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PEOPLE OF PARADOX

An Inquiry concerning the Origins of American Civilization

Michael Kammen

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bivalence gave way to confusion, anxiety, and hostility. They became, in Morton White's phrase, "ambivalent urbanites." The tranquillity of nature, the unorganized space of uninhabited land, were admirable, to be sure. But was it not the mission of America to build up the New Jerusalem and make the covenanted land flourish? "Americans paid homage to the ancient gods of solitude, while at the same time they went right on laying out the town lots and bringing in the railroad." [1]

In 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson confided to his journal: "I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children, and I wish city facility and polish. I find with chagrin that I cannot have both." That was why he had moved to Concord. "Whilst we want cities as the centers where the best things are to be found, cities degrade us by magnifying trifles." [2] Henry Adams would echo these sentiments a generation later, along with Josiah Strong: "Where men are most crowded together they are farthest apart." By the turn of the century, some Americans found the city wanting—not because it was too civilized, but because it was not civilized enough. Others, however, agreed with Mr. Dooley that "th' throuble about our farms is that they're too far fr'm our cities." [3]

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH America's years of youthful inexperience, her salad days, were drenched with a mix of oil and vinegar. In 1827, young Horace Bushnell, who became the leading native theologian of the nineteenth century, taught a student at Yale the proper technique for sharpening a razor, "drawing it from heel to point both ways," and thus making "the two cross frictions correct each other"—an excellent method, the student would discover, "for making the roughness of opposite sides contribute to a mutual fine edge."

1. Morton and Lucia White: *The Intellectual Versus the City. From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York, 1964), 13, 29–30, 71, 102, 227; Somkin: *Unquiet Eagle*, 125–6.

2. Bliss Perry, ed.: *The Heart of Emerson's Journals* (Boston, 1937), 208; E. W. Emerson, ed.: *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1903–4), VI, 153.

3. Strong: *The New Era* (New York, 1893), 187–8; *American Magazine* (Nov. 1908), 97.

CHAPTER 9

THE CONTRAPUNTAL CIVILIZATION

We have met the enemy and he is us.

Pogo

IN THIS FINAL CHAPTER I intend to look briefly at contradictory tendencies within the past generation of American history, then reflect upon our own time, and more especially upon some dominant expressions of cultural cleavage. And in conclusion I want to attempt a summary assessment; for our inheritance has indeed been bitter-sweet, and our difficulty in assessing it just now arises from the fact that American institutions have had too many uncritical lovers and too many unloving critics. We have managed to graft pride onto guilt—guilt over social injustice and abuses of power—and find that pride and guilt do not neutralize each other, but make many decisions seem questionable, motives suspect, and consciences troubled.

Perhaps so many American shibboleths seem to generate their very opposites because they are often half-truths rather than the wholesome verities we believe them to be.[1] Perhaps

1. Franklin Roosevelt made a pertinent remark to Henry Morgenthau in 1942: "You know I am a juggler, and I never let my right hand know what my left hand does. . . . I may have one policy for Europe and one diametrically opposite for North and South America. I may be entirely inconsistent, and furthermore I am perfectly willing

we ought to recall Alice in Wonderland playing croquet against herself, "for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people. 'But it's no use now,' thought poor Alice, 'to pretend to be two people! Why, there's hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person!' "

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT'S administrations provide us with an overview of the 1930's. Roosevelt the politician managed to synthesize what Erik Erikson calls "this native polarity of aristocarcy and mobocracy." As Roosevelt increased the radicalism of his rhetoric, he also augmented the conservatism of his decisions. He candidly observed in 1936 that "I am that kind of conservative because I am that kind of liberal." [2] In crucial respects, the New Deal proved to be the salvation of American capitalism; it became Roosevelt's policy, as he put it, "to energize private enterprise." Nonetheless, the New Deal's emphasis upon social planning and welfare provided creative responses to critical situations.[3]

Roosevelt's associates and subordinates were tough-minded, "anti-utopian" realists who nevertheless harbored their own vision of a Heavenly City (the greenbelt town) and an ideal

to mislead and tell untruths if it will help win the war." John M. Blum: *From the Morgenthau Diaries. Years of War, 1941–1945* (Boston, 1967), III, 197. I am indebted for this reference to my colleague, Richard Polenberg.

2. Erikson: *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed., New York, 1963), 287; Samuel I. Rosenman, comp.: *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York, 1938), V, 390.

3. Even before becoming President, FDR recognized the ambiguous expectations held by American businessmen concerning their relationship to government regulation. "For while it has been American doctrine that the government must not go into business in competition with private enterprises, still it has been traditional particularly in Republican administrations for business urgently to ask the government to put at private disposal all kinds of government assistance. The same man who tells you that he does not want to see the government interfere in business—and he means it, and has plenty of good reasons for saying so—is the first to go to Washington and ask the government for a prohibitory tariff on his product." (Commonwealth Club Address, Sept. 1932.)

polity (what David Lilienthal liked to call the "decentralized administration of centralized authority").[4] Theirs was a pragmatic utopianism, based upon the assumption that the good life would emerge from sufficient social engineering to create the enviable environment. As one observer remarked of Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's aide-de-camp, "he had the purity of St. Francis of Assisi combined with the sharp shrewdness of a race track tout."

More than any previous event in American history, the Depression of the 1930's dramatized the enormous paradox of poverty amidst abundance. To Will Rogers the country seemed to be going "to the poor-house in an automobile." No country ever had more, he cracked, "and no country ever had less. . . . Ten men in our Country could buy the World, and ten million can't buy enough to eat." [5] The irony of impoverishment in the midst of agricultural surpluses drove America's farmers to drastic action and ambivalent demands. They wanted subsidies while opposing price-fixing. They wanted to curtail production, but be paid for doing so. As one wag put it, the New Deal might solve the paradox of want in the midst of plenty by doing away with the plenty!

Americans who looked around them during the 1930's saw that the nation's magnificent productive plant was still intact, that its ability to produce was unimpaired. Scarcity, therefore, represented a queer phenomenon—the result of rich resources rather than the stinginess of nature. There were food and commodities in abundance; only purchasing power was lacking. The mass production economy had failed by succeeding too well, for

4. During the winter of 1969–70, a treatise (written by Republican William Safire) called "New Federalist Paper No. 1" was circulated among the government departments in Washington. "We like the blessings of central government," it stated, but "we also like the blessing of decentralization, or home rule. Many have spent the past year working out a synthesis of the most desirable in both central government and home rule. The purpose [of the new federalism] is to come to grips with a paradox: a need for both national unity and local diversity. The new federalists . . . are using an approach best described as 'national localism.' " *Time* (Jan. 26, 1970), 9.

5. Donald Day: *Will Rogers* (New York, 1962), 260, 265, 271.

as Christian Gauss commented, "the horn of plenty is too heavy upon our hands." [6]

The problem would persist, of course, and be "rediscovered" subsequently. A young aspirant for public office in 1946, John F. Kennedy, inscribed in his looseleaf notebook a brief quotation from Thomas Jefferson: "Widespread poverty and concentrated wealth cannot long endure side by side in a democracy." Seventeen years later Kennedy remarked in a letter to Lyndon Johnson that "poverty in the midst of plenty is a paradox that must not go unchallenged in this country." In our present age of affluence, economic abundance has reduced older norms of inequality but created new forms as well. By eliminating the traditional system of class distinctions, abundance has created a situation in which almost any social differentiation seems invidious.[7]

During the war years, with the world torn between polarized ideologies, liberalism seemed to thrive in circumstances which might well have overwhelmed it. On several occasions during the early 1940's, Carl Becker posed what then seemed to be the critical question for American democracy: How to achieve idealism without illusions and realism without cynicism. Writing in 1944, Becker enumerated the enduring dualisms of American civilization:

> Whether it has been a matter of clearing the forest or exterminating the redskins, organizing a government or exploiting it for private advantage, building railroads for the public good or rigging the market in order to milk them for private profit, establishing free schools by law or placing illegal restraints on the freedom of teaching, conferring on Negroes their God-given constitutional rights or making sure they do not vote, applauding the value of temperance or perceiving the convenience of bootlegging—whatever the immediate task may be, the short cut, the ready-made device for dealing with it, is apt to seem to us good enough so long as it gets the business done. Throughout our history ruthlessness and humane dealing, respect for law and right and disregard of them, have run side by side: in almost equal degree we have exhibited the temper of conformity and of revolt, the disposition to submit voluntarily to law and custom when they serve our purposes and to ignore them when they cease to do so.

6. Albert U. Romasco: *The Poverty of Abundance. Hoover, the Nation, the Depression* (New York, 1965), 3–9; Stuart Chase: *The Economy of Abundance* (New York, 1934); Ray F. Harvey: *Want in the Midst of Plenty. The Genesis of the Food Stamp Plan* (Washington, D.C., 1941).

7. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: *A Thousand Days. John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 105; Sidney Lens: *Poverty: America's Enduring Paradox. A History of the Richest Nation's Unwon War* (New York, 1969).

Becker, and other Americans at that time, were particularly worried by "a profoundly disturbing paradox. We seem to be offered a choice between depression and mass unemployment as the price of peace, and total war as the price of expansion and general prosperity. . . . This paradox, unless it be resolved, will surely wreck our institutions and destroy our freedoms." [8] Their concern over this dilemma in 1945 proved to be unfounded. America was just then entering a long era of sustained prosperity without having to pay the price of war—at least, not a "hot" war.

A different sort of price, however, would indeed be paid. Affluence in America meant that indications of inequality would be less visible than in Europe. Social distinctions here are not normally supported by great disparities in wealth, education, speech, or dress. Physical differences have been largely eliminated, however, without also reducing the prejudicial and cultural barriers to mobility and homogeneity. We have consequently achieved a situation of "classless inequality." We breed expectations among the less privileged but fail to fulfill them, thereby creating social tensions and personal frustrations.[9] Despite American pluralism, our political society has

8. *Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life* (New York, 1945), xlviii, 18–19.

9. See David M. Potter: *People of Plenty. Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954), 98–103, 121; Michael Harrington: *The Other America. Poverty in the United States* (New York, 1962), 12, 52.

been unable to guarantee equal protection and opportunity to ethnic minorities. Yet we pay full lip service to our democratic dogmas.

The less privileged nevertheless have had access to the "lonely crowd"—David Riesman's apt phrase for America's swollen and faceless middle class—the physical embodiment of collective individualism. Changes in the nature of "neighboring" mean that we have become "familiar strangers": a neighbor is merely someone who lives in close geographic proximity.[1] Hence the vogue of Esalen, encounter groups, and the so-called "human potential movement"—whereby people converge upon artificial settings to become "intimate strangers" for a weekend or a timeless moment removed from the monotony of their existence.

IN THE YEARS SINCE World War II, America's relationship to the wider world has been especially burdened with biformities and incongruities. Carl and Shelley Mydans have described our involvement in international affairs during the past quarter century as the era of *Violent Peace;* and Dwight Eisenhower chose to call the second volume of his presidential autobiography, *Waging Peace, 1956–1961.*[2] We stockpile atomic weapons in order to prevent a conflagration, even though doing so may actually make conflict more likely. We envision schemes of world order which bear no realistic relationship to either our dangers or our duties. The United States is now less potent to utilize its vast strength than it was half a century ago.

The American Beauty Rose must be handled with care because of its treacherous thorns. Similarly with the appearance our civilization offers to the world. To other peoples our brand of democracy has seemed attainable but not especially desirable, while our abundance has seemed infinitely desirable but not very attainable. Hence their tendency to hold us in

1. See Robin Williams: *Strangers Next Door. Ethnic Relations in American Communities* (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), 212, 386.

2. Carl and Shelley Mydans: *The Violent Peace* (New York, 1968).

"respectful contempt." Our perception of America's mission has been distorted by our failure to appreciate what outsiders regard as most significant in our development. Moreover, Americans like to envision their role in world affairs as that of umpire rather than empire; yet Third World nations regard the United States not as a referee but as a "preferee," a seeker of preferred status.

The Bald Eagle on the green side of your one dollar bill holds a clutch of deadly arrows in one clenched claw, and an olive branch in the other. Americans like to remind themselves, and others, that the United States emerged from a Revolution, an act of colonial self-emancipation. Nevertheless, they also like to emphasize that they stand for stability and order, balanced growth, constitutional procedures, and legitimacy. Americans like to speak the language of power and "talk tough," all the while stressing the need for a language of community and harmony. A form of double-entry bookkeeping seems to account for our efforts at international misunderstanding. We stress the need for nations to behave as equals, and to subordinate particular interests to the common cause of peace. At the same time, however, we insist that our very disinterestedness and worldwide responsibilities entitle us to the privilege of interpreting and vouchsafing the common good. All of these dualisms emerge from the fact, as Stanley Hoffmann believes, "that the nation's values (and leaders) point simultaneously in opposite directions. There is, in the American style, a tension between the instinct of violence and the drive for harmony."[3] Ofttimes our leaders offer nectar and napalm in the same breath, as President Johnson did in his speech on Vietnam at Johns Hopkins University in April 1965.

I cannot accept the convention that America's identity simply developed and persisted in opposition to the evils and *persona* of Europe. The United States was born of Old World arrogance—perhaps it all began when Columbus persuaded

3. Stanley Hoffmann: *Gulliver's Troubles, Or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1968), 109, 112, 177–81, 185, 187–8, 190–1.

Ferdinand and Isabella that he could get East by sailing West —but bred in New World isolation and ignorance. We owe to Europe aspects of our religion, our common law, our ideal of constitutionalism; but also our dread of aristocracy, feudalism, monopoly, and communism. Consequently, we are both attracted to and wary of Europe, and subsequently suspicious of the world at large beyond the shrunken Europe of today.[4]

This dualistic state of mind may be found also in the domestic political values subscribed to by most Americans. We are comfortable believing in both majority rule and minority rights, in both consensus and freedom, federalism and centralization. It may be perfectly reasonable to support majority rule with reservations, or minority rights with certain other reservations. But this has not been our method. Rather, we have tended to hold contradictory ideas in suspension and ignore the intellectual and behavioral consequences of such "doublethink." The Congress, perhaps more than any other political institution, is a repository of American ambivalence. The founders created a bicameral body so that it would expressly embrace contradictions. The House was dedicated to the proposition of majority rule, and the Senate to the sacredness of minority rights.[5]

There is, certainly, a sense in which Americans are still obsessed with legalism and legitimacy.[6] Few countries have ever assigned to courts the powers we have given them: the judge is a particularly respected citizen; and we venerate constitutions. How, then, explain the pervasive American penchant

4. Cf. Daniel Boorstin: *America and the Image of Europe. Reflections on American Thought* (Cleveland, 1960), 11–12, 36, 46.

5. See the brilliant essay by Robert G. McCloskey: "The American Ideology," in *Continuing Crisis in American Politics*, ed. Marian D. Irish (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), esp. 14–23.

6. In 1970, in a well-publicized memorandum to the President, Daniel Patrick Moynihan said: "In one form or another, all of the major domestic problems facing you derive from the erosion of the authority of the institutions of American society. . . . All we know is that the sense of institutions being legitimate—especially the institutions of government—is the glue that holds societies together. When it weakens, things come unstuck."

for lawlessness? In part because we legitimize our lawlessness. Citizens of the United States can understand and even condone what Tammany boss George Washington Plunkitt liked to call "honest graft." Plunkitt was referring to financial benefits which came to entrepreneurial hustlers at no extra cost to the public. Every city must buy insurance and deposit its funds in banks. The premiums charged or the interest paid are usually uniform. Often they are set by law. It makes no difference to the city, therefore, which company gets the business; but it makes an enormous difference to particular companies—so much so that they are willing to pay something extra to get it: either in the form of cash, or by putting a key politician on its board, or by hiring him as its "lawyer."[7]

There is both integrity and intrigue in American politics. That is why we believe that our government is weak, stupid, overbearing, dishonest, and inefficient, and also believe it to be the best in the world and would like to offer it to others. Cleveland, Ohio, has an air pollution code which is most commonly violated by the city's own municipal utilities, especially the electric and gas corporation. The author of *Rights in Conflict*, a report on violence in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention of 1968, became convinced of the occurrence of what could only be called a "police riot," or lawless law enforcement. The searching question raised by that report, moreover, asked how the United States can "keep peaceful assembly from becoming a contradiction in terms?"[8] Given the deterioration of respect for government and politics in the United States, is it any wonder that tactics of "planned irresponsibility" (sit-ins, etc.) have become standard fare since the 1960's?

Why should it be so? In part because of the ironies of American technology. Poor people are victimized by the very inventions and machines which improve standards of living for

7. James Q. Wilson: "Corruption Is Not Always Scandalous," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 28, 1968, 54–62; Oscar Handlin: *Al Smith and His America* (Boston, 1958), 22, 35.

8. *The New York Times*, Dec. 2, 1968, 38.

the rest of society. Traditional "Negro jobs" are being destroyed by automation, and unskilled middle-aged workers find themselves "too old to work, too young to retire." In rural America, mechanization has helped to increase the class of "property-owning poor." As larger units of production become ever more efficient and modern, small farmers fall farther and farther behind. In addition, the welfare state seems to benefit least those who need help most. The poorest farmers, for example, are excluded from parity programs. Union fringe benefits, such as pension systems, restrict the mobility so badly needed when an area or an industry become depressed. The basic paradox of the welfare state in America is that it is not designed for the desperate, but for those capable of helping themselves.[9]

The trouble with this society, insists a New York City taxi driver, is that "it's overdeveloped and undernourished. It can't afford itself." In part the difficulty lies in our industrial-consumer arrangement of "creative obsolescence"—Alfred Sloan's program for General Motors—a form of resourceful wastefulness. It is the deliberate and publicly proclaimed policy of most American manufacturers to change styles at frequent intervals.

Within industry and finance, recent changes have created more rather than fewer anomalies. Stock ownership, for example, has become less exclusive than it once was, but ironically this fact has thrust even more power into the hands of the few large stockholders. Then, too, as Ralph Nader suggests, our capitalist economy is rapidly acquiring the character of "corporate-socialism" because the great corporations seek governmental protection from competition (Penn Central applies for welfare; oil producers insist upon import quotas, etc.).

Among American regions, the south has been especially prone to self-contradiction. It is known for profuse hospitality, and notorious for hostility toward strangers. It manages to combine legacies of gentleness and violence, of Puritanism and

9. Harrington: *The Other America*, 16, 19, 21, 30, 33, 38–9, 47, 49, 60, 80, 157–8.

hedonism. C. Vann Woodward has located the southern identity in a covey of paradoxical circumstances: the experience of defeat and frustration in a country where success is taken for granted; the experience of guilt (because of the Negro) in a country with a cult of Adamic innocence; the experience of poverty in a country where sufficience (if not abundance) is taken for granted. As one panel of specialists on southern history recently agreed, "the conflicts that have been so much a part of the southern experience have occurred, we insist, between Southerners and within Southerners, as much as between North and South."[1]

Which brings us, ineluctably, to matters of color in a biracial nation. Black Americans have certainly shared and felt many of the dualisms described in this book. But they have also had to cope with tensions uniquely their own. "One ever feels his twoness," wrote W. E. B. DuBois in 1903, "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." DuBois often spoke of the "double-consciousness" of Negro life in the United States.[2] It appears in the contradictory role of the black mother, at once permissive and punitive, at once given to both gratification and deprivation for her children. It appears in the anomalous role of the black man: an archetype of virility who cannot achieve his manhood because he has been castrated by white society. It appears in the experience of southern black families living in northern ghettos, trying to raise their city children with rural values. Two black psychiatrists have recently insisted that Negro survival in the United States depends

1. W. J. Cash: *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1956), 69; Woodward: *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960); Charles G. Sellers, Jr., ed.: *The Southerner as American* (Chapel Hill, 1960), v–vi.

2. W. E. B. DuBois: *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1961), 16–17. J. Saunders Redding remarked that "the Negro lives constantly on two planes of awareness," and that "one receives two distinct impacts from certain experiences and one undergoes two distinct reactions." (*On Being Negro in America* [2nd ed., New York, 1962], 12, 98–9.)

upon achieving a "healthy cultural paranoia." Blacks must maintain their suspiciousness without allowing it to impair their grasp of reality.[3]

There is considerable diversity within the black community, ranging from the Negro middle class—whom militants derisively call "black Anglo-Saxons"[4]—to radical advocates of black power whose positions are often paradoxical. They require "white funds" (from the Ford Foundation, for example) for operating expenses while proclaiming their capacity to sustain the institutional nexus of an urban community. They insist that "separate but equal" epitomizes their aspirations—thereby overturning a century of efforts by and on behalf of black people.[5]

For the black intellectual in America, achieving an identity free of burdensome contradictions is difficult. Eldridge Cleaver has written with pride of his "Higher Uneducation," and with contempt of black writers "who have become their own opposites, taking on all of the behavior patterns of their enemy, vices and virtues, in an effort to aspire to alien standards." *The Amsterdam News*, newspaper of Harlem, the largest black community in the United States, contains a strange mixture of attributes. The paper is caught between bourgeois aspirations and ghetto realities. It aims part of its appeal at the middle class and part at the working class. Consequently, it seems to

3. William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs: *Black Rage* (New York, 1968), 61–2, 87, 161; Claude Brown: *Manchild in the Promised Land* (London, 1965), 269, 275. Brown refers to provincial blacks who spend their lives confined to the ghetto as "big-city backwoods people" (391).

4. Nathan Hare: *The Black Anglo-Saxons* (New York, 1965), 18, 37, 57, 115.

5. Martin Kilson: "Black Power: Anatomy of a Paradox," *Harvard Journal of Negro Affairs*, II (1968), 30, 33; *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 24, 1969, 15. Cf. Arnold Hano's description of Harry Edwards: "Edwards is moderate *and* militant; he is separatist *and* integrationist. He symbolizes the Black Power advocate who . . . shouts from the ghetto to friendly whites: 'Stay out!' even though he sometimes secretly means, 'come in.'" ("The Black Rebel Who 'Whitelists' the Olympics," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1968, 41, 44.)

straddle the issues, and contends alternately that black is beautiful and not so beautiful, that blacks are militant but also moderate.[6]

Similarly, the managing editor of *Time* magazine defines its underlying philosophy as "progressive conservatism."[7] Why? Because in a society so marked by cultural pluralism, he is trying to please several different constituencies at once. But Americans like to speak the language of irony. Mayor Daley of Chicago labels unacceptable arguments as "unreasonable reasoning." Politicians tell their constituents that "you have never had it so good," but also refer longingly in the same speech to "the good old days." Call that nostalgic presentism. And Americans like to regard themselves as "optimistic fatalists," a phrase originated by H. G. Wells with particular reference to this country.[8]

Religious movements in American history have ceaselessly sought to bring into being the City of God, but with amazing consistency have built instead cities of man with the wages of sin. In this country we have a spiritualized state ("one nation, under God") containing secularized churches whose self-perpetuating vestrymen have the power to select ministers, raise and disburse funds. Denominationalism, the central fact of American church history, has produced a spirit of competition accompanied by a mitigating spirit of co-operation.[9]

Billy Graham's Christian Crusade distributes a pamphlet entitled *How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious*. A sizable number of American men of letters, especially during

6. Cleaver: *Soul on Ice* (New York, 1968), 13–14, 18, 75–8, 99, 102–4; J. Kirk Sale: "The Amsterdam News: Black Is Beautiful-Ugly, Comfortable-Sensational, Moderate-Militant," *The New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 9, 1969, 30–1, 37–45.

7. Richard Pollak: "*Time:* After Luce," *Harper's* (July 1969), 46.

8. *The New York Times*, April 18, 1968, 83; Jan. 11, 1969, 67; C. Vann Woodward: "The Future of the Past," *American Historical Review*, LXXV (1970), 724.

9. William A. Clebsch: *From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History* (New York, 1968), 3, 8, 10–14, 16–17, 26–9, 43, 63, 72, 99, 115, 167, 172.

the 1940's and 1950's, proclaimed themselves "Atheists for Niebuhr."[1] And in Troy, Michigan, the Catholic Church is experimenting with a "churchless parish."[2] The "death of God" theologians whose vogue was so prominent during the 1960's call for a "religionless Christianity" in such books as *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* by Thomas J. J. Altizer. Here and there Altizer insists that "God is Satan," but elsewhere that "God is Jesus." By any conventional logic, therefore, Jesus must be Satan.[3]

Literary critics have observed that the most characteristic American fiction has been shaped by the contradictions, not by the unities in American civilization. Look at the grimness and the gaiety in Faulkner, the sustained tension between creative and destructive impulses, the strains between hopefulness and tragic reality. Nor is American fiction simply a function of patriotism—love of country or of place. "Love of country?" John Cheever asks rhetorically; "We all love our country, and hate it."[4]

In *Bullet Park*, his latest novel, Cheever divides the American psyche between his two main characters: Eliot Nailles and Paul Hammer. Nailles is conventional, upper-middle-class, stable, and hypocritical. Hammer is unconventional, illegitimate, unstable, and brutally honest. Nailles is oversexed, provincial, respectable, and fond of the status quo, while Hammer is undersexed, cosmopolitan, shady, and searching for change. Nailles is first and foremost a father, raises an overprotected child, loves his son, and finds friendship an important part of his life, whereas Hammer is essentially a son, a neglected child, unloved by his parents, and incapable of friendship. Nailles has too much ancestry, his life is too routine, but ultimately he affirms life. Hammer has no ancestry he can claim, is incapable of permanency, and finally suffers from a death wish. Cheever seems ultimately to affirm the bland and much-faulted suburban gentry. He is sensitive to its failings, but suggests that its predictability is accompanied by stability of personal affection and values. *Bullet Park* represents the latest and one of the better attempts by a contemporary novelist to see the American personality whole by dividing it in half.[5]

Among modern poets, Robert Frost and John Crowe Ransom have also pursued the same purpose. Frost's "divided consciousness" and sensitivity to the paradoxes of American history is distilled in what has become his best-known poem, "The Gift Outright."

> The land was ours before we were the land's.
> She was our land more than a hundred years
> Before we were her people. She was ours
> In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
> But we were England's, still colonials,
> Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
> Possessed by what we no more possessed.
> Something we were withholding made us weak
> Until we found out that it was ourselves
> We were withholding from our land of living,
> And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
> Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
> (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
> To the land vaguely realizing westward,

1. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter particularly admired theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. After listening to one sermon, the late Justice said: "I liked what you said, Reinie, and I speak as a believing unbeliever." "I'm glad you did," the clergyman replied, "for I spoke as an unbelieving believer."

2. *The New York Times*, Mar. 29, 1969, 71. At one of President Nixon's White House worship services, the Reverend Dr. Richard C. Halverson, pastor of a Presbyterian church in Bethesda, Maryland, remarked that "when we kneel to God, we stand tall."

3. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia, 1966), 15, 31, 101, 113; Richard Rubenstein: *After Auschwitz. Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis, 1966). Experimental forms of worship, called "the no-service service," have been tried at Hillel Foundations on various campuses. (*The New York Times*, Dec. 22, 1968, 31.)

4. See R. W. B. Lewis: *The Picaresque Saint. Representative Figures in Contemporary Fiction* (Philadelphia, 1959), 186, 190, 195, 205; *The New York Times*, July 11, 1969, 43.

5. Nailles, "in his experience with trains, learned something about the mysterious polarities that moved him." *Bullet Park*, 56–7, 239.

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.[6]

What about the arts in America? A major exhibition of contemporary American art which toured the country in 1968 was entitled "The Articulate Subconscious." Ben Shahn and others of his circle combined social criticism with surrealism, and through their special talents made a success of social surrealism: a blend of European traditionalism, American realism, and the ash can school. The avant garde in art circles today are torn between fine art and applied art, between traditional techniques on the one hand, and synthetics (e.g., plastics) on the other. Wishing to inhabit both worlds—the world of the studio and the world of the industrial designer—they have not successfully come to grips with either, thus far.[7]

As for popular culture, the trend seems to be toward "studied casualness." Fashion designers from California have decreed "formal informality" as the new vogue, while Henri Bendel is accenting "respectable poverty" for "rich little poor girls." The tendency toward flamboyant styles and bright colors in men's clothes has caused Russell Lynes to label this generation "the mass-produced eccentrics." With regard to his clothing, the American male "wants to be different but not really different. He wants to express his personality as he sees it, but he does not want to give himself away. He wants to be in fashion but he shudders at the idea of being fashionable. The truth is that he wants neither to be mass produced nor lonely, so he seeks his solace in being some of both." [8]

George Plimpton has earned the sobriquet to which many American men aspire: "the professional amateur." The Broadway and Hollywood gossip column, because it synthesizes excitement and ennui, has been designated "a thrilling bore."

6. *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York, 1949), 467.

7. Hilton Kramer: "'Plastic as Plastic': Divided Loyalties, Paradoxical Ambitions," *The New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1968, D39; Barry Ulanov: *The Two Worlds of American Art: The Private and the Popular* (New York, 1965).

8. *The New York Times*, July 13, 1968, 14; Feb. 26, 1969, 42C; Russell Lynes: *A Surfeit of Honey* (New York, 1957), esp. 71, 85.

And the essence of American humor continues to be what Hawthorne referred to as "the tragic power of laughter." For Woody Allen, "comedy is deadly serious business." Mark Van Doren, the poet and critic, is also given to this earnestly satirical outlook. "Humorists are serious," he remarks, "they're the only people who are." "Happiness is a very solemn, serious thing," Van Doren insists. "Joy is the most solemn thing on earth. You express it with tears." [9]

Among the youth culture, with its unstable mixture of precocity and dependency, there are "domestic expatriates," "native aliens," "Hell's Angels" on the road and "Unmarried Marrieds" on the campus. They love the music of "hip hicks" and "country slickers," hybrid stylists like Johnny Cash who blend pop with country music and a touch of rock.

For a considerable period of time now, middle-class children in America have been pulled by conflicting forces within the Protestant ethos: to obey moral rules and precepts of brotherhood while adjusting to forces of social mobility pushing children to compete strenuously against their playmates and peers. Many of the "cynical young idealists" who face difficult decisions about professional careers condemn what Kenneth Keniston labels "the failure of success." The world lies before them, but they reject it. Torn between the passionless mind of the formal curriculum and the sometimes mindless passion of student rebellion, they seek realistic alternatives. When Justice Abe Fortas addressed the "pious lawbreakers" in 1968, he asked "how, then, can I reconcile my profound belief in obedience to law and my equally basic need to disobey particular laws?" [1] There are no easy answers, and this quest looms as one of the largest dilemmas posed by the 1970's.

THROUGHOUT THIS INQUIRY, I have intermingled paradoxical qualities which seem particularly indigenous cheek by

9. *The New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1969, 26, 35; June 13, 1969, 45.

1. W. Lloyd Warner: *American Life: Dream and Reality* (Chicago, 1953), 88–9; *The New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1968, 33; *The New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1968, 29.

jowl with cases from the American context which happen to be universal circumstances of the human condition. Perry Miller once invoked the phrase "nationality within universality," and I too would like to do so. Americans being a species of humanity, their characteristics are inevitably human and recurring. It is the particular configuration of those characteristics, and their consequences, which can be called peculiarly our own. Besides, the native who daily confronts a variety of institutional, intellectual, and circumstantial biformities does not bother to sort them into pigeonholes marked *U.S.A.* and *Universal.* He copes with them all, as a cluster, as best he can.

Americans have managed to be both puritanical and hedonistic, idealistic and materialistic, peace-loving and warmongering, isolationist and interventionist, conformist and individualist, consensus-minded and conflict-prone. "We recognize the American," wrote Gunnar Myrdal in 1944, "wherever we meet him, as a practical idealist." [2]

Throughout our history we find, all too often, ironic contrasts between noble purposes and sordid results. One need only look at Reconstruction after the Civil War, or at World War I. Americans have experienced many disappointments because prospects for realizing national purposes have presented themselves but have often gone unfulfilled. There is a profound contradiction in the American ethos which commands men to seek worldly goods while warning them that the search will corrupt their souls. Those who aspire to middle-class membership will be thrifty on the way up and then extravagant upon arrival. The co-ordinate of Yankee ingenuity is resourceful wastefulness. We seek efficiency through labor-saving devices and then squander the savings through thoughtless exploitation.

The American passion for movement and change has been matched by an equally strong sense of nostalgia and inertia. Our garden has produced abundance but not fulfillment. Our cities have produced slum tenements as well as sanitary hos-

2. Myrdal: *An American Dilemma. The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), I, xlii–iv.

pitals, ideas, music, and culture in addition to filth, disease, and misery. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence reported in 1969 that "paradoxically, we have been both a tumultuous people and a relatively stable republic." Hannah Arendt has suggested that America is more likely to erupt into violence "than most other civilized countries. And yet there are very few countries where respect for law is so deeply rooted." [3] Perhaps the explanation is partially historical, for in the colonial era law had to be built everywhere as a bulwark against lawlessness, a process repeated on the moving frontier in the nineteenth century and the urban frontier of the twentieth. Even our anti-militarists have become violent about their pacifism.

Americans expect their heroes to be Everyman and Superman simultaneously. I once overheard on an airplane the following fragment of conversation: "He has none of the virtues I respect, and none of the vices I admire." We cherish the humanity of our past leaders: George Washington's false teeth and whimsical orthography, Benjamin Franklin's lechery and cunning. The quintessential American hero wears both a halo *and* horns.

Because our society is so pluralistic, the American politician must be all things to all people. Dwight Eisenhower represented the most advanced industrial nation, but his chief appeal rested in a naïve simplicity which recalled our pre-industrial past. Robert Frost once advised President Kennedy to be as much an Irishman as a Harvard man: "You have to have both the pragmatism and the idealism." The ambivalent American is ambitious and ambidextrous; but the appearance of ambidexterity—to some, at least—suggests the danger of double-dealing and deceit. The story is told of a U. S. senator meeting the press one Sunday afternoon. "How do you stand on conservation, Senator?" asked one panelist. The senator squirmed. "Well, I'll tell you," he said. "Some of my constituents are for

3. *The New York Times*, June 6, 1968, 32; June 6, 1969, 23; "Is America By Nature a Violent Society?" *The New York Times Magazine*, April 28, 1968, 24–5, 111–14.

conservation, and some of my constituents are against conservation, and I stand foursquare behind my constituents."

Raymond Aron, the French sociologist, has remarked that a "dialectic of plurality and conformism lies at the core of American life, making for the originality of the social structure, and raising the most contradictory evaluations." Americans have repeatedly reaffirmed the social philosophy of individualism, even making it the basis of their political thought. Yet they have been a nation of joiners and have developed the largest associations and corporations the world has ever known. Nor has American respect for the abstract "individual" always guaranteed respect for particular persons.[4]

There is a persistent tension between authoritarianism and individualism in American history. The genius of American institutions at their best has been to find a place and a use for both innovators and consolidators, rebellious dreamers and realistic adjudicators. "America has been built on a mixture of discipline and rebellion," writes Christopher Jencks, "but the balance between them has constantly shifted over the years." Our individualism, therefore, has been of a particular sort, a collective individualism. Individuality is not synonymous in the United States with singularity. When Americans develop an oddity they make a fad of it so that they may be comfortable among familiar oddities. Their unity, as Emerson wrote in his essay on the New England Reformers, "is only perfect when all the uniters are isolated." [5]

How then can we adequately summarize the buried historical roots of our paradoxes, tensions, and biformities? The incongruities in American life are not merely fortuitous, and their stimuli appear from the very beginning. "America was always promises," as Archibald MacLeish has put it. "From the

4. Aron in *As Others See Us. The United States Through Foreign Eyes*, ed. F. M. Joseph (Princeton, 1959), 59–60; Robert N. Beck: *The Meaning of Americanism. An Essay on the Religious and Philosophic Basis of the American Mind* (New York, 1956), 140–1.

5. Jencks: "Is It all Dr. Spock's Fault?" *The New York Times Magazine*, Mar. 3, 1968, 27, 76; Ralph Barton Perry: *Characteristically American* (New York, 1949), 9, 13.

first voyage and the first ship there were promises." Many of these have gone unfulfilled—an endless source of ambiguity and equivocation. More than that, "Jacobethan" travelers and settlers discovered that the various images projected of America could be contradictory. The New World turned out to be hospitable to radically different expectations. If America seemed to promise everything that men had always wanted, it also threatened to obliterate much of what they had already achieved. Critics and intellectuals throughout our past have recognized not only the gap between national aspirations and numbing realities, but also ambiguities endemic in the actual configuration of American goals.[6]

Guilt and insecurity have played a major part in keeping contradictory tendencies inherent in our style. First we wiped out the Indians whose land this was; then we emasculated the Africans brought to work the land. Few cultures in history have had to bear this kind of double collective culpability.

There are also paradoxes of freedom in this country. There seemed to be no limits to what America and Americans, beginning *de novo*, could become. Consequently, the American way is so restlessly creative as to be essentially destructive: witness our use of natural resources. Because achievement seems so accessible, Americans are competitive and competition is a major source of inner conflict. Because unlimited competition is not good for either individuals or the public interest, we seek restraints; but the restraints themselves involve irreconcilable antagonisms. Mutual exercise of complete freedom by rulers and subjects alike is impossible; but only recently, and very painfully, have we begun to learn that there must be limits placed upon democratic resistance to democratic authority.[7]

Above all other factors, however, the greatest source of

6. See MacLeish: *America Was Promises* (New York, 1939); John Morton Blum: *The Promise of America* (Baltimore, 1967), 53, 55, 161.

7. See Sidney Hook: *The Paradoxes of Freedom* (Berkeley, 1962), 3, 10, 12, 25, 39–40.

dualisms in American life has been unstable pluralism in all its manifold forms: cultural, social, sequential, and political. *E pluribus unum* is a misbegotten motto because we have *not* become one out of many. The myth of the melting pot is precisely that: a myth. Moreover, our constitutional system seems to foster fragmentation of power while our economic-technological system seems to encourage consolidation of power. Thus the imperatives of pluralism under conditions of large-scale technology commonly conflict with principles and practices of constitutional democracy.

Political factionalism in colonial America was simply the most manifest symptom of unstable pluralism, just as party coalitions in the national period have been expedients to make our political biformities functional. It is difficult to make a sharp distinction between "loyal opposition" and "government" in America because both merge imperceptibly into a system of coalitions, bargains, and compromises in which no one coalition can really be said to govern steadily, and none is definitely and persistently in opposition. This seems to be a salient feature of political culture in a pluralistic nation. Parties and personalities cannot put together a winning combination without organizing factions of different, and often contradictory, interests. Even the American conception of sovereignty is pluralistic, for federalism is the institutional embodiment of political pluralism.[8]

As immigrant groups were transformed by diverse influences in American society, they lost many of their original attributes, were re-created as something new, but still remained discrete, identifiable groups. The impact of trends and pressures for assimilation was felt in divergent ways because the groups themselves were dissimilar to begin with. Catholic peasants from southern Italy were affected differently in the same American cities and at the same time than were urbanized

8. See Robert A. Dahl: "The American Oppositions: Affirmation and Denial," in *Political Oppositions in American Democracies*, ed. Dahl (New Haven, 1966), 62; William H. Riker: *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, 1962), 54–66.

Jewish workers and merchants from eastern Europe. It is a basic condition of unstable pluralism in this country that American society has not assimilated all immigrant groups fully or in the same degree.[9] Is it any wonder, then, that World Wars I and II were causes of conflicting loyalties for many hyphenated Americans?

It has been the impulse of our egalitarianism to make all men American and alike, but the thrust of our social order and intolerance to accentuate differences among groups. We have achieved expertise at both xenophobia and self-hate! At several stages of our history, population growth has outstripped institutional change. The result in many cases has been violence, vigilante movements, or economic unrest, all with the special coloration of unstable pluralism. Because there are significant variations in state laws regulating economic enterprise, taxation, and welfare payments, people and corporations move to tax-sheltered states and to those with the most generous welfare provisions. In this way mobility becomes a function of pluralism.

I do not argue that pluralism is a peculiarly American phenomenon. But I do believe that unstable pluralism on a scale of unprecedented proportion is especially American. The classic cosmopolitanism of great cities around the world has usually been limited to the élite portion of the population, whereas urban heterogeneity in the United States occurs most profoundly at the grass roots level. In what other country has there been such a cerebral response to conditions of cultural pluralism? America's most distinctive and original thinkers have sought to provide a rationale for diversity and tolerance. Thus William James is pre-eminently our philosopher of plu-

9. See Nathan Glazer and D. P. Moynihan: *Beyond the Melting Pot. The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 13–14. Consider the case of Fiorello LaGuardia: his father a lapsed Roman Catholic, his mother a lukewarm Jew; an Italian-American, he was raised an Episcopalian in a predominantly Catholic environment; called by his enemies "the half-Jewish wop," his first wife was Catholic, and his second wife Lutheran. In Congress he served as a link between urban and rural Progressives.

ralism, particularly religious pluralism. John Dewey is our philosopher of educational pluralism, and Carl Becker our philosopher of historical pluralism, or relativism.[1]

There is a sense in which the super-highway is the most appropriate American metaphor. We have vast and anonymous numbers of people rushing individually (but simultaneously) in opposite directions. In between lies a no-man's-land, usually landscaped with a barrier of shrubs and trees, so that we cannot see the road to Elsewhere, but cannot easily turn back either. Indeed, the American experience in some spheres has moved from unity to diversity (e.g., denominationalism), while in other areas it has flowed in the opposite direction, from diversity to unity (e.g., political institutions). Along both roads we have paused from time to time in order to pay substantially for the privilege of traveling these thoroughfares.

There have always been Americans aware of unresolved contradictions between creed and reality, disturbed by the performance of their system and culture. Told how much liberty they enjoy, they feel less free; told how much equality they enjoy, they feel less equal; told how much progress they enjoy, their environment seems even more out of control. Most of all, told that they should be happy, they sense a steady growth in American unhappiness. Conflicts *between* Americans have been visible for a very long time, but most of us are just beginning to perceive the conflicts *within* us individually.

It is a consequence of some concern that our ambiguities often appear to the wider world as malicious hypocrisies. As when we vacillate, for example, between our missionary impulse and our isolationist instinct. From time to time we recognize that the needs of national security and the furtherance of national ideals may both be served by our vigorous but restrained participation in world affairs. At other times these two desiderata tug in opposite directions. However much we desperately want to be understood, we are too often misunderstood.

1. See James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1902); Dewey: *Democracy and Education* (New York, 1916); Becker: *Everyman His Own Historian* (New York, 1935).

Because of our ambivalent ambiance, we are frequently indecisive. "I cannot be a crusader," remarked Ralph McGill, "because I have been cursed all my life with the ability to see both sides." [2] Our experience with polarities provides us with the potential for flexibility and diversity; yet too often it chills us into sheer inaction, or into contradictory appraisals of our own designs and historical development. Often we are willing to split the difference and seek consensus. "It is this intolerable paradox," James Reston writes, "of being caught between the unimaginable achievements of men when they cooperate for common goals, and their spectacular failures when they divide on how to achieve the simple decencies of life, that creates the present atmosphere of division and confusion." [3]

Because of our pluralist inheritance of biformities, we are also given to forms of inadvertent overcompensation. Take for example our longstanding vacillation between nature and civilization. After generations of abuse and neglect, we are beginning in sizable numbers to appreciate the spiritual value and aesthetic beauty of the American wilderness. Yet this very increase in appreciation may ultimately prove to be its undoing, for we are beginning to love our national forests and wonders right out of existence, so crowded have they become with campers and their litter.

I suppose it seems to many just now that the United States has become "successfully unhealthy." Oddly enough, I am fairly sanguine about the future; for I have come to believe that America historically has achieved the ultimate stability of an arch (think of the Natural Bridge in Virginia, beloved by Jefferson): those very forces which are logically calculated to drag stones to the ground actually provide props of support—derived from a principle in which thrust and counter-thrust become means of counterpoise.[4]

2. *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1969, 28.

3. *Ibid.*, Aug. 3, 1969, E10.

4. Political scientists contend persuasively that the more complex an institution or system is, the more likely it is to achieve stability. Simple forms of government are more likely to degenerate; the "mixed state"

We should recognize, as Hawthorne did, the innocence as well as the evil in our natures. We should understand, as William James did, that Americanism is a volatile mixture of hopeful good and curable bad. We must maintain, as Carl Becker pleaded, a balance between freedom and responsibility. For freedom unrestrained by responsibility becomes mere license, while responsibility unchecked by freedom becomes arbitrary power. We must pursue, as we have at our best, the politics of "utopian pragmatism."

We have reached a moment in time when the national condition seems neither lifeless nor deathless. It's like the barren but sensuous serenity of the natural world in late autumn, before Thanksgiving, containing the promise of rebirth and the potential for resurrection. On bare branches whose leaves have fallen, buds bulge visibly in preparation for spring. Along the roadside, goldenrod stands sere and grizzled, and the leafless milkweed with its goosehead pods strews fluff and floss to every breeze, thereby seeding the countryside with frail fertility. The litter of autumn becomes the mulch, and then the humus, for roots and tender seeds. So it was, so it has been, and so it will be with the growth of American Civilization.

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is more given to endurance. Both Plato and Aristotle suggested that the most practical polity would combine democracy and oligarchy. Perhaps, then, there are considerable advantages in our "democratic élitism."

Bibliographical Suggestions

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