

**NO PLACE OF GRACE:
Antimodernism and the
Transformation of American
Culture, 1880-1920**

by T. J. Jackson Lears
Pantheon, 1981
357 pp. \$18.50

A generation of revisionist scholars has demonstrated that economic and social stability was the main objective of the intellectual, corporate, and political leaders of the Progressive Era. The most significant reforms—including banking and currency reforms, new scientific management techniques, and social welfare measures—helped advance, not restrain, the consolidation of 20th-century corporate capitalism.

But if historians understand a good deal about what motivated enlightened capitalists and politicians to support the emerging economic order, they understand far less about what prompted large numbers of upper-, “new middle-,” and working-class Americans to do so. Lears, a University of Missouri historian, offers an ingenious explanation of how an assortment of essentially upper-class “antimodernist” intellectuals paved the way for social and economic changes they originally set out to resist.

In the ranks of the antimodernists, Lears includes such familiar figures as psychologist William James, critic Van Wyck Brooks, art historian Charles Eliot Norton, and author Henry Adams, along with some 60 lesser-known journalists, ministers, and academics. Earlier interpretations have treated these men and women as escapist dilettantes or as declining gentry unable to accept the challenge of new wealth. Lears suggests a more ironic process: Essentially *private* efforts to relieve anxiety and frustration produced by the erosion of Protestant and liberal values inspired these privileged intellectuals to search for “authentic experience”—for spiritual, moral, and even physical regeneration. This search had the unintended *public* consequence of shoring up the new corporate-industrial order by ennobling the individual quest for self-fulfillment—a quest that has become a central and necessary element of 20th-century consumer culture.

During the 1870s, according to Lears, American Victorians were essentially united in an optimistic faith in progress, recently reinvigorated by philosopher Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary positivism and supported by increasing material comfort. But the generation that came of age in the ’80s faced the first realities of modernization: bureaucracy, the monotony of industrial routine, an overwhelming concern for profits. Even sons and daughters of the most powerful old-line Eastern families felt they had little control over the direction of their lives. Life seemed overcivilized, lacking in vitality, and emotionally empty. The psychological strain revealed itself in a virtual epidemic of “neurasthenia” (a term coined at the time) and other debilitating neuroses.

Yearning for release, a sizable number of the Gilded Age’s “best and brightest” turned, like earlier European Romantics, to the past. Some, such as Charles Eliot Norton, following the English Arts and Crafts movement, tried to recover a sense of community and meaningful work by re-creating the hard but satisfying life of medieval artisans. Others, including historian Brooks Adams, glorified the martial values of medieval

society. Still others turned to Oriental mysticism, to cults of femininity (as Henry Adams did, with his idealization of the Virgin Mary), or to Anglo-Catholic ceremony and ritual.

Yet this quest for regeneration was ambivalent. Rebellion went only so far. In most cases, the antimodernists remained committed to the world of their fathers, with its rationality and stern ethic of achievement. The more practical elements of the Arts and Crafts movement were incorporated into vocational education (which managers hoped would be an effective means of class control), even as the movement inspired a do-it-yourself craze that captivated desk-bound businessmen. Nostalgic militarism provided intellectual justification for imperialism; not surprisingly, Teddy Roosevelt found much to praise in Brooks Adams' *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1895).

Thus adapted, these new passions eased the transition from a producer ethic of hard work and self-denial to the "therapeutic ethic" of individual growth, self-fulfillment, and gratification through intense experience. They helped revitalize and transform American culture, accommodating it to the needs of an advanced, consumer-oriented industrial society.

In addition to showing that the "therapeutic ethic" antedates the 1960s, Lears's argument has historiographical significance. His use of Freud's theories of repression and ambivalence and of Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony" (i.e., that the dominant class controls the lower classes through manipulation of cultural symbols) explains much about the motives of his subjects.

The book's flaws stem from overgeneralization. These privileged intellectuals were not the first or even the most important antimodernists. That honor should be reserved for 19th-century agrarian and working-class radicals and for authentic (mostly Southern) regionalists who clung to communal, anti-commercial values. Their persistence into the 20th century suggests the limits of ruling-class hegemony as an explanatory device.

Lears's argument cannot be extended even to most segments of the new middle class. A service ethic, faith in scientific objectivity, and marketable expertise eased many of the new class of professionals into the 20th century without paralyzing ambivalence. Middle-class managers and specialists who modernized education and social welfare had more to do with mediating and spreading corporatist values (above all, the promotion of social harmony through conservative reforms aimed at improving the "standard of living") than did elite journalists and literati.

Finally, Lears underestimates the importance of his subjects' retreat from political involvement. His subjects are less noteworthy for what they did than for what they failed to do—and more culpable. In the end, many were guilty of escapism, for failing to use their considerable influence to shape responsible political and economic institutions.

Despite these disagreements, this is a courageous, sensitive, closely argued, and important book that advances the discussion of the dynamics of modernization to a new level.

—Mary O. Furner