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# LIFESTYLE

*One measure of a word's currency is the frequency of its misuse. Now even historians talk about the "lifestyles" of Roman citizens and medieval peasants. Such anachronistic uses betray ignorance of the unique cultural conditions that gave birth to the word. Robert Erwin here recalls its proper provenance.*

BY ROBERT ERWIN

Once the Americans had backed into independence by demanding their rights as Englishmen, what next? No one supposed they were immune to the universal passions distinguished by Kant: for possession, for power, and for honor. To fend off anarchy and sustain a workable society they would have to govern and ration those passions, in the process evolving cultural norms that even those who did not benefit immediately or equally would abide by.

Many foreigners and a fair number of ultrafederalists did not see how this could be done without the equivalent of nobility as a social principle. Long live King George (Washington)! Nobility, after all, had been the linchpin of social order in Europe for 1,000 years. It specified rules for membership in the ruling class, designated responsibility by custom and statute, and allocated control over weapons, resources, and symbols. Holiness rivaled nobility in cultural prestige, but the highborn had privileged access to the church. To justify its position, moreover, the aristocracy conscripted language, loading the word *noble* with positive moral connotations. Intermittently at least, Europeans of all classes acceded to a cultural strategy whereby the few lived well for the many.

By the time Tocqueville came to inspect America in 1831, it was obvious that the Founding Fathers who rejected hereditary titles and official churches had read American conditions and modern conditions astutely. The commercial value of property outweighed "domain," and commercial activity in general—commodities, transport, technology, industry—propelled the society. Titles of nobility would have brought civil war instead of order. Government needed functionaries and partisans, not retainers. Instead of dwelling on novelty as such or on the absence of old ways, Tocqueville was interested in how the social system actually functioned. Although American patterns might be peculiar by comparison with historical and world standards, they were, he thought, just as definite as any others. People learned norms while growing up or settling in as immigrants; they held values in common; they regulated social transactions accordingly.

One thing Tocqueville discovered was that Americans believed in the possibility and desirability of starting over. Move to a different part of the country, take up a new occupation, begin another family, break old habits and acquire new ones, become best friends with strangers. Besides the ups and downs of wealth and status intrinsic to a

commercially frenetic society, in addition to the whirl of fashion and elections, on top of the itch to build new towns and tear up old neighborhoods, they believed on principle that the past could be disregarded and that individuals had a right to redirect their lives.

Over the years, this faith in starting over from scratch has fascinated America-watchers. "The stuff of self-improvement manuals generation after generation," writes Frances FitzGerald in *Cities on a Hill*, "is a major theme in American literature." Attitudes toward this trait differ sharply among the reflective. Someone from a country chewed up by history—a hell of prisons and massacres or a decaying society that has carried certain values to exhaustion—might scorn American naiveté and self-indulgence. Yet someone else from the same kind of place might rejoice that at least one lucky nation had preserved its innocence so long. One school of social critics might associate starting over with the loneliness, superficiality, and incoherence of American life. Other social critics might point out in good humor that many so-called changes were simply more of the same, grounded as always in human nature. (The student who dominated the radical caucus continues as the lawyer hell-bent on becoming a partner in the firm.) The especially optimistic and tolerant might hail the latitude to start over as freedom not available in hidebound societies. Still other observers might be struck by paradoxes—a tradition of the new, unanimous individualism. Whatever the attitude, the fact is not in dispute. Americans, and to a lesser extent people in all highly industrialized societies, tend to

believe they can shuck off the past and make new lives.

**D**uring the 1970s, a word came into common use that perfectly encapsulates this cultural assumption and the social patterns related to it. *Lifestyle* is the word. It was a brave word at first, hinting at rich possibilities, a broad view of human development and the life course, an order that fulfilled rather than constricted. Unfortu-



"Haven't we met in a previous life style?"

nately, however, journalists, salesmen, and pop psychologists trivialized it even more rapidly than usual. Lifestyle already stands mostly for the section of the newspaper that runs recipes for pumpkin mousse and tips on buying a futon. It sets a pseudoclassy tone when movie actresses on talk shows reveal that they own a dog. Encouraged by an interviewer to think big, a doctor in Boston recently recommended "lifestyle changes such as . . . seatbelt use."

In the short interval before it was trivialized, lifestyle sounded more impressive

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than older terms from the same cultural cluster—terms such as *moving on* and *self-help*. People who could barely count change from a five-dollar bill had fantasies of designing and redesigning their precious selves as Picasso would approach a blank canvas. Partly, the pretentiousness of the word resulted from rhetorical battles of the times in which it came into use. But partly it reflected the decline of a countervailing norm that had set limits to the idea of styling oneself.

**I**n place of the hereditary rank they refused to tolerate, Americans at the outset installed respectability as a social anchor. It held in check notions of starting over and anything goes. Achievement and character across class, occupation, gender, and ethnic identity were measured by respectability for two centuries. It lasted as a norm through industrialization, depression, and war.

The generation that came of age about the same time as lifestyle probably cannot fathom the hold respectability once had on the whole society. The better-educated and more affluent members of that generation are used to a portfolio mode of culture. Sell migrant workers and buy the homeless. Keep an eye on the greenhouse effect for potential growth in the environmental sector. As safe investments with a steady yield, beer and exercise are dependable. College degrees are down slightly. The only widely shared conception of the common good now is sufficient order and support so that trading may continue. Poorer members of the same generation are necessarily more limited in their options, but they make numerous choices in a volatile market too. Should they dye their hair blue or orange? Should they go for a continuance or a plea bargain?

By the time Elliott Gould, smiling sweetly and wearing a ratty football jersey, was allowed to tell a national television audience that he was glad to host "Saturday Night Live" because the program, in his words, "has balls," a certain number of viewers were titillated, a large number could take it or leave it, and those who were offended had a subconscious suspicion they might be cranks. Just a few years earlier Richard Nixon, villainous and squirrely as they come, had stuck his neck out 10 times farther than Elliott Gould; but he was older, and he by god wore a suit, pressed and buttoned, even to board a private airplane. Millions upon millions of decent citizens, beside themselves with anger, fright, and shame, would have been ready to join a lynching party had Gould broken the taboo in 1860 or 1960.

To reinforce the point, against Gould's show biz effervescence can be set a humorless passage from the "Judgment Day" section of James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*, received as incendiary realism when it was published in the 1930s. In this scene a housewife with a baby is about to take on four strangers for \$2.50 each to recoup the grocery money she lost to a bookie. When Studs draws high card for first turn with her and one of the others says, "Leave a little for us," she becomes indignant. "This is my house," she snaps. "Get out if you're going to talk lewd." As the example suggests, respectability extended far beyond the bourgeoisie. Forty years after Studs's fictional lesson in etiquette, the historian Tamara Hareven interviewed former workers at the Amoskeag mill in New Hampshire, in its day the largest textile plant in the world under one roof. Virtually every one of them avoided "off-color" talk, though these men and women left school early and were poor all their lives.

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*Robert Erwin, a writer and former director of the University of Pennsylvania Press, is the author of The Current Language Panic and Other Essays in Cultural History. Copyright © 1990 by Robert Erwin.*

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Of course, youngsters did learn the underground language by hook or by crook. Taboos have to do with the forbidden, not necessarily with the unknown. Some of them, on the sly, managed a passable imitation of the toughest kid in town, destined to go directly from grammar school to prison. The boys often encountered an authority—a straw boss, a coach—who used rough language that impressed them. Later, facility in the other language might come in handy for coping with or surviving among troops, laborers, tenants. Going to bars, rooms, brothels, pool halls, and cooch shows meant having your cake and eating it too: upholding the norm by breaking taboos in a place prescribed for that purpose. Usually by a more subterranean route girls arrived at an equivalent “secret” knowledge, though in some ways a worse state of duplicity.

It would be a great mistake to shrug respectability off as antiquated taste, hypocrisy, and squeamishness. As industrialization proceeded, roles multiplied, population grew, and science put custom into question, something was needed to encourage compliance among segmented, atomized citizens. For stratified democracies and administered authoritarian states, respectability filled the bill. It suited conditions. It worked.

To spend one’s life laying trolley track or packing mothballs did not preclude wearing a starched collar on Sunday and subscribing nominally to “clean living, proper behavior.” Such behavior could be demanded by the eminently respectable from the barely respectable, or it could be rewarded with token esteem. (Address the washerwoman as “Mrs.” and share her disapproval of spitting.) According to current needs for cheap labor, dirty work, scapegoats, and disenfranchisement, the line could be redrawn expediently at the bottom, denial of respectability justifying discrimination

practiced against minorities, immigrants, and subjugated peoples.

In societies composed largely of peasants and artisans, any deliberate departure from pomp had been a manifestation of privilege by other means. This was obvious when ladies of the French court played at being milkmaids or when English peers paraded in public “drunk as lords.” As Sartre pointed out, when Saint Francis handed back his clothes to the well-to-do father who had paid for them, the gesture was a moral luxury. The majority around him had no choice but to go ragged and dirty. As per capita income rose and the number of “things” commonly owned increased in industrial societies, downward departures took on a different meaning. In their way—with pearl stickpins, donations to the church, and the like—even hustlers, gangsters, and fixers followed the code of respectability. Out-groups such as Gypsies and circus performers, as well as occupational groups remote from centers of respectability (such as cowboys, loggers, and sailors) were clearly exceptions, rare and exotic. By the same token, however, it was now easy to make dissident gestures against respectability.

Bohemians, on the whole sufficiently educated and sufficiently employable for respectability had they the inclination, in fact made an issue of rejecting it in the conviction that they knew better than respectables how to live. They ranked themselves as aristocrats of the spirit, the elite few with intellect, imagination, taste, and moral courage. Sometimes aestheticism swayed bohemia. The cultivated dandy appeared more debonair, witty, knowing, and, above all, interesting than any solid citizen. At other times, antimaterialism dominated bohemia. Dull respectables who cared about napkin rings and baths were ridiculed and despised. At still other times, a “wild” mode ruled bohemia—drugs, outlandish costumes and couplings, links with

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the underclass, living on the edge.

**F**or a long while a stand-off prevailed. On the one hand, enclaves opposed to or opposed by the respectable were often cordoned off—bohemian quarters, shantytowns, red-light districts, and the like. News from the forbidden zone reached ordinary people largely through stereotypes supplied by journalists, dramatists, politicians, and do-gooders—stereotypes of longhaired artists, bomb-throwing reds, Wild West outlaws, scarlet actresses, and rascally sporting men. Sustained, deliberate counter-respectability rarely presented itself in the barnyard, the mill, the shop, the school, or the social call. On the other hand, crossing the line for pleasure or profit was not too difficult. Novelists did it. The police did it. Real estate operators did it. Dance halls and casinos lay close to the border. A majority accepted respectability in principle and upheld it or cheated as circumstances dictated. With the cooperation of his sisters and servants, Emily Dickinson's brother, a prominent lawyer and treasurer of Amherst College, managed discreet trysts in the family dining room, which had a large fireplace and a stout door. From roughly World War I forward, furthermore, a resourceful speakeasy mentality helped preserve the stand-off. The cocktail party, the smart set, and café society accommodated "nice" people. Blues became "entertainment." The mass media upgraded notoriety to celebrity. True, psychoanalysis showed respectability in an ambiguous light. Revolutions, anticolonial movements, and totalitarianism shook the whole world, and economic depression and another cataclysmic war hit the United States directly. Nevertheless, a socially intelligible balance held through the 1940s and 1950s. Mom and Apple Pie, God and Property continued to receive their due. Cultural instructions remained clear: Get a haircut, be on time, carry proper identification. Yet room was left to

relax—to become temporarily a watered-down Rimbaud, make-believe hoodlum, or attenuated carnival dancer—without losing the thread. It was believed—indeed hoped—that movie stars had orgies galore, preferably on bearskin rugs. The few should live licentiously for the many. But the stars were expected to support the Code of Decency by day and pull the shades at night.

In short, respectability was a strong norm. It had stamina, manipulative power, coherence, and flexibility. And it is not dead yet. A "respectable" way to behave endures, fuzzy and precarious, residually enforceable at law, more or less adhered to by the executive class and the old blue-collar class, deeply ingrained in many families. Numerous "mature" men would still be mortified to appear sockless in public, and numerous women would feel disgraced by a loud belch. By the 1980s, however, respectability was simply a prominent norm in a boutique of norms. No explosion occurred if someone attended the symphony in jungle pants or showed up wearing a "gay" earring to sign a mortgage. People said *lifestyle* without a second thought.

**J**ust as real wars frequently end with both sides worse off than they were before, so lifestyle is the uncomfortable and in the long run probably untenable outcome of the cultural wars of the 1960s and 1970s. Relatively disorganized, formerly unrecognized groups in that period learned to use nonconformity to wage politics. Countercultural presence was shaped to make demands: stop the war, jobs for blacks, power to sisterhood. Rather quickly, cultural politics became an issue in itself. For a brief time one could call the Beatles lower-class deformed (as Malcolm Muggeridge did) with only music in mind. Soon those became fighting words. Respectables were held responsible for induced poverty, racism and sexism, stifling routines and alienating work, for

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police brutality, a vile war in Vietnam, and piling nuclear weapons on each other 50 times over, for shoddy goods, phony sentiments, and crooked deals, for miseducation and the destruction of the environment—in short, for the worst of human nature and an intrinsically defective way of life. As this message registered, a great many old believers felt equally hostile and betrayed. Respectability had been painfully drilled into them, they had mastered the whole complicated code and strained to live up to it, and suddenly a crowd of young nobodies, pointy-headed intellectuals, and “agitators” seized the cultural initiative. As they saw it, respectability was being sold out for nothing worth having—drugs, shoplifting, herpes simplex, a rising rate of youthful suicide, and weakness in the face of a Red Peril and a Yellow Peril. Aside from damage done in the famous campus “disruptions,” some serious force was used by both sides. The Weathermen, for example, broke windows and beat up professors, and urban rioters torched their own neighborhoods. National Guardsmen gunned down students at Kent State, and police in Berkeley blinded a painter with shotgun fire during the Battle of the People’s Park. Symbolism was the common weapon, though. On the one side, students with draft deferments and job prospects burned the flag. Movie actresses—of the type who previously sanctified the status quo by stepping out of limousines in sheath dresses under blue and rose spotlights—appeared with kinky hair, breasts dangling under worn T-shirts. Young ministers offered public prayers for Patty Hearst and her “associates” in the spirit of cheerleaders. On the other side, negotiating and conceding details of respectability so as to guard more important levers of power, the established order cranked out new merchandise: rolling papers, water beds, tape decks, mountaineer packs, socially significant overalls. Rules were dropped, and ways were found to loosen up at a safe distance from hippies, radicals, and

poor people. Off with the white shirts, you swinging dentists of Cherry Hill. On with the double knits and the psychedelic ties a yard wide (in what clothing manufacturers around 1970 called the Peacock Revolution). Hoist skirts and tighten jeans across the butt. Put on the gold chains of a good-doing pimp and his teenage whore. Pass for a hip comedian, a centerfold sexpot, a person who sings at Mafia hotels. In the end the result of the cultural battling and of the dispersion of the counterculture was a social type nobody liked: yuppies. Those who grew up under respectability but were critical of it and hoped attacks on it would lead to a freer, happier, more just society saw their movement trivialized and half-forgotten. Those who defended respectability and hoped for full restoration found themselves living in a cultural boutique among institutions of impaired legitimacy.

**D**efective institutions such as the multiversity persist. To them have been added greater national inequality and idiotic policies such as prosperity through debt. Non sequiturs are now the staff of life: commodities trading Monday through Friday and gathering wild foods on the weekend; gay liberation and campaigning to return to the mass in Latin; computer programming to produce astrological charts; save the whales and serve sashimi. With all the jogging and hopping and weightlifting, whole neighborhoods have been changed into giant track-and-field events, and yet at home the “athletes” use remote control buttons to change TV channels. Respectability has become an option, part of a jumbled social landscape through which individuals thread their way according to whim and circumstance. The Four-H club need never confront the meditation society, and neither need confront the single parents’ group. Roles coexist and succeed each other without adding up.

Among those old enough to view the

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lifestyle era as a phase, attitudes differ. Some resist, holding on as tightly as possible to what they were comfortable with in the first place—respectability or principled opposition to respectability. They assume the storm will pass, and afterwards an equilibrium such as they remember between social stability and the urge to start over will re-emerge.

Doubtful. The adulteration of the counterculture is not to be taken lightly. Now the future is partly in the hands of someone to whom lifestyle is not just a catchword. Farrell's horse-playing housewife had a grandson. Barry, age 32, lives in Houston, where he works for a real-estate trust that manages shopping malls. To him lifestyle is the sea in which he swims, as it is for his sister, who stayed in Chicago and became one of the first women hired as a sales representative in the wholesale wine business. He considers himself to be a regular member of society, in that sense respectable. Yet his world tips in a different direction from that of his grandmother. He comes home at no particular hour, throws his jacket on the floor, says the day was a pisser, throws his mail on the floor, wonders whether or not to stay in, throws a towel on the floor. After a meal that may or may not be known as dinner and that could equally well include a fast-food gristleburger or fresh-made pesto, he listens inattentively to a tape by the Booger Eaters, skims an article on tax shelters, and during the late news on TV comes to a consensus with one or more people who live with him for the time being that the telephone company sucks, the weather sucks, and Somalia sucks.

History separates this man from his grandmother as evolution positions two species to receive light from different regions of the spectrum. *Don't talk lewd*. She clutched at that even while taking on the neighborhood. Respectability was the code her culture trained her to rely on, as it was the code whose infringement made her feel that the situation in which she found herself

was a crisis. Her grandson has no special talent for breaking taboos or expanding consciousness. He will not directly test the established order's capacity to deflect and absorb. He will probably wear shined shoes if he has to go to court. Yet he may be ultimately unreachable by both respectables and their traditional opponents. How much reality can he ascribe to a norm that for him has no interior?

The question of who he was in a previous existence currently interests Barry. Next year it may be kayaks. Instead of deploring and resisting this lifestyle mentality, part of the older population joins in and counts on it functioning indefinitely. It suits rejuvenation schemes and dreams. Yet their assumption, the opposite of those waiting for the storm to pass, is doubtful too.

**T**rivial productions do not necessarily have trivial results. Lifestyle clashes with certain deep-seated and more important Western ways that are still very much in force. The notion is in the air that out of countless personal preferences will somehow flow public good—pushed along by an invisible hand such as Adam Smith imagined. In a distorted way this continues a Western tradition of individualism: choice, conscience, assent, will as a faculty of self, values created rather than granted. But it is hard to think of a social configuration up to now that makes no provision for relating the individual to a cosmos and a community. How is it possible for humans to live in groups and not share values? When lives are styled in the same space, what keeps them from tangling? To say that at present we can't agree on a reason for human association in the public realm implies that explosive pressure for a new connection will build up.

For good or bad, Western culture has fostered linear thinking. It is embedded in concepts such as prime mover, cause and effect, means and ends, input and output,

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critical mass, formative stages. It is embedded in proverbs and literature and commerce and science. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. The child is father to the man. Must have successful track record. Rate of return on investment. Relative contribution of nature and nurture. It is bound to be unsettling to move daily between those assumptions and the idea that a life consists of styles that can be chosen, altered, discontinued at will, and replaced like fabrics.

Perhaps the greatest pressure for a cultural framework more settled than lifestyles arises from the strain of assembling the world from moment to moment, like walking a long distance by reinventing the step every two and a half feet. We endure and participate in a welter called experience. The categories into which we divide the welter—such as forces, conditions, stimuli, intervals, feelings, perplexities, and relationships—are not exhaustive and do not necessarily express fact or wisdom in an absolute sense.

They simply organize our experience, and thus they are largely worthless if used capriciously.

**T**he advantage of organizing experience on the biological level is clear. Every organism has a genetic program, capabilities fitted to an environment, patterned relations with others of its species, and a boundary (such as skin) to regulate inflow and outflow. Perception automatically sorts experience: focusing attention, triggering response, and enabling skills to develop.

That culture continues in this direction is obvious—economizing effort, standardizing encounters, pooling experience. But existence under the dispensation of lifestyles becomes jittery. It is exhausting to hew selves and connections over and over. It is intolerable to have to make up rules each time for each set of social transactions. If nothing else, a culture ought to provide points of reference in a whirling world.