. They should not. When public opinion is deeply divided on moral questions, the Supreme Court cannot make up



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our moral minds for us. It can, and should, set the standards that enable a fair debate to take place. But if it tries to resolve the debate, it will only engender the kind of furious and determined opposition that arose after *Roe v. Wade*.

Second, we ought to experiment a bit more with moral federalism. Both sides in our moral debates want to universalize their positions: Condoms should be distributed to teenagers in each and every school or they should be distributed in none. In reality, different localities and different states will try different approaches, and this is how it should be. There was no reason why all New York City children needed to be instructed under the controversial "Curriculum of the Rainbow" favored by the head of the city's school system. Let Queens keep it out and Manhattan keep it in. A policy of encouraging particular rather than universal moralities violates consistency and philosophical principle. It also makes a good deal of political sense. Ultimately, universal moral principles may even emerge as people learn that their particular moralities are more problematic than they had realized.

Finally, both sides in the war over middle-class morality have to recognize that politics is a two-way street. Liberals cannot expect government to be in the business of helping people without recognizing that the beneficia-

ries have an obligation to behave responsibly. Conservatives cannot go around telling people how to behave if they are unwilling to make the plight of the unfortunate their business. Liberals are surely correct when they remind us that without rights we lose our freedom. But conservatives are also correct when they point out that without obligations, we have no rights. Thinking about politics as the art of balancing rights and obligations does not tell us what to do in situations of moral complexity, but it does at least force us to consider the positions of those with whom we disagree.

**N**o one expects the war between the head and the heart of the American middle class to end soon. To be middle class in America is to reap all the satisfactions of making it while simultaneously assuming the obligations that come with success. Middle-class Americans ought to be generous to those who have been left behind. But it is foolish in this less-benign economic era to expect them to gloss over the increasing importance of the hard work involved in becoming middle class. It is impossible to predict the next step in American politics, but it does seem plausible that our public life over the next few decades will be preoccupied with watching the middle class make up its mind.

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# The Upper Class, Up for Grabs

BY NELSON W. ALDRICH IV



**E**asily the most conspicuous building in the flossy New York neighborhood of Madison Avenue and 72nd Street is the blown-up replica of a High Gothic reliquary whose original, one suspects, is to be found in some unvisited room of the Metropolitan Museum, eight

blocks to the north. Built in 1895, the mansion is now the flagship emporium of lifestyle outfitter Ralph Lauren, and it teems with visitors every day of the week.

But it is no less a reliquary for that.

The relics purveyed at Polo HQ are those of a social elite, now dispersed, called the

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WASP upper class. The marketing pitch is faithfully echoed in the decor, which recreates a perfect period of the WASP ascendancy, those last few years before the Crash of 1929 when WASPs reigned supreme in the spiritual—that is, upward striving—aspirations of their fellow citizens.

**I**t was a period not unlike our own recent past. For three presidencies in succession, all rich Americans had enjoyed the capital's heartfelt indulgence, the old-money Buchanans quite as much as the new-money Gatsbys. More to the point that Ralph Lauren wants to make, the WASP upper class before 1929 held undisputed sway over America's *stylistic* imagination. The celebritocracy had not yet spread its firmament over our heads, its stars twinkling in and out of existence like lights in a pinball machine. Thus the advertising industry had no imagery to work with to capture middle- to lower-class consumers, except images of wealth and social ease—in a word, "class." (The absence of the qualifier "upper" is a typical American hypocrisy, a ploy to arouse covetousness without arousing resentment.) By 1929 every opportunity-seeking American in the land of opportunity was being assailed by idealized visions of the haute WASPoisie at home, at play (often at polo, in fact), or on their way to work at the command posts of capitalism and democracy. WASPs in those latter days were still where Thorstein Veblen had located them in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), at the "radiant center" of American society.

So powerful was this imagery that it survived the Great Depression, the greatest blow to a group of upper-class status-bearers since the age of Jackson. Even during its depths, polo players such as the great Tommy Hitchcock—the model in part for Jay Gatsby's rival, Tom Buchanan—used to draw thousands of quite ordinary spectators to the fields of Meadow Brook to watch them play. (Today,

while almost no one watches polo, virtually everyone buys Polo polo shirts.) The imagery also got a boost, possibly, from the ebullient WASP in the White House; it certainly got one from the fantasists of sophisticated comedy in Hollywood.

But the radiant center could not hold after 1941. The vast democratization of social life during World War II dealt it one blow, the great democratization of prosperity that came after the war dealt it another, and the rise of the celebritocracy finished it off. The imagery dimmed and faded out. Beginning in the 1950s, consumers were tempted by a whole new range of stylistic options. Some were proudly middle class (Scandinavian furniture, "sportswear"), some were generational (kids and teens), some were geared to "leisure" lifestyles (most of these styles, ironically, were former working-class uniforms: the woodsy, the marine, the western), some manipulated racial consciousness (black fashions), but all pandered to an impeccably democratic aesthetic of self-expression, not class-expression. It was not until the early 1970s, with Watergate and the oil crisis, the gray dawn of the age of diminishing expectations, that pre-World War II WASP imagery began to return to consumer awareness. Retrieving it was Ralph Lauren's great idea.

It came, of course, like all lifestyles, with a specific ideological aura—in the WASP case, the aura of almost metaphysical belonging. After all, theirs was a class whose peculiar fortunes were *given*, not earned; chosen for them, not by them. And this given-ness, or fate, or Providence, or destiny entailed a particular, indeed an obligatory, role in American life: the stewardship of the nation's assets. WASPs were to "deserve" their privileges after the fact, as it were, by serving their countrymen as the trustees, the custodians, the curators of all that was good, true, and beautiful in this New World (including, needless to say, much of its wealth).

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Here is the deeper significance of that sense of easy grace captured in the shop windows of Polo HQ. One has only to look at the men and women in Lauren's ads, at the stoic set of their mouths and eyes, at the touch of melancholy in their *sprezzatura*. These are people in whom beauty is allied with power—no greater grace than this!—but in whom power is tempered by responsibility. If WASPs belonged socially, even transcendently, it was at the grave price of being obliged truly to take care of what belonged to them.

And this was only fitting. WASPs came by this "higher" calling rather as motorists who knock down pedestrians, rushing over to see what they have done, often find that the circle of bystanders around the victim parts to let them through. As WASPs were the first to profit by the march of free markets and technological progress, so they were the first to understand that while it is always necessary to destroy this village, habitat, way of life, etc., in order to save it, it is not always necessary to destroy absolutely everything. Some of it can indeed be saved. To the spoils, as Fitzgerald once remarked, belong the victors.

It is by their curatorial care, at any rate, that WASPs are now remembered. Private schools and colleges, art and natural-history museums, hospitals and parks, zoos and botanical gardens, historical societies and libraries, Nature herself in all Her conservancies—all testify to the WASP conversion from pillagers to preservers of the past. Nowadays, however, even this contribution is obscured. At the country's museums and libraries, for example, the commemorative plaques of WASP benefactors may soon be outnumbered by those of other ethnics. Hollywood has taken on the environmentalist duties of conserving Nature. No old-money WASP today puts together a museum-quality collection of anything. Boards of directors and of trustees look for bigger bucks, and more resonant minority status, than WASPs can provide. In short, there is little left to mark the place where WASPs once stood, stewards

of all they surveyed, except Ralph Lauren's store at Polo HQ.

What happened to the WASPs? Does it matter? These questions are significant enough to have generated a steady trickle of writings and readers. (And a river of customers for the Ralph Lauren lifestyle. "Belonging," if only the image of it, is not easily given up.) Unsurprisingly, it turns out that what happened depends entirely on one's point of view. The task of understanding, as Nietzsche once mocked, makes us all into Don Juans of the multiple perspective.

WASPs have two perspectives on the matter. One view, beginning with Henry Adams's lament about his kind of people going the way of the buffalo, is more or less Darwinian. Successive waves of immigrants surged onto our shores, the Adams theory holds, leaving behind masses of struggling ethnics any one of whom was better equipped to survive in America, on America's terms, than those who came here first, like the Adamases. Adams had in mind "a furtive Yacoob" from Warsaw; today's younger WASPs, who are scarcely alone in this, have in mind a Lee Chung from Hong Kong, or even, thanks to that forced inner immigration known as affirmative action, a Mustapha Jones from Harlem.

Of course, as Adams would have been the first to point out, this account of WASP decline says more about America's terms of success than it does about WASPs, or even about ethnics. These terms were set with Andrew Jackson's humiliating defeat of Adams's grandfather, or perhaps even earlier than that, with the passing of the Founding Fathers, including Adams's great-grandfather. Thereafter, the noble ideals and practices of the American republic were forever swept away by the unbounded appetites, the unappeasable restlessness, the narrow selfishness, the brutal rationalism, and the technological wizardry of the one truly American democracy—the democracy of the marketplace.

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In this democracy Adamases lose out to immigrants (including in-migrants like Gatsby) for the simple reason that immigrants, unlike Adamases, are unburdened by the dogmas of an earlier democracy. Then, in the Adamases' perspective, the pursuit of purely individualistic visions of the good was supposed to be conducted with all due respect to the past and to posterity, and in a properly democratic spirit of civility, candor, and (social) conscience.

'Twas never thus, perhaps, but these dogmas of an earlier America, an exclusively white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America, did at least occasionally disturb the orgiastic worship of the free market. Now, according to the Adams theory, it is the orgy itself that is dogma, and American history consists entirely in a pleonastic ("more, more") struggle for advantage, one individual over another, one interest group over another, one immigrant group over another, at the trough of economic opportunity. In this perspective, shared with Adams by countless WASPs after him, America's elite is now just another defeated "group," slightly better off than the Indians, perhaps, but spiritually quite as irrelevant.

This is a not-implausible account of what led the WASPs to their dismal pass. The trouble with it is that it leaves no room for WASP responsibility in their fate, apart from their vague ineptitude at moneymaking, or for the continuing appeal of the Polo shop windows. For it seems unlikely, really, that WASPs should be entirely without blame for their decline, any more than they should be entirely without virtue in their lifestyle. Another WASP perspective, whose best-known expositor today is the novelist Louis Auchincloss, goes some way toward illuminating these issues.

Auchincloss's master theme is the loss of WASP authority. WASPs were not deprived of their stewardship; they lost it. They lost it through a fatal narrowness and flabbiness of character that sapped, and finally destroyed, the qualities of self-command required of

stewards. Auchincloss is not alone in this view. It was held before him, with varying degrees of envy, disappointment, and contempt, by Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. P. Marquand, John O'Hara, and James Gould Cozzens, among our novelists. It was also the view of the two Roosevelts, among recent WASP presidents, and of John F. Kennedy, among recent hereditarily rich presidents. It is the view, as well, of E. Digby Baltzell, among sociologists and sociologizing journalists. It is a very common view.

It is also very often disputed—most recently by Andrew Del Banco in a recent review of Auchincloss's life and works in the *New Republic*. Del Banco faults the novelist's theory primarily on the grounds that it does not cut deeply enough, or painfully enough. First, says Del Banco, Auchincloss fails to establish that the WASP sense of public responsibility ever existed "in more than a handful of exceptional men." In fact, says Del Banco, if there was ever a time when the WASP elite exhibited in any depth the civic, never mind the domestic and pecuniary, virtues that Auchincloss imputes to them, Auchincloss himself has not found it. Second, Del Banco alleges that Auchincloss fails to establish that the WASP brand of public responsibility was ever "capacious," by which he means inclusive, welcoming, *widely* responsible, "before it became merely tribal." The most scornful thrusts of Del Banco's argument, in fact, go straight to this point: that the novelist himself, in his attitudes toward the "newer" ethnics, in his valuations of family and boyhood friendships, in his prissily archaic language, far from having transcended tribalism, has positively wallowed in it.

This, it must be said, is also a very common view. WASP critics of WASPs are always being attacked by non-WASP critics of WASPs for being insufficiently ruthless toward—nay, for harboring some slight tenderness or affection for—the sorts of people among whom they were born, educated, and made their earliest friendships. Ambivalence may be absolutely mandatory in other stories of betrayed

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or abandoned "background" (who would read Amy Tan if she had turned on her mother's ways with pure contempt?), but WASPs, to other ethnics, are not just any other ethnic group. They are the ethnic group that fancied itself steward of its country's fortunes.

**B**ut bad stewards—bad because (unlike other ethnics, presumably) they behaved as a "tribe." For critics such as Del Banco, the custodians, all but a few exceptional men, were a stifling association of blood, breeding, and inordinate (that is, unearned) wealth and influence. In this view, WASPs have always done their evil best, for as long as they could get away with it, to hog all of America's economic resources, all of its awards of status and privilege, all of its cultural amenities, and all of its political influence. WASPs were bad, in short, because they stood against the essence of America itself, the promise of individual opportunity. Thus they deserve all the opprobrium they get, no less from one of their enlightened own, such as Auchincloss, than from their justly indignant victims.

Behind these charges, without question, is a true historical experience—the blackball—and a serviceable sociological generalization. WASPs blackballed at the loan desk, at schools and colleges, at trustee meetings, on boards of directors, in the conduct of public (especially foreign) affairs—wherever and whenever they were in command. The generalization is that, in blackballing people, the WASP ascendancy brought *social* considerations, specifically the right to choose one's friends and associates according to one's elective affinities, into business, political, economic, and cultural or educational realms where America-as-Opportunity declares they do not belong—where only merit, or only a Whitmanesque democracy, belongs.

This charge, growing out of that experience, seems accurate enough as far as it goes. Blackballing did happen (still does, in clubs), and the principle behind it is the social principle of elective affinity. The question occurs,

however, whether WASPs might not have been able to claim that *their* elective affinities, and therefore their blackballing, were governed by "higher" moral principles than govern the affinities of other Americans, either as individuals or as groups. And this claim, horribly invidious though it is, WASPs did make. There is something in the atmosphere at Polo HQ, WASPs would argue, that goes deeper than personal adornment.

But to be persuasive here, WASPs would have to answer one of Del Banco's questions: Was there ever a time when WASPs conducted themselves as a group according to "their brand of public responsibility"? I would argue that there was such a time, not indeed in the history of the country but in the lives of individual WASPs. This was when they were in boarding school. If I am right about this, then the "boarding-school moment," as one might call it, provides a standard by which to measure the extent of the WASPs' failure, both individually and collectively, of moral authority. This standard was set by their schoolboy, and schoolgirl, ideals.

**T**hat the issue is an educational one should be no surprise. In a culture of no culture (or of one, two, three, or many cultures) such as ours, education is always the issue. Thus by far the most arresting story Del Banco tells us about Auchincloss concerns an educational effort made by the novelist's late wife. It seems she was trying to set up a summer program for poor children in the New York City park system. "We saw kids . . . playing baseball in the bird sanctuary," Mrs. Auchincloss told an interviewer, "so we had to teach them what a bird sanctuary was, so they would play elsewhere."

Del Banco's gloss on this story (appropriately enough in a professor) is more ambivalent than what most non-WASP critics of WASPs would offer. Mrs. Auchincloss, he says, more or less approvingly, was acting out her class's most cherished values—"discipline, duty, and, in some half-sacrificial, half-

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narcissistic way, a kind of American noblesse oblige." The trouble comes with the assumption that people like Mrs. Auchincloss actually had something to teach these "kids" about duty, discipline, and civic obligation. For if she did, it means that she and the kids were not on the same moral footing. And that way, as a professor knows better than most, lies the wrath of the people.

For whether the people are populists or Reaganite individualists—and most Americans are one or the other, or some combination of both—Mrs. Auchincloss's assumption is not, most emphatically not, PC. As a result, Del Banco must hedge his already mild approval by sneeringly imputing to her a sneer. Mrs. Auchincloss, he says, is giving in to an "impulse to lift the lowly out of their moral squalor;" she is indulging the old WASP habit of "teaching the barbarians to behave."

But leaving aside the sneers for a moment, it is clear that the lady is acting according to the educational ideals of the "boarding-school moment." I do not know whether playing baseball in bird sanctuaries is actually so hard on the birds, but if it is, then most American boys, not only poor boys, need to be taught that it is. Judging by the self-help shelves, they need to be taught just about everything else, from how to be men to how to how to argue with their spouses; so it stands to reason that they would need to be taught about how to behave ecologically correctly around birds. This is what is meant by growing up in a culture of no culture: Education has to do everything.

So the question then becomes, By what right of education do WASPs like Mr. and Mrs. Auchincloss arrogate to themselves the public responsibility of teaching their fellow Americans how to behave in bird sanctuaries? Or in banks, for that matter? By what moral reasoning was Clark Clifford led to advise his BCCI clients to get themselves a WASP president? Could it have been because Clifford supposed that WASPness still signifies to bank examiners and other such Americans some sort of su-

perior stewardly probity? Could WASPs ever claim, at any time, that this reputation was deserved?

Whether they could or not, they did. And if there were any grounds for WASP arrogance in these claims, they lay in the WASP boarding school. By this I mean chiefly the St. Midas schools, as Fitzgerald called them: Groton, St. Paul's, St. Mark's, and the like for boys, and Foxcroft, Madeira, and the like for girls. I do not mean the so-called Academy schools—George Bush's Andover, for example. The distinction, now blurred, was once vital. The Academy schools were governed by much the same ethos as governs most American high schools—most American life, for that matter. They are governed, that is, by a sink-or-swim, individualistic liberalism.

At the St. Midas schools, this was not at all the case. There, from the 1850s to the end of the 1960s, the most favored little children of the rich got an education the likes of which was nowhere else to be found in the New World. At St. Midas the reigning spirit was a decidedly un-American, unliberal, *paternalistic communitarianism*—a stewardship, so to say, of moral futures.

There is a surprisingly large literature concerned with these schools. Much of it, the stories and memoirs especially, is horribly, fascinatingly ambivalent—quite as much so as Amy Tan's work. For the writers of these works, Auchincloss among them (as in his best-known novel, *The Rector of Justin*), the tension between the ideological training "at school" and the experience of "the real world" would seem to have been almost unbearable. The "world," when these WASP boys and girls finally got out into it, was a place of liberation, of experiment and self-experiment, of constant perspectival adjustment, and of the headiest (because well-endowed) individualism. In a word, the "world" was a place of modernity.

"School" was something else again. From

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the age of 13, these children were sequestered on vast country estates, far from the sinful cities, far from their parents' wealth, far from all consumerist temptations and media corruptions, for nine months of the year. There, they were not free to experiment; there, the perspective was *given* and *good*; there, individualism was a peril to the common welfare. At St. Midas, children were subjected to the most intense, unrelenting training in social consciousness and social conscience. Of course, the schools demanded individual performance as well—continuous, arduous performance that measured the children against all the norms of the "well-rounded man (or woman)." Students had to perform socially (manners and morals), aesthetically (looks, dress), athletically (team sports only), and, last and not least, academically—least, of course, because serious intellectual work is for loners, and loners might become moral experimentalists. Moreover, these performances had to be sustained day in and day out, without rest, without privacy, without let-up.

But it was the community, its past and posterity, that mattered most at these schools, far more than any individual. The community, under the paternal guidance and care of the rector, was the school's alpha and omega: the ground of its morality, the object of its care, and the warm viscous medium of every individual performance, for good or ill. This communitarianism had its sources in Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics, and in Anglican Christianity (though this last was mostly for a gentling aesthetic effect, stiffened somewhat by elements of the Social Gospel). Its didactic purpose, however, by which I mean its dialectical opponent, was thoroughly contemporary—the unfettered liberal individualism which in the economic realm had produced the inherited fortunes of these children, but which in the moral realm was always threatening to produce that ineffable carelessness, both private and public, which is the perennial weakness—and the charm, oh yes, the charm!—of the socially secure.

If the "boarding-school moment" was as

significant in the lives of WASPs as I think it was, then we have an answer to Del Banco's question. WASPs *were* once, and in depth, the avatars of their own brand of public responsibility—at boarding school. They failed then, as a class and as individuals, when they entered the "world" of modernity—with its liberations, its multiple perspectives, the wonderful optionality of its notions of the good, and the primacy, over the community, of the idea of the individual self. There were of course those "exceptional men"—few, according to Del Banco, thinking perhaps of stewards on a national scale like the Roosevelts; disproportionately many, I would argue, thinking of more local stewardships. But of most WASPs, judged by St. Midas' ideals, it has to be said that they've been "letting the old school down" from the beginning.

**A**ctually, what most WASPs did was more complicated, and worse, than that. One must understand that St. Midas is in one sense a perfectly familiar place. It is the old ethnic neighborhood, the homogeneous small town, from which all Americans have chosen to flee. (All Americans, that is, except blacks, who had no choice in the matter.) In this perspective, St. Midas is just another of those ghettos that play such a powerful role in today's politics as "America's lost sense of community." But there is a grave difference in the relationship that WASPs ultimately establish with their "lost" communities and the relationships that other groups establish with theirs. The others can't go home again; they can't afford to. WASPs can afford to, and most of them do.

Their movement on leaving "school" is one step forward, followed by two steps backward. The forward step is, as I have suggested, a sort of emancipation, both in the modern sense of a liberation from oppression, and in the ancient sense of a banishment from all moral security. But then, even before 1929, many WASPs discovered that neither their ineffable belongingness, nor their superior



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sense of the national interest, helped buoy them up, either spiritually or financially, in the eyes of their non-WASP countrymen. This came as a shock, as any reader of *The Education of Henry Adams* will remember, and it came again and again as each new generation of WASPs grasped its American birthright of freedom, and its family birthright of inherited wealth, and ran with them into the "world."

The two steps backward were taken soon thereafter. Other Americans who fail to "make it," either on their terms or the market's, are left to take what consolation they can from the thought that their failure was theirs alone—"alone" being the operative word here. Not so, thanks to their inheritances, the WASPs. They could salve their wounds by the simple expedient of retreating into the "tribalism" that evokes Del Banco's sneer. And there, in ethnically pure neighborhoods, they took their second step, back beyond the moral rigors of "school" to the soft certainties of childhood.

WASPs were hardly alone in wanting these havens in a heartless (I mean, free) world, but they were alone in bumping up against a humiliating contradiction at the heart of their havens. I mean that to get to Greenwich and Siwickli, even once there, WASPs had to pass through the reproaches of St. Midas. "School" might have been an ethnic ghetto, but it was also what few other ethnic ghettos manage to be, a training ground in universal, or at least national, ideals. Graduates were not supposed to end up huddled together like so many squeamish, frightened children, lamenting the vulgarity and obtuseness of the big, powerful, grown-ups. On the contrary, like Mrs. Auchincloss, they were supposed to translate their adolescent experiences and principles into a more worldly language of what might be called civic conserva-

tism. Americans quite properly love liberty, WASPs were taught at St. Midas, but most of them are badly in need of tutors to tell them what to do with it.

This was the historic role of the WASPs, to teach their fellow Americans at last what WASPs had learned first—that individual freedom is just another phrase for civic responsibility. No one at St. Midas ever assumed that this "school spirit" would be an easy lesson to get across in liberal, individualist, sink-or-swim America. But it was assumed that the sort of man or woman produced at St. Midas—strong, cultured, sure in his sense of what constitutes both the good life and the common good—would never give up trying to teach it. And indeed those "few" who did not give up found that there was a place for them, even in America, especially in educational, conservationist, and welfare (human conservation, as it were) undertakings.

**M**eanwhile, however, a curious cloak of invisibility has settled upon the WASPs, concealing their lives but projecting their lifestyles. They are a defeated people, much as Adams said they were, but a people defeated by their own failures, as Auchincloss and Del Banco say they are. They fail first to become what all good Americans are supposed to become, independent entrepreneurs of the sovereign self; and they fail, second, to be what St. Midas trained them to be, unAmerican tutors of the civily responsible self. All that remains of them is what Ralph Lauren chooses to let us know about them through his "authentic reproductions" of their personal adornments. Yes, a vague sense of belonging does emanate from these artifacts, but whether the ideals of civic conservatism emanate along with it, let the visitor to Polo HQ be the judge.

## THE NEW POLITICS OF CLASS IN AMERICA

It is now such a cliché that America is a middle-class society that few stop to ask how it came to be one. Historian Gordon S. Wood of Brown University suggests in **The Radicalism of the American Revolution** (Knopf, 1992) that it was almost an accident. Wood argues that the Revolution was not only a war for independence but a radical attack on the social order inherited from England—a social order in which most colonists “still took for granted that society was and ought to be a hierarchy of ranks and degrees of dependency and that most people were bound together by personal ties of one sort or another.” In place of this rigid society, the Founding Fathers proposed to create what Thomas Jefferson called a “natural aristocracy” of talented men like themselves—liberally educated gentlemen of the Enlightenment who had risen from modest circumstances yet had been excluded under the old order. “For many of the revolutionary leaders,” Wood observes, “this was the emotional significance of republicanism—a vindication of frustrated talent at the expense of birth and blood.”

But many of the Founding Fathers, including Jefferson, were dismayed by what the Revolution wrought. Americans took all too seriously the idea that they (or at least the white males among them) were free and equal, and in their egalitarian enthusiasm they blurred the once-vital distinction between gentlemen and plain people. By the 1820s, writes Wood, “in the North at least, already it seemed as if the so-called middle class was all there was. . . . By absorbing the gentility of the aristocracy and the work of the working, the middling sorts gained a powerful moral hegemony over the whole society.”

It was easy for the middle class to dominate national life because the United States in its early years was spared the worst extremes of wealth and poverty. Industrialization changed that, especially as it accelerated after the Civil War, creating both vast fortunes and crushing poverty. The change is chronicled in **Three Centuries of Social Mobility in America** (Heath, 1974), an anthology edited by Edward Pessen, a sociologist at the City University of New York.

Out of middle-class anxieties about these developments, historian Richard Hofstadter argues in his classic study, **The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.** (1955), the Progressive movement grew. “The newly rich, the grandiosely or corruptly rich, the masters of great corporations, were bypassing the men of the Mugwump type—the old gentry, the merchants of long standing, the small manufacturers, the established professional men, the civic leaders of an earlier era,” Hofstadter writes. Beginning in the 1870s, the old-stock Americans responded by taking up the reform cause, hoping to limit the power of the newcomers in the political and economic realms.

A slightly different tack is taken by E. Digby Baltzell, a University of Pennsylvania sociologist, in **Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class** (1959; reprint, Transaction, 1989). Baltzell shows how local nouveaux riches and old families were cemented into a self-aware national upper class through marriage and various institutions created precisely for that purpose in the late 19th century, including New York’s *Social Register* (1888) and prep schools such as Groton (1884).

An advocate, like Thomas Jefferson, of a “natural aristocracy” (though perhaps more willing than Jefferson to admit a hereditary factor), Baltzell harshly criticizes the WASP upper class of his day for succumbing to the temptation to act like a caste rather than an aristocracy, excluding Jews and other talented ethnics from the institutions it still controlled. “While the socialist faiths, on the one hand, have centered on the vision of equality of condition in a classless society,” he writes in **The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America** (1964; reprint, Yale, 1987), “our own best traditions have stressed equality of opportunity in a hierarchical and open-class, as opposed to a classless, society.” In **The Protestant Establishment Revisited** (Transaction, 1991), a collection of essays, Baltzell reflects that within a few short years of his book’s publication, not only the WASP establishment but the very idea of social author-

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ity exercised by any group was all but gone.

It is a typically American irony that an era that gave birth to a cohesive upper class did little for the working class except increase its numbers. The absence of class consciousness among the American proletariat has puzzled observers for decades. In **Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?** (1906; reprint, Macmillan, 1976), German economist Werner Sombart tried out several of the now-familiar explanations—the availability of cheap western farmland, the relative affluence of American workers, the American belief in political and social equality—before settling on one that Americans themselves hold dear: American workers do not consider themselves a proletariat because they do not feel condemned to be workers forever. For “a far from insignificant number,” Sombart observed, the rags-to-riches saga was no myth.

Subsequent research has shown, however, that by the late 19th century opportunity was about as abundant in Europe as in the United States. What explains the attitudes of U.S. workers, Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix write in **Social Mobility in Industrial Society** (1959; reissued, Transaction, 1992), is the fact that getting ahead is actively encouraged in America, while the country’s democratic ethos prevents inequality in income from being directly translated into inequality in other areas of life.

In a fluid society such as the United States, the very idea of social class tends to make people uncomfortable. During the Great Depression, several public-opinion surveys showed what Americans deeply wanted to believe—that theirs was in effect a classless society—and a myth was born. Vast majorities—88 percent in one case—told pollsters that they considered themselves middle class. Some years later, Richard Centers pointed out in **The Psychology of Social Classes** (1949; reprint, 1961)

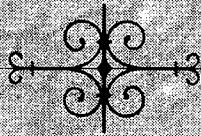
that those polled were given only three choices: lower, middle, or upper class. Given the choice, Centers said, 51 percent of the people he surveyed in 1945 identified themselves as *working class*.

The nation’s economic irregularity since 1973 has bred a whole new set of anxieties about class, expressed in a raft of articles and books on “the decline of the middle class,” including **The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America** (Basic, 1988), by Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone; Frank Levy’s **Dollars and Dreams: The Changing American Income Distribution** (Russell Sage, 1987); and Kevin Phillips’s **Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity** (Random, 1993). Interestingly, however, Americans queried about their class status over the years by the National Opinion Research Center seem to tell a different tale. The proportion calling themselves middle class has been on the rise since 1983, reaching a record-high 49 percent in 1991. The survey data appear in the *American Enterprise* (May/June 1993).

The woes of the great American middle will very likely prove to be momentary tribulations. A development of far greater import may be the discovery of an urban underclass. Although it has been scrutinized in volumes ranging from Ken Auletta’s journalistic **The Underclass** (Random, 1982) to Christopher Jencks’s **Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty, and the Underclass** (Harvard, 1992), much about the underclass—how long it has existed, how big it is, whether it is growing larger—remains unknown or debatable. But the existence of a sizable group of Americans more or less permanently mired in poverty and perhaps passing its disabilities on to its children poses a monumental challenge to the ethos of opportunity that has from the beginning animated American life.

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## CURRENT BOOKS

### Is Liberalism Dead?

**THE ANATOMY OF ANTILIBERALISM.** By Stephen Holmes. Harvard. 330 pp. \$29.95

**THE LOSS OF VIRTUE: Moral Confusion and Social Disorder in Britain and America.** Ed. by Digby Anderson. *The Social Affairs Unit and the National Review*. 258 pp. \$22.95

There is much to be said for the thought that liberals are happiest when under fire. As a positive doctrine for the good life, liberalism—especially American liberalism—can look pretty thin. Its deference to the principle of freedom of choice sometimes reduces liberalism's moral vocabulary to "you choose, dear." Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel has achieved fame and fortune by complaining that this "voluntarism" is, indeed, all that liberalism amounts to and that something sterner, more "republican"—with a small *r*—is needed for liberalism, both as a theory of political freedom and as a theory of how to motivate the citizenry. Yet when liberals try to escape this communitarian complaint by claiming that they have a positive vision of this good society, they find themselves assailed by libertarians such as Robert Nozick, who espouse precisely rip-roaring voluntarism. Happier, then, the liberal who finds him- or herself assailed by the Right, whether in its lugubrious, moralizing, or counterrevolutionary guise. If liberals do not know quite what they are for, they are pretty clear about what they are against.

This is not a frivolous point. The late Judith Shklar wrote a memorable essay on the "liberalism of fear," in which she argued that the beginnings of liberalism lay in the need to avoid the horrors of the religious wars of the 17th century. An antipathy to cruelty, and a strong suspicion that all of us are capable of it when under the influence of religious or ideological passion, underpins a basic liberal response to politics. In *Political Liberalism* (1993), John Rawls argues for the virtues of the liberal separation of the political and the theological

that our forebears contrived in the late 17th century. Liberals of Rawls's stripe are keenly aware of the nasty potentialities of the human race. When others speak of religious conviction, they see the fires of Smithfield, and when others speak of communal ties, they see ethnic cleansing. Thus Stephen Holmes, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, can argue here that it is very far from true that liberals are absurdly optimistic about human nature—a familiar charge ever since the days of Joseph de Maistre. Indeed, Holmes argues, liberals have taken over and even generalized their critics' pessimism.

Elitists of all kinds are ready to agree that humanity has fallen, but they invariably exempt their favorite ruling class from the worst effects of original sin. Liberals, by contrast, think that we have no reason to suppose that anyone is exempted from the corrupting effects of power, the blinding effects of vanity, and the human disposition to wishful thinking, impatience, and imprudence. Chastened Madisonian liberalism, according to Holmes's account of it, needs no lectures from anyone on the need to defend ourselves against human imperfection.

Instead of composing a defense of liberalism, however, Holmes analyzes those who attack it, those who have made liberalism, in certain political circles, almost a dirty word. In exposing the philosophical underpinnings of antiliberalism, Holmes examines the theoretical doctrines associated with some great (and not so great) names in modern political thinking. The names are those of de Maistre, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, and Roberto Unger, all of whom become targets of his wonderfully uninhibited assault. (Readers who like their uninhibition really raw can chase down early versions of several of these chapters in the pages of the *New Republic*.) Underlying what these figures have in common is what Holmes calls the "permanent structure of antiliberal

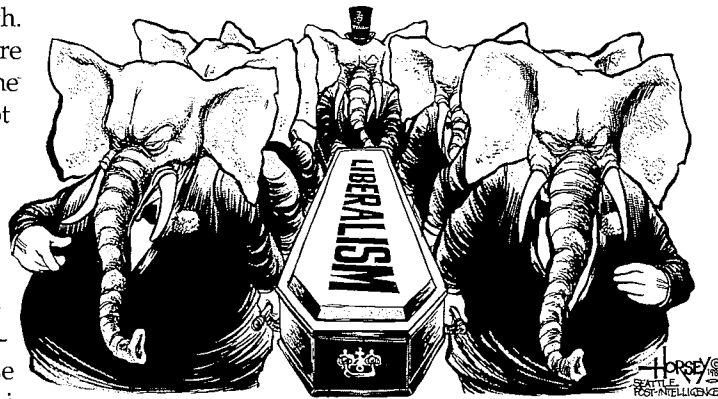
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thought." Not putting too fine a point on it, Holmes finds that antiliberalism usually combines elements of mythical thinking, ethical anti-individualism, and the diluted American version of *völkisch* thought generally labeled "communitarianism."

Antiliberalism varies a good deal according to the antiliberal who is writing. Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) wrote in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and the salient feature of his hatred of the modern world was its sanguinary quality. He could never be quite sure that he was opposed to the French Revolution, since the very things he loathed about it—its destructive, violent quality, its resort to regicide and mass murder—might, he thought, be a particularly emphatic demonstration of God's justified wrath. The execution of Louis XVI bore several possible meanings. One might be that Louis XVI got what was coming to him for his folly in compromising with the forces that overthrew him.

Holmes admits that de Maistre had rational moments and that in those rational moments he made the case against wholesale social engineering that Burke had made and that good liberals like Karl Popper would make 150 years later. It was absurd to think that one could uproot habits that had taken centuries to instill and demand that people forget them overnight. Social custom became second nature, and although it was only second nature, it was no easier to alter than first nature. This insistence on tradition could easily tip over into the thought that no new beginnings were possible. And that was precisely de Maistre's thought when he announced that it was extremely unlikely that the United States would survive at all, while the odds against anyone building a capital city called *Washington* were 1,000 to one. It all smelled too much of human contrivance.

Nobody in the 20th century goes quite so far. Still, Holmes has a good time tearing Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss to pieces. Schmitt in particular was a very peculiar case. Although he seems to have behaved well enough to individual Jewish colleagues, he was a fierce anti-Semite even before the Nazis came to power. A ferocious opponent of the Weimar Republic, he later became a loyal servant of the Nazis. Doctrinally, he held that liberal democracies were incapable of governing themselves, of producing leaders, and of making decisions. Schmitt's antiliberalism rested on the conviction that the Weimar Republic was, you might say, wimpishness expressed as politics. As a theory, Schmitt's suffered from



a terrible flaw: It could not explain why the British and French had emerged victorious in the First World War.

**T**he more local brands of antiliberalism offered by Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, and Roberto Unger are dealt with more delicately but not much more kindly. Holmes is, in fact, in the happy position of being able to play off the critics against one another, and, in the case of Lasch, against himself. Unger criticizes liberalism for breeding conformity; MacIntyre for breeding a lack of authority. It seems unlikely that both can be right, and perhaps unlikely that both are looking at the same thing. Lasch invokes Georges Sorel to complain that

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liberalism is too peaceful and Edward Bellamy to complain that it is too *mouvementé*, too unsettling. Holmes nicely characterizes Lasch's various points as "disheveled eclecticism."

In general, of course, liberalism is likely to look a lot like an unsatisfactory compromise to an awful lot of people—too secular to the religious and too accommodating of the susceptibilities of the religious to the friends of Bertrand Russell, too sociable to the disciples of Nietzsche and too anomic to Robert Bellah and his friends, and so on indefinitely.

It is, however, no use just saying that. Something may be attacked from all directions and still be quite other than a good thing in itself. Because Stephen Holmes has such a good time smiting the assailants of liberalism, his positive defense of liberal values, the liberal polity, and the liberal worldview has to be gleaned from the edges of the field of battle. Holmes's liberalism, in fact, is not relentlessly high-minded like John Stuart Mill's; it more resembles the liberalism of Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), about whom Holmes has written a good deal elsewhere. Mill thought, as Socrates had, that the unexamined life was not worth living, and he often wrote as though anyone not constantly engaged in public-spirited good deeds was wallowing in piglike insensibility. You would be safe enough from coercion in the society Mill imagined, but you would not be safe from censorious philosophers.

Constant, a Franco-Swiss novelist and political writer, defended a more relaxed liberalism. One of the blessings of the modern world, he thought, was the variety of things it offered for our enjoyment. Although he agreed that the liberal state needed a good deal of public-spirited activity to keep it going, he did not give political activism the highest place among the human virtues. In his famous *Essay on the Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns* (1819), he defended modern society's emphasis on the pleasures of private life against the ancient belief that freedom consisted *only* in active citizenship. In part,

Constant's argument was that ancient society depended on slavery for many in order to give citizenship to some; in part, that the ancient world was rather boring, so naturally politics bulked larger. Constant's neatly deflationary account of why we mind about privacy he balanced by the observation that, unless we mind enough about politics also, we shall be governed by crooks and tyrants. Like Constant's, Holmes's liberalism is a defense of private happiness, not privatized indifference to public affairs. And this is a defense of the modern world against its detractors, and thus exactly what you would expect to find Stephen Holmes offering.

The authors of *The Loss of Virtue* are perhaps fortunate to have published their work too late to have come within range of Holmes's guns. Their contributions add up to an odd little volume. Its oddity begins with the striking disparity between the claims the book makes for the bracing and unorthodox attitudes of its sponsors—the Social Affairs Unit in Britain and the *National Review* here—and its editor's obsessive insistence upon the doctoral and professorial status of his contributors. It used, indeed, to be true that some Thatcherites were rather lively and aggressive critics of liberal good causes, and the *National Review* is famous for the jokey antiliberalism of its founder, William F. Buckley, Jr., but this volume is not antiliberal. It is merely wet and gloomy.

The drift of the volume is indicated by its subtitle: *Moral Confusion and Social Disorder in Britain and America*. (The "America" is a bit of a fraud, since all the authors are British and most of the moral confusion and social disorder under review is either British or located somewhere in the imagination of the writers.) The general line taken here is familiar enough. Theft, violence, fraud, illegitimacy, family breakdown, illiteracy in school, and many other gloom-inducing phenomena seem to have risen inexorably over the past 40 years. Their rise, according to the authors, has nothing to do with the objective conditions of those who lie, steal,

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murder, speak back to their teachers and occasionally beat them up into the bargain, and thereafter break their marriage vows, neglect their kids, and otherwise contribute to social breakdown. Life has grown nastier as prosperity has increased.

What accounts for the rising rate of assorted misbehavior? The only plausible view, or rather the only view offered here, is that we have abandoned our traditional moral codes. The various contributors do not, however, focus on *all* traditional morality. Their common theme is that we set too little value by self-control. Too many people have ceased to believe that they *must* control their own behavior. Too many others have ceased to believe that they *can*. This is not a theme that liberals are altogether likely to resist. Certainly one strand in modern liberalism is an antipuritan strain of thought that resists the repressive, life-denying overtones of terms like "self-control." That is not the only strand, however. Liberalism developed out of Protestant Christianity as well as in opposition to it. The liberal defense of toleration, for instance, has never been a defense of mere intellectual *laissez faire*. It has always been a defense of the individual's right (and duty) to find his or her *own* way to salvation.

**I**ndeed, one of the easier conservative criticisms of liberalism has always been that it places too much weight on the individual's capacity for moral reasoning and self-control. Edmund Burke feared to set each man to trade upon his own stock of reason because the individual's resources are small. *The Loss of Virtue* is un-Burkean, however. Its authors content themselves with bemoaning the low moral state into which we have fallen, without saying much about how we might lift ourselves out of it.

What they do have to say usually has to do with the family, about its importance in teaching its members how to behave decently. The thought that the family is the most important socializing agent we encounter, and that any weakening of its authority will result in

children who range from idle to thoroughly antisocial, is not only plausible in itself but the common coin in discussions among current liberals, too. William Galston's *Liberal Purposes* (1991) is only one of several recent attempts to show that a sensible liberalism is not to be identified with a wild Nietzschean individualism but with the politics of a pluralist society. Galston was one of Bill Clinton's campaign advisers on family policy and now works in the White House on the civilian national-service program. He is a liberal who shares the anxieties of many of the authors of *The Loss of Virtue* and is now trying to reverse that loss by instilling in teenagers some sense that they are entitled only to ask from society a return commensurate with what they are ready to contribute.

**O**ne curious thing about the contemporary debate among liberals, as well as between liberals and their opponents, is the extent to which *everyone* is in favor of community, family, and individual virtue. The two figures who are wholly in disrepute are those arch-individualists, the bearded hippie of the 1960s mumbling "do your own thing" and the bond trader of the 1980s shouting "greed is good." Of course, liberals disagree with conservatives over the extent to which community, family, and the pursuit of individual virtues license the state to invade our bedrooms, censor our reading, and encourage prayer in the classroom. Nonetheless, it has become increasingly clear that the "communitarian" critics of liberalism have mostly been internal critics, liberals themselves.

It is no wonder that so many writers have rediscovered the virtues of John Dewey and the arch-communitarian liberals of the 1920s and '30s, while John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell are relatively in decline. Professor Holmes, however, usefully reminds us that the accommodation between liberalism and communitarianism can go only so far. A community attached to liberal values is, as they say, nice work if you can get it. When you can-



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not, the familiar division between conservatives backing loyalty and stability and liberals backing individuality and imagination simply reappears. That is hardly surprising. If any cleavage is a permanent feature of the

political landscape, this is it.

—Alan Ryan teaches politics at Princeton University and is the author of *Bertrand Russell: A Political Life* (1988).

## Preaching to the Converted

**RACE MATTERS.** By Cornel West. Beacon Press. 105 pp. \$15

**N**o one would likely dispute the claim that coming to grips with "race matters" is fundamental to understanding American politics, history, or culture. But an argument is certain to arise if one ventures to be more specific. There is no common definition of the problem, no consensus on a historical narrative explaining how we have come to this juncture, no agreement about what now should be done. Perhaps most important, Americans lack a common vision of the future of our racial relations. We seem no longer to know what it is we are trying to achieve—with our laws, through our politics, in our classrooms, from our pulpits—as we struggle with the legacy of African slavery. Indeed, Americans of all races seem to be confused about who "we" are.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West, professor of religion and director of Afro-American studies at Princeton, tries to bring order to our collective intellectual chaos on this vexing question. Sadly for all of us, he does not succeed. A philosopher, theologian, and social activist, West has emerged in the last decade as an important critical voice on the Left in American public life. Though it may be an exaggeration to say, as one admirer boasts, that he is "the pre-eminent African-American intellectual of our generation," there is no arguing that he is a thoughtful, articulate, and quite influential social critic. His analyses of our "American dilemma" are studied in universities and seminaries across the country. His opinions on social and cultural policy were

solicited by then President-elect Clinton just after last year's election. And shortly after his installment at Princeton, West acquired official academic celebrity status when he was profiled in the *New York Times Magazine*.

This new book is a collection of eight short essays. Taken together, they sketch the outlines of an interesting if problematic vision of race in America. West offers a stunning array of propositions about our economy, politics, and culture, each one elegant and provocative, and some possibly true. But because West writes more in the manner of the prophet than of the analyst, he never stays long enough with any one point to convince us that he has got it right.

West believes the public discourse about race matters in this society is pathetically impoverished. In this he is surely right. But his explanation is a good deal more controversial: The absence of an effective public dialogue on the race question, he believes, derives from the fact that not all Americans are equal members of the national community. This is a failure for which he holds both liberals and conservatives responsible. Both mistakenly define the "racial dilemma" in terms of the problems that black people pose for white people. Liberals see poor blacks as the historical victims of American racism, needful of government assistance, while conservatives see in the behavior of the black poor the need for moral reform. Both, however, look upon lower-class urban blacks as a people different in some elemental way from themselves. The problem for both is how to transform "them" so they will be more like "us." But this, West believes, tragically misconstrues the problem:

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To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as black people are viewed as “them,” the burden falls on blacks to do all the “cultural” and “moral” work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply “fit in.”

West is talking here about hegemony, though (we may be thankful) he avoids the word. He has in mind the historical fact and ongoing reality of the oppression of black folk—our separation from the mainstream of American life for generations, even after the end of slavery, as well as the horrible conditions under which many blacks continue to live. The “cultural stereotypes” he mentions are negative ideas—about the beauty, intelligence, moral worth, and even the humanity of Africans—which, given the need to rationalize slavery in a putatively Christian democracy, evolved over the years into an ugly antiblack ideology. He is asserting that we will get nowhere in our discussions of race until we unburden ourselves of the remnant of this ideological legacy. It is a superficially appealing position. But is it right?

Is it, in fact, true that racial progress depends upon a more ecumenical, less judgmental approach to the question of which ways of life embraced by various groups of American citizens are worthy of tolerance and respect? Is it entirely obvious that certain Americans have no right to say to others that inclusion—if not in terms of legal rights, then in social, cultural, and moral terms—is contingent upon “fitting in,” that is, upon adopting values more or less universally agreed upon. Surely this was what “we” said to segregationists during the civil-rights movement. Should it not also be “our” message to-

day to an Afrocentric spokesman who insists on the moral superiority of blacks (“sun people”) over whites (“ice people”); or to the black mayor of a drug-ridden metropolis who, when caught in the act of illegal drug use, declares himself a victim of racism in law enforcement?

Criticism of offenses such as these—offenses not simply against whites’ sensibilities but against what should constitute core American values—are hard to find in *Race Matters*. This, in no small part, is due to the fact that West is usually “preaching to the choir.” His words collected here serve an emblematic function; they constitute for the like-minded reader banners of progressive sentiment. Few among the students and teachers of the humanities at the many universities where this book will be on the reading lists this fall will need to be persuaded of the correctness of West’s views. But out in the “real” America—the blue-collar districts of the industrial states that elected Bill Clinton last November; the suburban rings around the core cities where whites (and blacks) have fled from the problems of urban decay; in the South, where interracial coalitions still must be built—few doubts will be dispelled or souls converted to the cause by these essays. My concern is that these essays fail in their task of persuasion because they are too “politically correct,” too imbued with the peculiar ethos of the contemporary academy, to serve as a healing vision for our racial problems.

One instance where West does challenge the conventional progressive wisdom is in his discussion of the spiritual condition of the urban underclass. His willingness to confront the phenomenon head-on, and to place it at the center of the crisis of urban black life, is quite admirable. He dares to peer into the vast emptiness and nihilism of the spirit that characterizes life at the bottom of our society, where one youth can kill another over a pair of sneakers or a disrespectful gaze, where children give birth to children amid multigenerational poverty and dependency, where the alienation is

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radical, the violence random, and despair rampant. West understands that these conditions announce the arrival of "postmodern poverty," a truly new phenomenon on the American scene.

But what he has to say about the causes and the cures of these problems makes very little sense to me. The spiritual problems of the black poor, it turns out, are due to the predations of market capitalism. The black underclass has been infested, as have we all, West says, with a materialistic acquisitiveness fueled by profit-seeking manufacturers, distributors, and marketers of consumer goods. The poor have borne the brunt of this capitalistic onslaught on cultural stability because their civil institutions—churches and families and community structures—are too weak to provide a counterweight to the dictates of television advertising.

One cannot dismiss this claim out of hand. There is a respectable tradition, on both the Left and the Right, that is skeptical about the cultural results of capitalism. But it is far from clear, given the historically unprecedented severity of the problems that have emerged in urban black society during the last three decades, that West's explanation explains enough. After all, a television commercial may lead a youngster to desire a pair of sneakers, but only a pathological deprivation of moral sensibility will allow him to kill for them. In any event, placing responsibility on "market-driven corporate enterprises" tells us nothing about what must be done to reverse the decay.

West's answer to the underclass problem is rather to advocate an all-too-predictable "progressive" policy agenda—more money from the government for schools; investment in infrastructure; the creation of good jobs at good wages; the continuation of affirmative action. But there is no serious inquiry into why such efforts, which have been tried repeatedly, have had so little impact on the deteriorating condition of the urban black poor. To counter this decline, West proposes a "politics of conversion." As I understand it, he is implying a kind of communitarian democratic so-

cialism, built from the grassroots. In advocating this "politics of conversion," West, a professor of religion and sometime preacher of the gospel, oddly makes no reference to the role of religious faith. The spiritual malaise is to be transcended not by a vertical relationship with the Almighty but through horizontal relationships with fellow combatants in the struggle against white supremacy and corporate greed. This sounds just a bit romantic. West offers little useful advice about how to put this new politics into effect, even as he ignores the ongoing ministries in the inner cities that are managing to "turn the souls" of some of those at the bottom.

About some of the more difficult questions that must be asked and answered if real change is to occur, West has even less to say. Why *are* the relations between black men and women so difficult? Why *does* black academic performance lag so in comparison with that of other students, even recent immigrants, and not just among the poor but at all levels of the income hierarchy? How *can* effective engagement in the lives of the alienated urban poor be promoted and achieved by middle-class Americans of any race, when the poor are seemingly so divorced from the social and political commonweal? And what practical political program, implementable in the here and now of American public life, *can* secure enough consensus to support concerted action on these problems?

Questions such as these cannot be answered by sloganeering or with the clever deconstruction of our "patriarchal society" whose "machismo identity is expected and even exalted—as with Rambo and Reagan." It is no political program to call for the emergence of "jazz freedom fighter(s)" who will "attempt to galvanize and energize world-weary people into forms of organization with accountable leadership that promote critical exchange and broad reflection." It is an insufficient argument for affirmative action, which must be sustained by courts and electoral majorities, to invoke the need for an "affirmation of black humanity, especially

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among black people themselves, . . . [that] speaks to the existential issues of what it means to be a degraded African (man, woman, gay, lesbian, child) in a racist society." This may be the rhetoric prescribed in the multiculturalists' handbook, but it is a rhetoric, I fear, that is largely irrelevant to the serious racial problems that continue to beset American society.

West talks about transcending race as, he asserts, blacks should have done when instead we rallied in large numbers behind the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Yet he mires himself in an essentially racist vision that makes it difficult to see how such a transcendence can be achieved. Why, one wonders, does he find it necessary to equate the violence-promoting lyrics of rap performer Ice-T with the public statements of former Los Angeles police commissioner Darryl Gates? More disturbing, how can a man whose claim on our attention here rests upon the morality of his denunciation of racism speak of "visible Jewish resistance to affirmative action and government spending on social programs"—as if the fact that some American Jews hold some ideas can be used

to ascribe these ideas to the entire group? West would certainly, and rightly, be offended by a similar-sounding charge that blacks as a group should be judged as engaged in an "assault on Jewish survival" because some criminals who are black have murdered some victims who are Jews.

**I**n the end, the moral authority of Cornel West's voice in these pages must be supplied by the reader. If you come as a true believer, you will be entertained and energized by the eloquence and commitment of this "pre-eminent black intellectual of our generation." The rest of us perhaps must take our lead from the current fashion in literary criticism and read this text not for what it appears to be arguing but, indirectly, for what it can be understood to say about the curious disposition of influence and moral authority in the contemporary American academy.

—Glenn Loury is professor of economics at Boston University. His *One by One* from the *Inside Out: Race and Responsibility in America* will be published by the Free Press later this year.

## The South Rises Again

**THE PROMISE OF THE NEW SOUTH:** *Life After Reconstruction.* By Edward L. Ayers. Oxford. 572 pp. \$30

**W**hen C. Vann Woodward entered graduate school at the University of North Carolina in the 1930s, southern history writing, he later recalled, consisted chiefly of references to injured sectional pride and pretensions to glories that never existed. Slogging through text after text, the man who would become the leading southern historian of his time quickly realized that he had never before read "prose so pedestrian, pages so dull, chapters so devoid of

ideas, whole volumes so wrongheaded or so lacking in point." With a succession of brilliant works, including his popular *Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955), Woodward rectified the problem. His classic work, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (1951), covers those years after the Civil War that others had disregarded in favor of the southern golden age from Jefferson's inauguration to Lee's surrender. Woodward demonstrated that, by comparison with a prospering North, the South possessed a distinctively tragic past—a historical record of poverty, defeat, and internal strife that was not uncommon to most nations but to which the Yankee conquerors were the lucky exceptions.

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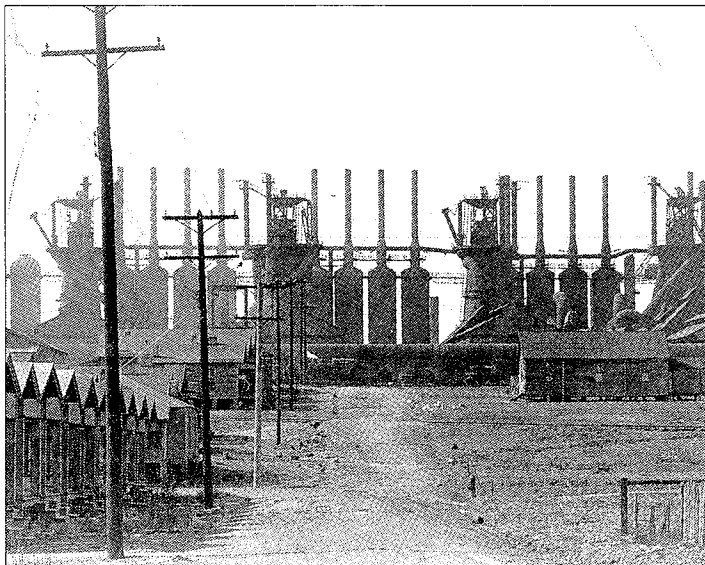
The hapless heirs of the Confederacy, in Woodward's story, staggered into the 20th century ill-prepared for the economic setbacks of the 1920s and 1930s.

In *The Promise of the New South*, Edward Ayers, a professor of history at the University of Virginia, offers a new narrative strategy, appropriate for our times. To be sure, we recognize many of the themes that Woodward introduced—the crop-lien system that ravaged the countryside and paid subsistence wages, and a ramshackle political system that

fers no unifying thesis, no memorable summation that helps the reader remember the findings. Indeed, as a young scholar influenced by the “new history” of our day—that is, by a historiography that highlights social, ethnic, and multicultural themes—Ayers is fortunate to be able to assume what Woodward had to prove: the South's distinctiveness. Thanks to Woodward's identification of southern uniqueness in the pre-World War I era, Ayers is free to range widely, and he does so with genuine relish. He fashions a visual and oral tapestry of many Souths, particularly through deployment of quotations from people of separate walks of life and subregions, and of different ages and colors. He discovers—from God knows where—diaries of black tenant farmers, petitions of poor white women with husbands in jail, expletives from mechanics, a suicide note from a lonely Texan, and reminiscences of shoe salesmen and of drummers on their dreary rounds. He has combed mail-order catalogs, patent-medicine pitches, and partisan broadsides for often-humorous reflections on the events of the hour. An eye-catching advertisement in an Arkansas newspaper sought

“two good hustlers, either sex, to introduce and sell Lightning Vermin Destroyer.” In this range of voices, Ayers discovers the movement of people seeking a better life, the restlessness and energy of the inhabitants.

Woodward painted a South hobbled by economic stagnation, with only a few places like Atlanta, Birmingham, and Richmond developing an urban vibrancy. Ayers's South, by contrast, is a land of growing settlements, large and small, where the frustrated farmer could leave the unsubmissive soil and clerk at a store before opening a shop of his own. Devoting a lengthy chapter to “Dry Goods,”



Birmingham steel mill, c. 1930

rewarded mediocrity and incited racial mistrust while ignoring real social and economic needs. Yet Ayers's post-Reconstruction South is headed not for the Great Depression but for the Sun Belt era. The title itself gives the clue. “Promise,” which suggests hope for the future, replaces Woodward's “Origins,” which, in the author's hands, implied an irony about a region of broken hopes, missed opportunities, and inclinations to self-deception.

Perhaps in reaction to what Harold Bloom has called the “anxiety of influence,” Ayers does not directly challenge Woodward (who was his dissertation adviser). Unlike Woodward's *Origins*, *The Promise of the New South* of-

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Ayers explains how the South developed a consumer economy. Country merchants with their ready-made products not only eased the lot of overworked farm wives but excited rural aspirations to a better life. Such dreams led many into the textile-mill hamlets of the Middle South—a release from agrarian drudgery for some and a new enslavement of whole families to arrogant bosses for others. For Woodward, mine and mill owners and country storekeepers were still largely the rapacious creditors and cold-eyed employers who held the dependent classes in almost permanent bondage.

**I**n Ayers, however, we find the beginnings of the current South—both its tackiness and its vitality. The post-Reconstruction South, for instance, took to baseball, football, and prizefighting as if they had been native sports, when in reality they were all imported from the North. In fact, Ayers's analysis of popular culture overwhelms the more orthodox concerns of politics and economics found in Woodward's *Origins*. While Woodward was trained as a political scientist, Ayers is primarily a social historian who seems a little off-balance in the political realm. He is more comfortable narrating lively vignettes about how John Heisman of Auburn inflamed the collegiate football craze or how Scott Joplin transposed banjo syncopation to the piano in the late 1880s. He even makes comprehensible the religiously tinted prohibition movement in a South where "Red Eye" and mellowing bourbon had reigned so long. With heavy female participation, the crusade sought to civilize a pervasive culture of male license in barroom and cathouse, check a serious problem of substance abuse, and solidify what we now call family values (references to which excited more southern than northern enthusiasm in the 1992 presidential election). Although the South remained behind the North in wealth, cultural refinement, and skilled workers, Ayers shows the section slouching toward a secular modernity that would have amazed

and probably appalled the honor-conscious fathers of the slaveholding era.

Two areas of *The Promise of the New South* deserve special mention. The first is Ayers's new and somewhat problematic approach to the region's economic record. The South between the wars (Civil and Great) was burdened with farm foreclosures, sharecropping, convict leasing on plantations and in the forests, and the lowest wages for farm labor in the country. To his credit, Ayers does not ignore these matters. Even "the growing southern cities," he writes, "were not so much signs of urban opportunity as of rural sickness." Cotton farmers were generally so encumbered with debt that they had fewer resources for crops to feed their livestock and themselves. Nor were those engaged in diversified husbandry necessarily better off than their cotton-growing cousins. Freight rates discriminated against the lightly populated rural South, and competition with midwestern farmlands was keen. Yet Ayers does not dwell sufficiently on the post-Reconstruction South's intractable woes. Like Chaucer, he rejoices in God's plenty, but he fails even to mention the medical problems of the rural poor—pellagra, rickets, typhoid, rheumatic and yellow fever, and syphilis. These were psychologically and physically depressing maladies that seemed to substantiate northern contempt for a "lazy" and woebegone section. Their omission from this account signals Ayers's preference for themes leading toward the more strutting Sunbelt of today.

**A** second theme, the relationship of black and white, Ayers handles with much sympathy and perspicacity. Some of today's troubles in the black family, he reveals, had their roots in this period rather than in slavery, under which the two-parent family was normal, despite forced separations by sale and bequest. Between 1880 and 1915 close to a third of black households consisted only of a mother and children, thanks largely to the low rate of employment for black men in the small towns where black women could at least earn a pittance as domestics.

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As for southern racial violence, Ayers reveals that the lynching of blacks occurred less frequently in areas where blacks had large majorities, as in the Mississippi Delta or Alabama Black Belt, than in areas of economic dislocation and collective stress, into which smaller numbers of blacks had recently moved. Motives for a lynching were less likely to be retribution for the rape of a white woman than a desire to settle a particular score with an allegedly "uppity-minded" black homeowner or entrepreneur. Ayers has an eye for the telling detail. He relates, for example, how at a carnival in 1896 a white schoolboy unsuspectingly put on earphones and heard an Edison recording of a lynching. To his horror, the boy heard the crackle of the flames and the victims "asking God to forgive their tormentors." The pitchman, noticing the boy's distress, dismissed it: "Too much cake, too much lemonade. You know how boys are at a picnic."

Inevitably, perhaps, Ayers has lost some of the coherence that Woodward's more schematic and morally driven account provided. After all, Woodward wrote when the American giant patrolled the world against communism. Ever a skeptic, Woodward set before an unheeding nation seemingly bent on a career of world domination and world policing the example of post-Reconstruction southerners, who understood from the defeat of 1865 the cost of overbearing greed and national hubris.

By contrast, Ayers shuns moral prescriptions of any kind. He belongs to the post-Vietnam War generation, which recoils from the moral imperatives of irony, places faith in the voices of ordinary people, not of authorities, and prefers readers to draw their own conclusions without much authorial direction. At times Ayers's sheer piling up of unfailingly fascinating details has the effect—in the absence of an overarching motif—of leaving the reader intellectually benumbed.

**A**yers's accomplishments, however, far outweigh such deficiencies. He has permanently altered our understanding of the New South by revealing a region with many faces, a region where the tackiest, cruelest, and most human moments are all jumbled together. Above all, he has produced a work of frequently stunning beauty. The elegance and sensitivity that he achieves are typical of few historical works, most of which retain a measure of the pedantry that the young Woodward found so disheartening 50 or so years ago.

—Bertram Wyatt-Brown, a former Wilson Center Fellow, holds the Richard J. Milbauer Chair of History at the University of Florida. His most recent book is *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (1986).

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## OTHER TITLES

### *Contemporary Affairs*

**PREPARING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.** By Paul Kennedy. Random House. 428 pp. \$25

Paul Kennedy's best-selling *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) was, for all its imposing size, a fundamentally simple book. Kennedy's unit of analysis remained the sovereign state, which by

the 1980s already looked to be distinctly old-fashioned—the currency of imperial *Weltpolitik* rather than of the modern world economy. The Yale historian never offered a definition of state power but seemed to assume that it was ultimately measurable in military terms. With disarming frankness, Kennedy now recounts the criticism he received on this point, and his new book is presented as a corrective. Here he turns his attention to larger, transnational develop-

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ments such as demography, global warming, biotechnology, and robotics that are bound to influence, if not dictate, the shape of a future social life—a life in which the sun becomes an enemy rather than a friend and nature a victim instead of a challenge, and in which babies are not only weighed but measured by the “environmental damage” they represent. (An American baby represents 280 times the damage of a Haitian one, which, Kennedy soberly observes, is “not a comfortable statistic for anyone with a conscience.”)

Of course, futurology is a hazardous trade, never more so than in the aftermath of the Cold War. While some changes may be somewhat predictable—population growth is the most important of these—others, such as ecological shifts, are much more uncertain, and political, religious and intellectual revolutions lie outside the range of every crystal ball known. Historians are typically opponents of prediction. Yet they are exceptionally well-equipped to grasp the parameters of the possible. Kennedy’s careful inquiry is a good example of this. At one level he might appear merely to be offering a prodigious digest of everything from genetic engineering to the origins of the nation-state, but that digest is informed by sober realism and held in focus by his governing question: How can people prepare for the future?

It is in attempting to answer this question that Kennedy’s analysis runs out of steam. Who is capable of systematically “preparing” on such a scale? Corporations, within their limits, maybe, but states are becoming ever less capable of solving major problems whose causes lie outside their borders. On Kennedy’s showing, indeed, the state is already obsolete in a technical sense. People’s thinking, however, has not begun to catch up with this fact: National sovereignty is still defended and pursued (as in Bosnia) with unremitting, even mounting, ferocity. Meanwhile, the logically necessary vehicle for preparing for the 21st century, the world-state, remains as unlikely as it has ever been. In its absence, the familiar disparate list of competing structures—countries, social groups, societies, states—jostle inconclusively through Kennedy’s final pages.

Within the context of nationality, Kennedy concludes with a poignant historical parallel. He

suggests that Britain a century ago was in something like the position of the United States today: uneasily aware that its supremacy was fast eroding, but still too mesmerized by faith in its uniqueness to learn lessons from others who were setting the new pace. He is right to fix on that sense of exceptionalism. Plenty of influential people in turn-of-the-century Britain could see what needed to be done, “but nobody was capable of getting it done. The British people thought it better to ‘muddle through,’ ” Kennedy writes. But even this implies a more deliberate strategic choice than is conceivable in a mass democracy. What present historians say about Britain’s failure to adapt, future historians (if any) may well repeat about America’s incapacity, for example, to tolerate a 50-cent gasoline tax. As Kennedy bleakly concludes, “Humankind will have only itself to blame for the troubles, and the disasters, that could be lying ahead.” Who else?

**MEXICAN AMERICANS: The Ambivalent Minority.** By Peter Skerry. Free Press. 463 pp. \$27.95

Americans tend to have one great concern about the millions of Mexican Americans who have crossed the border in recent years: Will they join the mainstream? Will they learn English, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, move to the suburbs, and adopt a pro football team as their very own? They almost certainly will, says Skerry, Washington director for the UCLA Center for American Politics and Public Policy. Unfortunately, he reports, that is not the important question. Mexican Americans face a collective *political* choice about their identity in America. They will be forced to decide whether to define themselves as a traditional ethnic group, like the Irish or Poles, or to adopt the status of a minority group, like the African Americans, and seek special protection under the law.

These alternative futures are already embodied in two cities. San Antonio, Texas, has a large and stable Mexican-American community, with relatively few newcomers and a modified machine-style politics rooted in the city’s churches, neighborhoods, and community organizations.



United in their resentment of the Anglos, San Antonio's Mexican Americans nonetheless eschew racial rhetoric for the politics of "getting ahead and getting even." Los Angeles offers a much quicker route to the American Dream. The city's Hispanic households had average incomes of \$33,500 in 1990, nearly \$10,000 greater than those of Hispanics in San Antonio, despite the California city's heavy influx of poor immigrants. Yet Skerry believes that San Antonio's political style promotes a healthier kind of assimilation.

Los Angeles politics, scrubbed clean of "machine" excrescences by Progressive-era reforms and dominated by the news media, discourages grassroots politics. Political organizing is made nearly impossible by the never-ending stream of new immigrants, which makes life in many Mexican-American neighborhoods highly unsettled even by Los Angeles standards. The city's Mexican-American politicians have little real connection to their constituents; instead, they attract media attention by playing the race card—raising issues such as bilingual education and immigration policy. The leaders who emerge from this system tend to be ineffective, with political careers as ephemeral as sound bites. The grittier San Antonio style has yielded more skilled leaders (including Henry Cisneros, now secretary of Housing and Urban Development), more municipal jobs for Mexican Americans at city hall, and twice as big a share (14 percent) of seats in the state legislature. Mexican Americans in Texas have what used to be called a stake in the system.

Skerry suggests that the San Antonio model offers Mexican Americans their best hope of political assimilation. But he fears that the American system today is rigged in favor of politics as practiced in Los Angeles.

**PANDAEMONIUM:** Ethnicity in International Politics. *By Daniel Patrick Moynihan.* Oxford. 221 pp. \$19.95

Plato's idea of a philosopher-prince seemed to acquire, after the Soviet empire broke apart, an artistic twist: Czechoslovakia elected a playwright president and Lithuania a musician. In



America the closest approximation to a philosopher-prince may be New York's senior senator. His politics and scholarship have certainly long reinforced each other. Thirty years ago Moynihan wrote (with Nathan Glazer) an influential study of ethnicity, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, and his awareness of ethnic conflicts has made him a shrewder observer of international realities than many Cold War "realists." Even a decade ago, when Henry Kissinger still defined world politics as an abiding conflict between communism and the free world, Moynihan was predicting that ethnic unrest would soon unravel the Soviet empire. Understanding ethnicity, however, left Moynihan with no illusions that the end of the Cold War could mean the end of history.

Expanding on his Oxford lecture of 1991, Moynihan here explains how ethnicity, conjoined with nationalist ambitions, has produced a recipe for endless conflict. It was Woodrow Wilson—with an addiction to phrasemaking that his secretary of state Robert Lansing privately criticized—who made "the self-determination of peoples" an active principle in world politics. Until recently, Moynihan says, Americans have tended to overlook the difficulties and dangers of this noble-sounding ideal. Conceiving rights in terms of individuals, not groups, Americans believed that governments, not people, caused all the world's problems. Now that international politics is no longer a Manichean struggle between good and evil governments, but rather an infinitely complex network of ethnic and national ambitions, Moynihan worries that America will retreat into a disenchanting isolationism. His main point, indeed, is that American participation is essential if there

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is to be "order in an age of chaos." "Sovereignty has become more permeable," Moynihan argues, in such places as the Balkans, where external intervention in domestic politics constitutes not aggression but humanitarian necessity. "Just how much horror can be looked upon with indifference, or at least inaction?" he asks. "To which the answer, of course, is plenty. But," Moynihan concludes, "civilizations with claims to universal values do, in general, try to uphold them, if only after a point."

**DEATH WITHOUT WEEPING:** The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil. By Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Univ. of Calif. 614 pp. \$29

Anthropology during the 1980s, inspired by the deconstructionist vogue in literary criticism, grew painfully self-conscious. Dissecting ethnographic writing, practitioners dispelled the notion that the anthropologist was a neutral observer. Yet after a decade, such textual self-scrutiny became repetitive and threatened to turn anthropology into an armchair discipline.

It may seem odd that a book titled *Death Without Weeping* augurs new life in what looked like a moribund discipline. To Scheper-Hughes, an anthropologist at Berkeley, the convulsions of history are not simply material for aesthetic critique. The sugar plantations of the Brazilian Northeast were born in slavery, and, as she puts it, they are now maintained by slavery of another kind. The region never experienced Brazil's "economic miracle." Quite the contrary. Today its landless peasants suffer from the combined effects of deforestation, regional decline, and agricultural mechanization—a fate shared with much of the Third World.

In Bom Jesus da Mata, where Scheper-Hughes studied everyday life for more than 25 years, a rural worker's average daily caloric consumption is less than that of an internee in Buchenwald. A medical anthropologist, the author describes how the local clinics treat the symptoms of hunger and malnutrition by prescribing medication, thus indirectly helping to maintain terrible social conditions. She goes beyond the usual denunciations of the role of conservative Catholicism in maintaining this status quo; in-

deed, she shows how the progressive liberation theology, which promulgates the church's teachings about female sexuality and reproduction, leaves poor mothers who cannot raise all the children they conceive in a state of "moral and theological confusion."

Scheper-Hughes is most original in her discussion of motherhood. Much recent feminist theory—as expressed in Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982), and Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* (1990)—promotes a nostalgic, almost mystical image of the mother-infant relationship. The behavior of the poor in Bom Jesus is a living—and dying—refutation of any universalist myth of motherhood. With resources too scarce to support all their children, shantytown mothers not only do not mourn the death of sickly babies; they hasten the dying of those unlikely to survive. These undernourished mothers make cold-blooded judgments about their children's chances in a slum environment, practicing what Scheper-Hughes describes, with both shock and sympathy, as "selective neglect" or "passive infanticide."

Scheper-Hughes makes some use of anthropology's recent self-conscious turn, employing critical theory to justify her role as an advocate for real people in real troubles. Her own voice—by turns womanly, muckraking, passionately engaged, and analytical—does not crowd out the many voices of her subjects, but it does contribute to a multitextured, experimental ethnography. Her work, in fact, stands as an invitation to fellow anthropologists to quit their armchair critiques and return to the field.

### Arts & Letters

**WHERE THE BLUEBIRD SINGS TO THE LEMONADE SPRINGS:** Living and Writing in the West. By Wallace Stegner. Random House. 227 pp. \$21

In 1964, a middle-aged Wallace Stegner declared the West to be "the New World's last chance to be something better, the only American society malleable enough to be formed." This pronouncement was characteristically self-effacing.

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Stegner would never have presumed to take on the responsibility of shaping the society of the West. Yet, in spite of himself, he did—more so than any other modern writer.

Stegner was born in rural Iowa in 1909 and grew up all over the West, dragged about by a shiftless father. The only member of his family to obtain even a high-school education, Stegner went on to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. In the decades that followed, he published more than two dozen novels and historical works as well as short stories and essays; he founded the creative writing program at Stanford University, which spawned a galaxy of western superstars; and he championed environmental causes long before the fight became fashionable, eventually serving as special assistant to the secretary of the interior in the early 1960s.

This collection of essays, published shortly before his death last April, shows Stegner in all his different roles. In "Living Dry," he is the environmental activist explaining why the region's climate simply cannot sustain excessive development. In "Striking the Rock," he is the historian charting the rise and fall of the various federal institutions that control more than half of the West's acreage. In "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," Stegner calls for a new western literature, enjoining writers to forget the glorified cowboy myth and get down to the hardscrabble business of describing an actual region. And in "Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood," he is again a boy of the West recalling his dad, whose version of the American dream—getting something for nothing—sent him on a quest through western landscapes that would serve as his son's most formative education. Unlike Jack Kerouac and others, however, Stegner never romanticized the "on the road" quality of western life: "Our migratoriness has hindered us from becoming a people of communities and traditions, especially in the West," he notes. "It has robbed us of the gods who make places holy." In the early 1940s, he quit teaching at Harvard to forge over the next half century a bond with the western landscape and its society.

Linking these 16 essays is a knowledge of

what it takes to appreciate the West: "You have to get over the color green; you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale; you have to understand geological time." Out of his appreciation of vast spaces and the small human struggles for self-reliance set against them, Stegner created a body of writings that has become identified with the contemporary West. In one essay, he posits (in typically low-key style) that "it wouldn't hurt if some native-born writer . . . was around to serve as culture hero—the individual who transcends his culture without abandoning it, who leaves for a while in search of opportunity and enlargement but never forgets where he left his heart." Stegner himself is no longer "around," but to numerous readers he is that hero he so offhandedly envisioned.



**WHAT REMAINS** and Other Stories. By Christa Wolf. Trans. by Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian. Farrar Straus. 295 pp. \$25

**THE AUTHOR'S DIMENSION:** Selected Essays. By Christa Wolf. Ed. by Alexander Stephan. Trans. by Jan Van Heurck. Farrar Straus. 336 pp. \$27.50

These stories and essays by the former East Germany's most famous writer arrive here under a cloud: the recent revelation that from 1959 to 1962 Wolf was an *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (I. M.), an informal collaborator for the East German secret police, the dreaded Stasi. Suddenly Christa Wolf, who was once considered her country's dissident Joan of Arc, appears to be a quisling who slept with the enemy. With this knowledge, how should a reader respond to her novella "What Remains," which evokes the life of a person living under constant Stasi surveillance?

Wolf recently said she fears "being reduced to these two letters"—I. M. Although Wolf did not confess her Stasi connection until police records were made public, those records suggest that the secret police found her ultimately of little use. Indeed, her role changed when she became the object of Stasi surveillance between 1969 and 1980. The year 1969 is significant. It was

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the year after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, an event that caused many behind the Iron Curtain to rethink their positions on communism. Wolf, a strong believer in the possibilities of a true socialist state, retreated into her writing, trying to transcend through literature the evil she now suspected lay around her. She watched as other writers opted to leave, staying on herself, apparently deciding that it was better to try to change things from within the country, however muted her voice might become as a result of government censors.

Now that East Germany is no more, can it be said that Wolf chose wisely? Can her writing survive the dual cataclysm of that regime's collapse and the stain of her former collaboration?

The evidence of her nonfiction, collected in *The Author's Dimension*, suggests that it cannot. In a final essay written just three months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, her pain is evident: Wolf lobbied briefly for the creation of a post-communist, democratic East German state; seeing her efforts frustrated, she abandoned her literary crusade, declaring that "the politicians and the economists have the floor now." In earlier pieces, Wolf's insights are occasionally brilliant, but the effect of the whole is that of a dated, sometimes self-serving historical document. By contrast, the fiction in *What Remains* may outlive the situations that inspired it. The poignant story "June Afternoon," for example, is intriguing precisely because it vividly brings to life a world that has passed out of our knowing. In it, the narrator is enjoying an idyllic afternoon in East Berlin, a peaceful moment that is interrupted by the sudden appearance of an American helicopter patrolling the border. Such intrusions, where the personal is forfeited to harsh social realities, are typical of Wolf's stories. The "forbidden fruit" her characters have eaten is not that of good and evil but the knowledge that they cannot escape living at a particular moment in history.

**CULTURE OF COMPLAINT:** *The Fraying of America.* By Robert Hughes. Oxford Univ. Press/New York Public Library. 210 pp. \$19.95

Hughes, a native Australian, has resided in the

United States for the last 23 years. A busy man, he has managed to write weekly art criticism for *Time* while producing several excellent books on subjects ranging from Modernism to Australian history to the city of Barcelona. A largely unabashed "pale patriarchal penis person," Hughes now jumps into the middle of America's current cultural war. The result is a witty, often rebarbative attack on the various inanities spewed forth by the two "PCs"—the patriotically correct and the politically correct. These three essays, originally delivered as lectures at the New York Public Library, might be described as an attempt to construct an unwimpy cultural liberalism, a bolder middle ground. With almost equal force, he swings right ("With somnambulistic efficiency, Reagan educated America down to his level") and left ("The world changes more deeply, widely, thrillingly than at any moment since 1917, perhaps since 1848, and the American academic left keeps fretting about how phallogocentricity is inscribed in Dickens's portrayal of Little Nell"). Hughes, moreover, rightly detects a symbiosis between the warring sides, characterizing them as "two Puritan sects, one plaintively conservative, the other posing as revolutionary but using academic complaint as a way of evading engagement in the real world." In his shrewdest essay, "Moral in Itself: Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy," he looks through the silliness of the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy. Drawing on historian Jackson Lears's critique of America's therapeutic culture, Hughes sees the elevation of Mapplethorpe's photography to the status of High Art as a secular variant of the view of art as "quasi-religious uplift," a notion grounded in the Puritan distrust of art that has no overtly moralizing purpose.

Useful and entertaining as all this is, Hughes might have subjected his own philosophical foundations—and his own middle ground—to closer scrutiny. A certain glib *Time-Life* phraseology—colorful, compact, and contrapuntal—can too easily substitute for real engagement. Yet when Hughes does reveal his own values—his veneration for craftsmanship, his belief in standards of artistic excellence—he does so with passion and conviction.

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## History

**PASSIONATE SAGE:** The Character and Legacy of John Adams. By Joseph J. Ellis. Norton. 277 pp. \$25

In 1801 an embittered John Adams, defeated at the polls by his rival, Thomas Jefferson, exchanged the White House for his family home in Quincy, Massachusetts. There he would remain in near-seclusion for the next 27 years. Ellis, a professor of history at Mount Holyoke, uses this period of retirement to bring into focus the entire career and character of that "misfit" among the Founding Fathers.

Adams lacked the Olympian calm of George Washington, the good humor of Benjamin Franklin, the "eternal taciturnity" of Jefferson. Possessed of an "ungovernable temper" and susceptible to "gusts of passion," he was the only president not to attend his successor's inauguration. It thus comes as little surprise that Adams spent much of his retirement trying furiously to vindicate himself. For five years he wrestled with a never-finished autobiography, an incoherent "open wound" in which he excoriated his enemies. Between 1809 and 1812 Adams wrote a series of lengthy, vituperative essays in the *Boston Patriot*, touting his accomplishments in foreign policy and answering his critics. These disjointed writings, Ellis suggests, served as a kind of therapy for the aging Adams.

His most significant retirement writings, however, were the lengthy letters he exchanged with Jefferson, his former rival. "You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other," Adams wrote in 1813, a year into their epistolary dialogue. The 14 years of correspondence between the "North and South Poles of the American Revolution," as Benjamin Rush dubbed them, cover history, political theory, and current issues—though never slavery. Throughout, the differences between the two are apparent. Unsympathetic to the prevailing thought of his day, Adams never made room in his vast lexicon for such key words of American liberalism as *freedom* and *equality*—the very pillars of Jeffersonian thought. The rather shocking argu-



ment of Adams's early *Discourses on Davila* (1790)—that irrational rather than rational forces shape history—was heresy in the Age of Reason.

As one after another of the Founding Fathers died, Adams and Jefferson lived on. Exactly 50 years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, on July 4, 1826, Adams passed away, uttering his last words, "Thomas Jefferson survives." Unknown to him, in the most startling coincidence in American history, Jefferson had died earlier that same July 4th at Monticello. After their deaths, the two men's stars followed different trajectories: Jefferson was enshrined in the pantheon of America's civil religion, while Adams faded further in popular esteem. Ellis attributes this to the fact that Adams was too skeptical about American exceptionalism. His prognosis for the American republic has proved right at least as often as Jefferson's, but Jefferson's language was celebratory while Adams's was always cautious. "The glass was always half-full at Monticello and half-empty at Quincy," Ellis concludes. For this reason, the Mall—and our national conscience—has room for monuments to Washington and Jefferson but none for the hard, passionate, and idiosyncratic president who came between them.

**MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK:** Civic Traditions in Modern Italy. By Robert D. Putnam, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. Princeton. 258 pp. \$24.95

Tocqueville never wrote a *Democracy in Italy*. Now someone has. Putnam, a Harvard professor of government, began studying Italian regional politics two decades ago, shortly after Rome established 20 semi-autonomous regional governments throughout the country. Putnam was curious to discover why some of these governments were faring better than others. Now, 20 years later, his conclusions resonate with implications that extend far beyond the Italian peninsula.

Although the formal structure of all the regional governments is identical, their performances are anything but. Those in northern Italy work far better than those in the south. Why? Putnam puts forward many plausible explana-

tions, including economic development, the extent of higher education, and the level of urbanization. He rejects each in turn as insufficient. Differences in performance, he finds, are most closely correlated to the degree of civic involvement. And, surprisingly, that correlation depends on traditions of civic consciousness and civic practices that have endured for a thousand years.

In the 11th century, the north and the south of Italy set out on divergent paths of development. In the north, communal republics such as Florence and Bologna addressed their public needs through collaboration among citizens. Civic groups—trade guilds, neighborhood associations, parishes whose members swore oaths of mutual assistance—extended horizontally through the community. In the autocratic south, by contrast, rulers in places such as Sicily strengthened feudal arrangements of fiefs, hierarchy, and dependency. These two traditions have persisted for a millennium, through plague and war and technological advance. Unlike southern politics, which too often produced isolation, suspicion, and economic stagnation, northern politics fostered civic engagement and successful cooperation—“social capital,” as Putnam calls it. It is this capital, he argues, accumulated over time, that makes democracy work.

Does the Italian south hold lessons for the Third World and the former communist lands as they move uncertainly toward self-government? Putnam thinks so. “Palermo,” he writes of the Sicilian capital locked in its spiral of inefficiency, stagnation, and lawlessness, “may represent the future of Moscow.” Putnam counsels against despair, however. He points out that even the least effective regional governments appear to have had some salutary effect on political life. Some readers may not be reassured. Beneath the composed professorial surface of the book, they may hear less a call to community than a half-voiced cry of surrender.

## Science & Technology

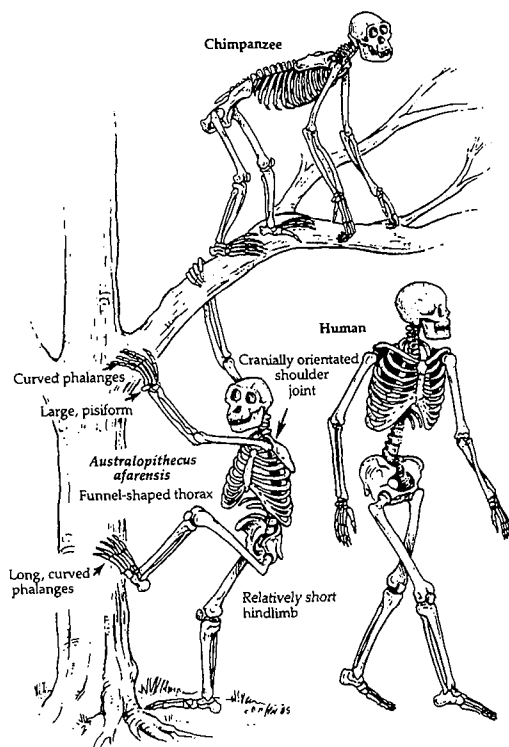
**TOUCHED WITH FIRE:** Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament. By Kay Redfield Jamison. Free Press. 370 pp. \$24.95

“We of the craft are all crazy. . . . all are more or less touched.” Thus Lord Byron on poets. Even

in his day, it was hardly a novel idea. Since antiquity, artistic creativity has been linked to “a fine madness.” But with recent advances in genetics, neuroscience, and psychopharmacology, the hard evidence is in. And the old characterization of the artistic temperament as alternating between feverish energy and darker moods is now the clinical definition of manic-depressive illness.

Even though most artists are probably not manic depressive (or vice versa), the disease is known to occur far more often among artists and their families: Byron, van Gogh, Melville, Burns, Coleridge, and Virginia Woolf all had manic depression running through their family histories. Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Medical School and co-author of the standard text *Manic-Depressive Illness*, notes that science may soon identify the exact gene or combination of genes responsible for the illness. Yet every advance in medical knowledge creates thorny ethical issues. Although Jamison endorses medical treatment—indeed, treating manic depression psychiatrically without medication would generally be considered malpractice—she recognizes that drugs such as lithium, valproate, and carbamazepine often leave artists





with a dispirited blandness and no desire to write, paint, or compose. Many artists have responded as did the painter Edvard Munch, who resisted medical treatment when he was hospitalized for psychiatric illness: "It would destroy my art," he insisted. "I want to keep those sufferings."

Along with the promise of newer medicines that may eliminate the worst side effects is the prospect that, by the year 2000, there may be prenatal testing for the manic-depressive gene—and the possibility of aborting a fetus at high risk for the disease. Twenty years ago, in his psychiatric study of Edgar Allan Poe, John Robertson asked, "Who could, or would, breed for . . . a club-footed Byron, a scrofulous Keats, or a soul-obsessed Poe?" Such idle speculations, Jamison writes, may demand real decisions tomorrow.

**ORIGINS RECONSIDERED:** In Search of What Makes Us Human. By Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin. Doubleday. 375 pp. \$25

How far back can you trace your family tree? A

million years? Three million years? The answer you give will embroil you in the fiercest controversy in paleoanthropology today.

In *Origins Reconsidered*, Leakey, director of the Kenya Wildlife Service and a leading paleoanthropologist, has written (with science writer Lewin) an entertaining introduction to a discipline that studies early primates and, by extension, what makes us human. To explain human origins, Leakey draws on disciplines as diverse as geology, archaeology, primatology, comparative anatomy, molecular biology, and psychology. But it is clear that in his heart Leakey is a *bone man*—most at home hunkered down over a table of fossils at Kenya's Lake Turkana. There, he says, "in the arid sediments around that magnificent lake, answers were to be pieced together that went beyond the questions normally asked in science."

No point in paleoanthropology is more in contention than when to date the origins of the human race. Leakey's long-time antagonist (and one-time friend) Donald Johanson, discovered in Ethiopia a small, three-million-year-old fossil skeleton that Johanson believes is the earliest-known representative of our species. The implications Johanson drew from this skeleton (dubbed "Lucy") are, first, that all humans are descended from a single branch, and, second, that what distinguishes human beings is bipedality. Leakey, however, finds "Lucy" still too apelike, and asserts that a human Rubicon was crossed only with "Turkana boy," a 1.6-million-year-old skeleton he himself discovered in 1984. Had Turkana boy survived into adulthood, he would have stood over six feet tall, his physique molded by a life of hunting and tool use. By dating humankind's emergence from this much later specimen, Leakey can describe a human species that at its origins was less violent and characterized by cooperation and a more complex social life. "At the real beginning," he says, "was the burgeoning of compassion, morality, and conscious awareness that today we cherish as marks of humanity."

If cooperation marks the human species, one would be hard-pressed to find it among paleoanthropologists today. Recalling his entry into the field years ago, Leakey writes: "If I'd known then what bitter academic and personal

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battles lay ahead, maybe I would have dropped the whole enterprise and gone off to do something more peaceful—like being an army general.”

**HEISENBERG’S WAR:** The Secret History of the German Bomb. *By Thomas Powers. Knopf. 610 pp. \$27.50*

The great riddle of World War II is why Germany never developed an atomic bomb. The physicists who fled from Nazi Europe—Niels Bohr, Hans Bethe, Leo Szilard, Robert Oppenheimer—warned American authorities that Germany lacked nothing necessary for developing nuclear power. Besides being the birthplace of modern physics, Germany had ample stores of uranium seized from Czechoslovakia. It also had a Führer who would find such a destructive bomb appealing. Most important, it had Werner Heisenberg—winner of the Nobel Prize, discoverer of the uncertainty principle in physics, and the scientist most capable of single-handedly engineering such a bomb. Fear of Heisenberg fueled the U.S. Manhattan Project in its furious race to beat Germany to the bomb. Yet when Americans scoured German military installations after the war, they discovered to their astonishment only a small research reactor, hardly even the first step toward an atom bomb.

We are now in a better position to understand this puzzle. After the war, Heisenberg and other German scientists were interned in England near Cambridge, where hidden electronic devices recorded their conversations. From recently released transcripts, Powers, a

Pulitzer Prize-winning authority on American intelligence agencies, has pieced together a version of the story. The principle reason Germany did not develop the bomb—and the hero of Powers’s story—is Heisenberg himself. Simply stated, he was afraid to give Hitler such a potentially decisive weapon. Heisenberg said he “falsified the mathematics in order to avoid development of the atom bomb.” “Heisenberg had the luxury and the burden of choice,” Powers writes, “since no one could challenge him with anything weightier than a contrary opinion.” Heisenberg’s scrupulous conscience, in Powers’s narrative, almost puts to shame the physicists of the Manhattan Project, who were largely untroubled by the terrible bomb they were building.

But a closer reading of Powers’s materials reveals a more ambiguous story. After the war it was clearly in Heisenberg’s interest to exaggerate his opposition, yet during the war he at times expressed his hope for a German victory. Fritz Houtermans, a Heisenberg confidant, in 1941 leaked a message to American scientists, warning that “Heisenberg will not be able to withstand longer the pressure from the government . . . [for] making of the bomb.” But the German government oddly never applied that pressure—in part because Hitler expected too swift a victory to justify the long-term research and expense. Heisenberg’s luxury was, in fact, that of a Hamlet, indecisive, wavering, his conscience never put to the test. Fortunately for the Allies, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle extended beyond matters of physics.



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# POETRY

C . P . C A V A F Y

*Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky*

Poetry as we know it today—that is, its main genres of short lyric, elegy, pastoral, narrative, or didactic poem—was born around the third century B.C. in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. So was, some 2,000 years later, one of the greatest poets of our century, Constantinos Phanariotis Cavafis, or C. P. Cavafy, as his name is rendered in English.

Some 2,000 years ago Alexandria—founded by Alexander the Great, conqueror of all that became known as the Hellenistic world—was that world's pre-eminent city. Apart from being the seat of power of the ruling Ptolemies, it was the locus of the spiritual, cultural, and scientific life of the entire Hellenistic world, stretching from Egypt to India and from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D. What held together a world so large for so long was not troops but *Magna Lingua Graecae*—the great Greek language. Strictly speaking, the Hellenistic empire was a cultural rather than a political reality.

Compared to the epic and drama of the so-called archaic and classical periods of Greek history, the literature of the Hellenistic period dealt in relatively small forms. However, as is the case with every evolution, the smallness was the smallness of compression and condensation. The net result of such a process is an extraordinary intensity and durability.

Something similar, although in a far more diverse manner, occurred in the spiritual make-up of the Hellenistic world, as its polytheist metaphysics was pared down to philosophy. Always a marketplace of ideas, Alexandria by the first century B.C. was a virtual county fair of creeds, cults, doctrines, and faiths. Translated into social terms, polytheism meant tolerance.

That could not last. Politically, the curtain fell upon Alexandria when the Hellenistic empires were supplanted by the Romans. Spiritually and culturally, the end came when Rome herself went monotheistic, i.e. Christian. Alexandria died and lay buried. Until 1864, that is, when the wife of a well-to-do merchant in that city gave birth to her ninth child. He was christened Constantinos.

The name suits the poet remarkably well. There is perhaps no better word to describe the mode of his existence and his thematic concerns than constancy. He lived most of his life in the same city, held the same job (at the Egyptian Ministry of Irrigation), and, in his poems, addressed the same subjects. One might be tempted to suggest that he had only two subjects: the past of Alexandria, and his own. On closer inspection, they may amount to the same thing.

Cavafy called himself a "historical poet." This means, for one, that he identified completely with the place of his birth, with its place in history, and with its insignificant, indeed shabby, present. Alexandria and its Hellenistic realm (the eastern Mediterranean in particular) were for him what Yoknapatawpha

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County was for Faulkner, Dublin for Joyce, New England for Robert Frost. He knew everyone and everything that had transpired there between 300 B.C. and, say, A.D. 600 thoroughly. Characters and events of that period—and not the most illustrious among them—were what the bulk of his poems addressed. However, Cavafy is not a poet of the heroic past, of the Greek cultural patrimony. As one of his critics aptly remarked, it is impossible to put his poems into high-school textbooks. The trouble is not so much his subject matter (although I imagine it is that, too) but his tonality.

For Cavafy was a historical poet not in the thematic or factual sense only. The term “historical” in his case has to do, above all, with his diction. This calls for some explanation.

**V**irtually every poet in this century appears to be extremely concerned with the possible existence of some sardonic reader who just might smirk and scowl at the poet’s raptures and reveries. Every poet therefore tries to forge a diction that will shield him from the charge of emotionalism.

There are several strategies available here. The common one is the use of irony. By poking fun at oneself, a poet, as it were, pulls the rug from under his critic’s feet. That, however, is dangerous, because irony is a reductive metaphor: It wins you laughs but lowers your plane of regard. The next time you want to produce an epiphany (not to mention obtain a revelation), you have to start your climbing upward from the rung the laughs you won have lowered you to. Plenty of good poets have driven themselves into the ground with their sense of humor.

The other option is objectivity. It is awfully hard to forge, still harder to sustain. Inclined that way, a poet often borrows terminology and pitch from either science or medicine. In the end, though, dispassionate or clinical diction bores the readers just the same, for they justly take it either for posturing or another kind of rhetoric.

Cavafy, I believe, made a discovery. His reading of chronicles, annals, ancient authors, and inscriptions gave him not only an idea of tonality but the realization that whether a man reviews the past of his nation or of himself, he uses the same mental faculty, he applies the same prism. Hence, his poems dealing with the history of Alexandria and the Hellenistic realm have the poignancy and intensity of intimate self-scrutiny. Likewise his intimate, personal works addressing the vicissitudes of homoerotic love display, for all their autobiographical nature, the detachment of a historian.

His was a highly uneventful life. He never, for instance, published a book of his poetry in his lifetime. He circulated his poems in the form of pamphlets or broadsides among those few whose judgment he was prepared to reckon with. It appears as though he had no ambition or was very finicky. But, then, he may have been right. Few things are less palatable than praise from an inferior intelligence.

Perhaps the same goes for criticism. Shortly after his death in 1933, a prominent critic reviewing the first edition of Cavafy’s work likened his poems to pedestals with the statues gone. That had to do, I imagine, with the fact that Cavafy’s poems are indeed stripped of any poetic paraphernalia;

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there is nothing ornate about them, nothing visually stimulating or metaphorically striking. He uses the simplest epithets, such as "beautiful," "young," "good"; the same goes for verbs and nouns.

Yet an expression like "beautiful face" invites the reader to use his own imagination, to fashion that face according to his own notion of beauty. In other words, the poems result in their reader's complicity. A statue on the pedestal confines your imagination to its features; its absence awakens your imagination and makes you build it. This way, Cavafy's Alexandria becomes your own.

One of Cavafy's favorite themes was the tug-of-war that took place between the culture of Greek polytheism and Christian monotheism during the first six centuries of our era. To Cavafy, that period's main hero is the Emperor Julian, known as the Aposate, who, having ascended to the throne as a Christian, tried to return his empire to polytheism. There are about half a dozen poems about him in Cavafy's corpus, as well as many others treating in an absolutely remarkable fashion the fateful choice that humanity believed it had to make at that time.

What our poet from Alexandria shows us some 2,000 years later is that the choice was unnecessary. That man's metaphysical potential was (and is) substantial enough to accommodate or fuse two systems of belief. That by making that choice, humanity hopelessly robbed itself of enormous riches to which it was entitled.

In a world splitting more and more at its ecclesiastical and ethnic seams, there is hardly a better cure for the vulgarity of the human heart than the voice of this poet from Alexandria promising a better civilization, still available.

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### Ionic

That we've broken their statues,  
that we've driven them out of their temples,  
doesn't mean at all that the gods are dead.  
O land of Ionia, they're still in love with you,  
their souls still keep your memory.  
When an August dawn wakes over you,  
your atmosphere is potent with their life,  
and sometimes a young ethereal figure,  
indistinct, in rapid flight,  
wings across your hills.

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## Waiting for the Barbarians

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?  
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.  
What laws can the senators make now?  
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,  
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate  
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.  
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,  
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today  
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?  
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,  
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?  
Why are they carrying elegant canes  
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual  
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?  
(How serious people's faces have become.)  
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,  
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.  
And some who have just returned from the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

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## Thermopylae

Honor to those who in the life they lead  
define and guard a Thermopylae.  
Never betraying what is right,  
consistent and just in all they do  
but showing pity also, and compassion;  
generous when they are rich, and when they are poor,  
still generous in small ways,  
still helping as much as they can;  
always speaking the truth,  
yet without hating those who lie.

And even more honor is due to them  
when they foresee (as many do foresee)  
that in the end Ephialtis will make his appearance,  
that the Medes will break through after all.

## Kaisarion

Partly to throw light on a certain period,  
partly to kill an hour or two,  
last night I picked up and read  
a volume of inscriptions about the Ptolemies.  
The lavish praise and flattery are much the same  
for each of them. All are brilliant,  
glorious, mighty, benevolent;  
everything they undertake is full of wisdom.  
As for the women of their line, the Berenices and Cleopatras,  
they too, all of them, are marvelous.

When I'd verified the facts I wanted  
I would have put the book away had not a brief  
insignificant mention of King Kaisarion  
suddenly caught my eye. . .

And there you were with your indefinable charm.  
Because we know  
so little about you from history,  
I could fashion you more freely in my mind.  
I made you good-looking and sensitive.  
My art gives your face  
a dreamy, an appealing beauty.  
And so completely did I imagine you  
that late last night,  
as my lamp went out—I let it go out on purpose—  
it seemed you came into my room,  
it seemed you stood there in front of me, looking just as you would have  
in conquered Alexandria,  
pale and weary, ideal in your grief,  
still hoping they might take pity on you,  
those scum who whispered: "Too many Caesars."

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## Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope the voyage is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.  
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,  
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:  
you'll never find things like that on your way  
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,  
as long as a rare excitement  
stirs your spirit and your body.  
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,  
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them  
unless you bring them along inside your soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope the voyage is a long one.  
May there be many a summer morning when,  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you come into harbors seen for the first time;  
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
to buy fine things,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
sensual perfume of every kind—  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
and may you visit many Egyptian cities  
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

## A Byzantine Nobleman in Exile Composing Verses

The frivolous can call me frivolous.  
I've always been most punctilious about  
important things. And I insist  
that no one knows better than I do  
the Holy Fathers, or the Scriptures, or the Canons of the Councils.

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Whenever he was in doubt,  
whenever he had any ecclesiastical problem,  
Botaniatis consulted me, me first of all.  
But exiled here (may she be cursed, that viper  
Irimi Doukaina), and incredibly bored,  
it is not altogether unfitting to amuse myself  
writing six- and eight-line verses,  
to amuse myself poeticizing myths  
of Hermes and Apollo and Dionysos,  
or the heroes of Thessaly and the Peloponnese;  
and to compose the most strict iambics,  
such as—if you'll allow me to say so—  
the intellectuals of Constantinople don't know how to compose.  
It may be just this strictness that provokes their disapproval.

### The Bandaged Shoulder

He said he'd hurt himself against a wall or had fallen down.  
But there was probably some other reason  
for the wounded, the bandaged shoulder.

Because of a rather abrupt gesture,  
as he reached for a shelf to bring down  
some photographs he wanted to look at,  
the bandage came undone and a little blood ran.

I did it up again, taking my time  
over the binding; he wasn't in pain  
and I liked looking at the blood.  
It was a thing of my love, that blood.

When he left, I found, in front of his chair,  
a bloody rag, part of the dressing,  
a rag to be thrown straight into the garbage;  
and I put it to my lips  
and kept it there a long while—  
the blood of love against my lips.

### One of Their Gods

When one of them moved through the marketplace of Selekia  
just as it was getting dark—  
moved like a young man, tall, extremely handsome,  
with the joy of being immortal in his eyes,  
with his black and perfumed hair—  
the people going by would gaze at him,  
and one would ask the other if he knew him,

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if he was a Greek from Syria, or a stranger.  
But some who looked more carefully  
would understand and step aside;  
and as he disappeared under the arcades,  
among the shadows and the evening lights,  
going toward the quarter that lives  
only at night, with orgies and debauchery,  
with every kind of intoxication and desire,  
they would wonder which of Them it could be,  
and for what suspicious pleasure  
he had come down into the streets of the Selekia  
from the August Celestial Mansions.

### The God Abandons Antony

When suddenly, at midnight, you hear  
an invisible procession going by  
with exquisite music, voices,  
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,  
work gone wrong, your plans  
all proving deceptive—don't mourn them uselessly.  
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,  
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.  
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say  
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:  
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.  
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,  
as is right for you who were given this kind of city,  
go firmly to the window  
and listen with deep emotion, but not  
with the whining, the pleas of a coward;  
listen—your final delectation—to the voices,  
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,  
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

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