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THE
CULTURAL
CONTRADICTIONS
OF
CAPITALISM

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The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.

T. S. ELIOT
Choruses from *The Rock*

Foreword: 1978

I

THAT FABULOUS POLYMATH Samuel Johnson maintained that no man in his right mind ever read a book through from beginning to end. His own method was to glance rapidly through the pages, read only the parts that interested him, and skip all the rest.

This is one way of knowing a book, and for a clever reader it may suffice. But these days, many persons do not read a book but read of it, and usually from reviewers. Given the constraints of the media and the nature of the culture, this knowledge at one remove contains a peril. For one thing, even when a book has a complex argument, most reviewers, busy people they, sprint through a book seeking to catch a few lines to encapsulate the argument and to find a tag which can locate the author into the comfortable niches of the marketable vocabularies of conversation. Since the dominant bias in American culture is a liberal one, an argument that cuts across that liberalism makes some reviewers uncomfortable. And those whose work decries those aspects of contemporary culture which make cheap claims to "liberation," often find themselves labeled as "neo-conservative."

In its own terms, such a designation is meaningless, for it assumes that social views can be aligned along a single dimension. (What is ironic, in fact, is that those who decry the "one-dimensional" society, often hold such a one-dimensional view of politics.) In the larger historical context, the phrase makes no sense because the kind of cultural criticism I make—and I think of similar criticisms by Peter Berger and Philip Rieff—transcend the received categories of liberalism, and seek to treat the dilemmas of contemporary society within a very different framework.

Since an author's point of view is relevant to the understanding of his intentions, I think it not amiss to say that I am a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture. Many persons might find this statement puzzling, assuming that if a person is a radical in one realm, he is a radical in all others; and, conversely,

if he is a conservative in one realm, then he must be conservative in the others as well. Such an assumption misreads, both sociologically and morally, the nature of these different realms. I believe there is a consistency to my views which I hope to demonstrate in this Foreword. I will begin with the values I hold, and deal with the sociological distinctions in the following section.

About economics: the economic realm today is usually thought to be simply instrumental. One of the themes of this book is that capitalist society, in its emphasis on accumulation, has made that activity an end in itself. But no moral philosopher, from Aristotle and Aquinas, to John Locke and Adam Smith, divorced economics from a set of moral ends or held the production of wealth to be an end in itself; rather it was seen as a means to the realization of virtue, a means of leading a civilized life.

Modern economics has become a "positive science" in which the ends to be pursued are assumed to be individual and varied, and economics is only a science of "means," or of rational choice in the allocation of resources among competing individual ends. The price system, however, is only a *mechanism* for the relative allocation of goods and services within the framework of the kinds of demands generated. Yet these demands derive from the existing distribution of income. And moreover, what ultimately provides direction for the economy is the value system of the culture in which the economy is embedded. Economic policy can be efficacious as a means; but it can only be as *just* as the cultural value system that shapes it.

It is for that reason that I am a socialist in economics. For me, socialism is not statism, or the collective ownership of the means of production. It is a judgment on the priorities of economic policy. It is for that reason that I believe that *in this realm*, the community takes precedence over the individual in the values that legitimate economic policy. The first lien on the resources of a society therefore should be to establish that "social minimum" which would allow individuals to lead a life of self-respect, to be members of the community.¹ This

¹ The turning point in modern thought comes with Bentham. Bentham assumed that all men desired happiness, which he described simply as the maximizing of pleasure and the minimizing of pain. In practice this meant that whatever individuals defined as their own good was to be accepted as an "end" to be pursued. Adam Smith had written, besides *The Wealth of Nations*, a book entitled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which an "impartial spectator" represented the judgment of the community, which all right-thinking men would have to take into account. But for Bentham, in the *Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation*, "the Community is a fictitious body" and the interest of the community is "the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it."

means a set of priorities that ensures work for those who seek it, a degree of adequate security against the hazards of the market, and adequate access to medical care and protection against the ravages of disease and illness.

I accept, and in this book reinterpret, the classical distinction between needs and wants. Needs are what all individuals have as members of the "species." Wants are the varied desires of individuals in accordance with their own tastes and idiosyncrasies. I believe that the first obligation of a society is to meet those essential needs; otherwise, individuals cannot be full "citizens" of the society. Admittedly, the word "needs" is ambiguous. Keynes once wrote: "... it is true that the needs of human beings may seem to be insatiable. But they fall into two classes—those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable. . . . but this is not true of absolute needs."²

In this book, I pursue that difference through Aristotle's, and later, Thomas Aquinas's distinctions. As Aquinas pointed out, the desire for money knows no limits—which is why the Catholic Church placed restrictions on usury and the free setting of prices. But the needs represented in the form of food, clothing, shelter, and the like, have limits established by the capacities of the user.

Unwittingly, modern economics has established its own distinction between needs and wants: the concept of discretionary income. One part of a person's expenditure is relatively fixed—the amount necessary to meet one's self-defined basic (or, in Keynes's sense, absolute) needs. The other portion is variable: it can be postponed, used to satisfy different wants, and spent quite often in those pursuits that express the signs of status and the desires for superiority.

The social minimum I support is the amount of family income

Modern capitalist thought has accepted that argument to its own detriment, for a justification only or largely on the basis of individual interest is a weak moral argument. As my colleague Irving Kristol points out, economics is necessarily bound with normative considerations—the judgments whether the consequences of aggregated individual decisions are just and fair. No society can escape the necessity of making a reasoned judgment about what is proper and desirable, and of assessing the consequences of economic decisions in the light of those standards.

² J. M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," in *Essays in Persuasion*, The Collected Works of J. M. Keynes, vol. IX (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 326.

required to meet basic needs. And, since this is also a cultural definition, it will, understandably, change over time.³ And I am a socialist, also, in that I do not believe wealth should be convertible into undue privilege in realms where it is not relevant. Thus it is unjust, I argue (see pp. 260ff), for wealth to command undue advantage in medical facilities, when these are social rights that should be available to all. In the realms of wealth, status, and power, there are principles of just allocation that are distinctive to each realm.

Yet I am a liberal in politics—defining both terms in the Kantian sense. I am a liberal in that, within the polity, I believe the individual should be the primary actor, not the group (be it family or corporation or church, or ethnic or minority group). And the polity, I believe, has to maintain the distinction between the public and the private, so that not all behavior is politicized, as in communist states, or left without restraint, as in the justification of *laissez-faire* in traditional capitalist societies.

The public realm operates under the rule of law which applies equally to all, and is therefore procedural: it does not specify outcomes between individuals; it treats people equally, rather than seeking to “make them” equal. The private realm—in morals and economics—is one where consenting parties make their own decisions, so long as the spillover effects (pornography in one instance, pollution in the other) do not upset the public realm.

I believe in the principle of individual achievement, rather than the inherited, or prescribed allocation of social positions. But I am not an egalitarian in the current, fashionable sense that the law should *make* persons equal—a situation which is not, in fact, equality but representation by numerical quota. One of the reasons that I distinguish between needs and wants is that I do not see how, in the economic realm, one can make incomes equal. The insistence on wage differentials—which is strongest among workers—reflects the moral intuition that differences in skill and effort should be rewarded differently. Once a social minimum is created, then what people do with the remainder of their money (subject to the principle of illegitimate convertibility), is their own business, just as what people do in the realm of morals is equally their own business, so long as it is done

³ My colleague Lee Rainwater, in a number of empirical studies, has found that working-class individuals, in a wide variety of life settings and from diverse ethnic groups, when asked what it would take to give them a “decent” life, invariably converge on a common figure—about half the median income of the society. See Rainwater's *What Money Buys* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

privately. And, if universalism prevails in social competition, then the criterion of merit, I believe, is a just principle to reward individual achievement in the society.

I am a conservative in culture because I respect tradition; I believe in reasoned judgments of good and bad about the qualities of a work of art; and I regard as necessary the principle of authority in the judging of the value of experience and art and education.

I use the term culture—as is evident in this book—to mean less than the anthropological catchall which defines any “patterned way of life” as a culture, and more than the aristocratic tradition which restricts culture to refinement and to the high arts. Culture, for me, is the effort to provide a coherent set of answers to the existential predicaments that confront all human beings in the passage of their lives. (See pp. 12–13.) For this reason, tradition becomes essential to the vitality of a culture, for it provides the continuity of memory that teaches how one's forebears met the same existential predicaments. (Which is why the psalmist says: “If I forget thee, o Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning.”)

The emphasis on judgment is necessary to fend off that indiscriminateness which regards all “meaningful” experience as good, and which insists that each group's “culture” is as valid as any other. The debasement of modernity is the emphasis on “self-expression,” and the erasure of the distinction between art and life, so that the acting out of impulse, rather than the reflective discipline of the imagination becomes the touchstone of satisfaction. To have significance, a culture must transcend the present, because it is the recurrent confrontation with those root questions whose answers, through a set of symbols, provide a viable coherence to the meaning of existence. And since the appreciation of tradition in culture, and judgment in art (and a coherent curriculum in education) has to be learned, authority—in the form of scholarship, teaching, and skilled exegesis—is a necessary guide for the perplexed. And such authority can be earned only by study, not by speaking in tongues.

The triune positions I hold do have a consistency in that they unite a belief in the inclusion of all people into citizenship through that economic minimum which allows for self-respect, the principle of individual achievement of social position on the basis of merit, and the continuity of the past and present, in order to shape the future, as the necessary conditions of a civilized order.

II

In the broader sense, the theme of this book is not just the cultural contradictions of capitalism as such, but of bourgeois society: that new world created by the mercantile and fabricating guilds, the middle or bourgeois class that revolutionized modern society after the sixteenth century by making economic activity, rather than military or religious concerns, the central feature of society.

Capitalism is a socioeconomic system geared to the production of commodities by a rational calculus of cost and price, and to the consistent accumulation of capital for the purposes of reinvestment. But this singular new mode of operation was fused with a distinctive culture and character structure. In culture, this was the idea of self-realization, the release of the individual from traditional restraints and ascriptive ties (family and birth) so that he could "make" of himself what he willed. In character structure, this was the norm of self-control and delayed gratification, of purposeful behavior in the pursuit of well-defined goals. It is the interrelationship of this economic system, culture, and character structure which comprised bourgeois civilization. It is the unraveling of this unity and its consequences, which are the threads of this book.

I read the contradictions through two prisms: the first, a synthetic construct, is an "ideal type." It is "ahistorical" and treats the phenomena as a closed system. Thus it can be "hypothetical deductive" and specify the limits of the phenomena. Its virtue as an ideal type is the possibility of identifying the essential lineaments—what I call the axial principles and axial structures—of the circumscribed social realms which the flux of historical change sometimes obscures. Being static, however, the ideal type does not account for origins or future directions. For that, one needs the second prism of history and the detailed empirical complexity which is its content.

Using the ideal type, I see the contradictions of capitalism in the antagonistic principles that underlie the technical-economic, political, and cultural structures of the society. Now, the technical-economic realm, which became central in the beginning of capitalism, is, like all industrial society today, based on the axial principle of economizing: the effort to achieve efficiency through the breakdown of all activities into the smallest components of unit cost, as defined by the systems of financial accounting. The axial structure, based on specialization and hierarchy, is one of bureaucratic coordination. Necessarily,

individuals are treated not as persons but as "things" (in the sociological jargon their behavior regulated by the role requirements), as instruments to maximize profit.⁴ In short, individuals are dissolved into their function.

The political realm, which regulates conflict, is governed by the axial principle of equality: equality before the law, equal civil rights, and, most recently, the claims of equal social and economic rights. Because these claims become translated into entitlements, the political order increasingly intervenes in the economic and social realms (in the affairs of corporations, universities, and hospitals), in order to redress the positions and rewards generated in the society by the economic system. The axial structure of the polity is representation, and, more recently, participation. And the demands for participation, as a principle, now are carried over into all other realms of the society. The tensions between bureaucracy and equality frame the social conflicts of the day.

Finally, the cultural realm is one of self-expression and self-gratification. It is anti-institutional and antinomian in that the individual is taken to be the measure of satisfaction, and *his* feelings, sentiments, and judgments, not some objective standard of quality and value, determine the worth of cultural objects. At its most blatant, this sentiment asks of a poem, a play, or a painting, not whether it is good or meretricious, but "What does it do for *me*?" In this democratization of culture, every individual, understandably, seeks to realize his full "potential," and so the individual "self" comes increasingly into conflict with the role requirements of the technical-economic order.

A number of critics have objected to these formulations on the ground that "power" still lies primarily in the economic realm, principally in the hands of the large corporations, and that the impulses to self-expression in the culture have been "co-opted" by the capitalist system and converted into commodities, i.e., objects for sale.

⁴ I use the word profit here in the specific economic sense of those gains that derive from productivity in the efficient use of resources, not in the sense of speculation or windfall gains arising, say, out of shortages or the exercise of a monopoly or cartel. To that extent, *any* economic system seeks profit, for its converse is waste. The sociological question asks what factors one takes into account in the calculus of profit. Until the last fifty years, capitalist enterprise tended to adopt a narrow calculus, and the social costs (from pollution to the effects of work on the health and safety of the worker) were borne by the workers or by society. But the situation is often no different in communist countries where the bureaucratic enterprise, in order to increase its own plants' funds (from which it builds houses or pays for vacations) will generate high social costs (e.g., the pollution of Lake Baikal by paper plants on the shore) in order to increase its profits.

Such questions are empirical ones that test particular assumptions, not whether this mode of analysis, i.e., the idea of the disjunction between the realms, is useful or not. The answers lie in the court of history, and I shall return to them at the close of my historical exposition, the second thread of my analysis.

III

Much of the prevailing view of capitalism (that of the last thirty years) was shaped by Max Weber through his emphasis on Calvinism and the Protestant ethic—the role of methodical work and the legitimation of the pursuit of wealth—as the doctrines that facilitated the rise of the distinctive Western organization of rational production and exchange. But the origins of capitalism were twofold. If one source was the *asceticism* which Weber emphasized, the other was *acquisitiveness*, a central theme of Werner Sombart whose work was almost completely neglected in that period of time.⁵

To emphasize the diversity of origins, Sombart in his *Der Bourgeois*, identifies six fundamental types of “capitalist undertakers”:

⁵ Sombart's main works were the extensive three volumes, *Der Moderne Kapitalismus* (the first two appeared in 1916–17, the concluding volume ten years later in 1927), and a series of earlier volumes on the Jews and capitalism, luxury and capitalism, war and capitalism, and the capstone of that series, *Der Bourgeois*, published in 1913.

The dramatic eclipse of Sombart's reputation is probably due to two reasons. Before World War I, Sombart was highly sympathetic to socialism and produced a number of works which won him a high reputation, beginning with his first major book, *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung*, in 1896, which was translated into more than twenty languages. (His book on the United States, *Warum gibt es kein Sozialismus in der Vereinigten Staaten*, published in 1904, became a standard explanation for the failure of socialist ideas to take root in the U.S.) After World War I, however, Sombart turned against Marxism, and, in 1934, vaguely embraced National Socialism in the book, *Deutscher Sozialismus* (translated as *A New Social Philosophy*) continuing with other works that espoused a cloudy, spiritual view of man, until his death in 1941.

The second reason, theoretical rather than political, is that Sombart's work on capitalism, while extraordinarily rich and diverse—he assembled more material on the subject than probably any other writer—is, in the end, an *olla podrida* in which a number of indigestible elements were combined in the thick stew, and no clear-cut causal connections ever clearly emerged. At different times, Sombart sought to emphasize the importance of one social group or another (e.g., the Jews or the Florentines), or one social fact or another (e.g., the new supply of precious metals, or technology), yet underneath all these was an underlying emphasis on the impulse of acquisitiveness.

There is no complete translation of *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*, though a free-hand version was done by Frederick L. Nussbaum, as *A History of the Economic Institutions of Modern Europe: An Introduction to Der Moderne Kapitalismus of Werner Sombart* (New York, F. S. Crofts, 1933). *Der Bourgeois* was translated and edited by M. Epstein under the title *The Quintessence of Capitalism: A study of the history*

the Freebooters (the “ruthless sea-dogs who abounded . . . in England in the sixteenth century”); the Landlord (e.g., the capitalist farmers who turned to mining and the creation of iron works, as in France in the early eighteenth century); the Civil Servant (promoters of enterprise, such as Colbert, in France); the Speculators (such as the men behind the South Sea company, which took over the nation debt in England for overseas investments); the Trader (originally middlemen, they became entrepreneurs); and the Craftsman, or *fabricant*, who became manufacturers.

Sombart located the main areas of capitalist undertaking not in the Protestant countries, such as Holland, England, or the United States, but in the Florentine world, and he argued that the same kind of prudential bourgeois maxims associated with Benjamin Franklin (who in personal life was a *bon viveur*) could be found several hundred years earlier in the writings of Leon Batista Alberti, whose book *Del governo della famiglia* was a classic in its time, and whose views of middle-class virtues, the proper coordination of actions and the profitable employment of time, were adopted by large numbers of bourgeois entrepreneurs and *commercants* in Italy and France.⁶

and *psychology of the modern business man* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1915). Curiously, nowhere does the book state that it is a translation of *Der Bourgeois*. The fact that it was issued in London during the war may account for the lack of reference to a German edition. The most succinct statement of Sombart's views can be found in his article on “Capitalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930) vol. 3, pp. 195–208.

⁶ *The Quintessence of Capitalism*, pp. 104–113. For a discussion of Alberti as one of the key figures in establishing a rational esthetic of space and time, see pp. 108–111 in this volume.

Interesting support for the argument that the origins of capitalism are to be located in Catholic Italy, and that the Counter-Reformation, not the Protestant ethic, was responsible for the “trans-location” of capitalism has been offered recently by Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change, and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 23, 27–28. He writes:

For Marx, Weber, Sombart, who regarded medieval Europe as non-capitalist, the problem was to discover why capitalism was created in the sixteenth century. For us, who believe that Catholic Europe, at least up to the Reformation, was perfectly able to create a capitalist economy, the question is, why, in the sixteenth century, did so many essential agents of such an economy—not only entrepreneurs, but also workers—leave the old centers, predominantly in Catholic lands, and migrate to new centers, predominantly in Protestant lands. . . . They were expelled. And they were expelled for religion. . . .

It was not that Calvinism created a new type of man, who in turn created capitalism; it was rather that the old economic elites of Europe were driven into heresy because the attitude of mind which had been theirs for generations, was suddenly, and in some places, declared heretical and intolerable. . . .

For always we come back to this: the Calvinist and for that matter the Jewish entrepreneurs of northern Europe were not a native growth; they were an old growth transplanted.

Whatever the exact locations of early capitalism, it is clear that, from the start, the two impulses of asceticism and acquisitiveness were yoked together. One was the bourgeois prudential spirit of calculation; the other, the restless Faustian drive which, as expressed in the modern economy and technology, took as its motto "the endless frontier," and, as its goal, the complete transformation of nature. The intertwining of the two impulses shaped the modern conception of rationality. The tension between the two imposed a moral restraint on the sumptuary display that had characterized earlier periods of conquest. What is also evident—and it is one of the arguments in this book—is that the ascetic element, and with it one kind of moral legitimation of capitalist behavior, has virtually disappeared.

On the level of philosophical justification, the major attack on asceticism was mounted by Jeremy Bentham, who argued that asceticism ("miseries" inflicted by sectarians on unwilling others) violated the "natural" hedonism which rules men—the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Its "mischief" is that, whatever its pure intention, asceticism leads to "despotism" over men. The principle of utility alone could serve as the regulating instrument of men's search to satisfy their diverse ends. Thus the notion of common ends was dissolved into individual preferences.

On the plane of history, the "economic impulse" has been constrained earlier by the rules of custom and tradition, to some extent by the Catholic moral principle of the just price, and later by the Puritan emphasis on frugality. As the religious impulses diminished, a complex history in its own right, so did the restraints. What became distinctive about capitalism—its very dynamic—was its boundlessness. Propelled by the dynamo of technology, there were to be no asymptotes to its exponential growth. No limits. Nothing was sacred. Change became the norm. By the middle of the nineteenth century, this was the trajectory of the economic impulse. It was, as well, the trajectory of the culture.

IV

The realm of culture is the realm of meanings, the effort in some imaginative form to make sense of the world through the expressive-ness of art and ritual, particularly those "incomprehensions" such as tragedy and death that arise out of the existential predicaments which every self-conscious human being must confront at some point in his

life. In these encounters, one becomes aware of the fundamental questions—what Goethe called *Urphänomene*—which frame all others. Religion, as the oldest effort to comprehend these "mysteries," has historically been the source of cultural symbols.

If science is the search for the unity of nature, religion has been the quest for the unity of culture in the different historical periods of civilizations. To close that circle, religion has woven tradition as the fabric of meaning and guarded the portals of culture by rejecting those works of art which threatened the moral norms of religion.

The modern movement disrupts that unity. It does so in three ways: by insisting on the autonomy of the aesthetic from moral norms; by valuing more highly the new and experimental; and by taking the self (in its quest for originality and uniqueness) as the touchstone of cultural judgment.

The most aggressive outrider of the movement is the self-proclaimed *avant-garde* which calls itself Modernism. The discussion of Modernism (see pp. 46–52, and Chapters 2 and 3) is the inner thread of this book, for I see Modernism as the agency for the dissolution of the bourgeois world view and, in the past half-century, as gaining hegemony in the culture.

The difficulties of defining Modernism are notorious. Schematically, I would specify three different dimensions:

1. Thematically Modernism has been a rage against order, and in particular, bourgeois orderliness. The emphasis is on the self, and the unceasing search for experience. If Terence once said, "Nothing human is alien to me," the Modernist could say with equal fervor, "Nothing inhuman is alien to me." Rationalism is seen as devitalizing; the surge to creativity is propelled by an exploration of the demonic. In that exploration, one cannot set aesthetic limits (or even moral norms) to this protean reach of the imagination. The crucial insistence is that experience is to have no boundaries to its cravings, that there be "nothing sacred."⁷

2. Stylistically, there is a common syntax in what I have called "the eclipse of distance." This is the effort to achieve immediacy, impact, simultaneity, and sensation by eliminating aesthetic and psychic distance. In diminishing aesthetic distance, one annihilates contemplation and envelops the spectator in the experience. By eliminating psychic distance, one emphasizes (in Freudian terms) the "primary process" of dream and hallucination, of instinct and impulse. In all this, Modern-

⁷ I have elaborated this argument through an examination of major literary works in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in an essay, "Beyond Modernism, Beyond Self," in *Art, Politics and Will: Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling*, edited by Quentin Anderson, Stephen Donadio, and Steven Marcus (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

ism rejects the "rational cosmology" that was introduced into the arts during the Renaissance and codified by Alberti: of foreground and background in pictorial space; of beginning, middle, and end, or sequence, in time; and the distinction of genres and the modes of work appropriate to each genre. This eclipse of distance, as a formal syntax, cuts across all the arts: in literature, the "stream of consciousness"; in painting, the elimination of the "interior distance" within the canvas"; in music, the upset of the balance of melody and harmony; in poetry, the disruption of the ordered meter. In the broadest sense, this common syntax repudiates mimesis as a principle of art.⁸

3. The preoccupation with the medium. In all periods of cultural history, artists have been conscious of the nature and complexity of the medium as a formal problem in transmuted the "pre-figured" into the "figured" result. In the last twenty-five years, we have seen a preoccupation not with the content or form (i.e., style and genre), but with the medium of art itself: with the actual texture of paint and materials in painting, with the abstract "sounds" in music, with phonology or even "breath" in poetry, and with the abstract properties of language in literature—often to the exclusion of anything else. Thus it is the encaustic surface, not the image, that generates excitement in the paintings of Jasper Johns; the aleatory or chance factors in the music of John Cage; the aspirate rather than the syllable, as a measure of line in poetry of Robert Creeley—all of these as expressions of the self, rather than formal explorations of the limits and nature of the medium itself.

Modernism has, beyond dispute, been responsible for one of the great surges of creativity in Western culture. The period from 1850 to 1930 probably saw more varied experiments in literature, poetry, music, and painting—if not more great masterpieces—than any previous period we have known. Much of this arose out of the creative tension of culture, with its adversary stance, against the bourgeois social structure. Yet there has been a price. One cost has been the loss of coherence in culture, particularly in the spread of an antinomian attitude to moral norms and even to the idea of cultural judgment itself. The greater price was exacted when the distinction between art and life became blurred so that what was once permitted

⁸ Clearly not all Modernist writers are "anti-bourgeois" in any overt sense. T. S. Eliot was a High-Church Anglican and William Faulkner a traditionalist in his Southern politics. Yet both men were great "experimenters" in poetry and in the novel. Despite their specific political or cultural beliefs, one of the effects of their "modernist styles" was to disrupt the "rational cosmology," which underlay the bourgeois world view of an ordered relationship of space and time. (See pp. 108-119.)

in the *imagination* (the novels of murder, lust, perversity) has often passed over into *fantasy*, and is acted out by individuals who want to make their "lives" a work of art, and when, with the "democratization" of criticism, the touchstone of judgment is no longer some consensual agreement on standards, but each "self's" judgment as to how art enhances that "self."

Changes in culture interact with a social structure in complicated ways. Where there is a patronage system, the patron—be it prince, or church, or state—commissions a work of art, and the cultural needs of the institution, such as the Church, or the tastes of the prince, or the demands for glorification by the State, will shape the regnant style of the time. But where art is bought and sold, the market is where culture and social structure cross. One would expect that where culture has become a "commodity" the bourgeois taste would prevail. But in extraordinary historical fact, this has not been the case.

The phrase "cultural hegemony"—identified with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci—signifies the dominance of a single group in shaping the prevailing world view which gives a people an interpretation of the age. There have been many times where a single world view, growing out of and serving a dominant class, has prevailed. In the twelfth century—the "Age of Faith" symbolized by Innocent III—we see the apotheosis of Church control over society not in the uniformity of devotion, but, as Bryan Wilson has put it, "because the imprint of faith and order demanded by ecclesiastical authority dominated the social framework." The closest analogue today—in the regulation of daily life, the heavy-handed control of production and distribution, and the restraint of impulse and the glorification of authority—is the Soviet world, where the Party exercises complete cultural hegemony. It is an ideologically prescribed social order.

Marxists have assumed that under capitalism there has also been a single cultural hegemony—the ideas of the "ruling class." Yet the astonishing fact is that in the last hundred years, if there has been a dominant influence—in the high culture at least—it has been the avowed enemy of that class, Modernism.

At the start, the capitalist economic impulse and the cultural drive of modernity shared a common source, the ideas of liberty and liberation, whose embodiments were "rugged individualism" in economic affairs and the "unrestrained self" in culture. Though the two had a common origin in the repudiation of tradition and the authority of the past, an adversary relation between them quickly developed. One can say, as Freud would, that the discipline required by work was

threatened by the libidinal energies diverted to culture. This may perhaps be true, but it is abstract. What would seem to be the more likely historical explanation is that the bourgeois attitudes of calculation and methodical restraint came into conflict with the impulsive searchings for sensation and excitement that one found in Romanticism, and which passed over into Modernism. The antagonism deepened as the organization of work and production became bureaucratized and individuals were reduced to roles, so that the norms of the workplace were increasingly at variance with the emphasis on self-exploration and self-gratification. The thread connecting Blake to Byron to Baudelaire—who is the avatar of Modernism—may not be literal, but it is a figurative symbolic lineage.

So long as work and wealth had a religious sanction, they possessed a transcendental justification. But when that ethic eroded, there was a loss of legitimation, for the pursuit of wealth alone is not a calling that justifies itself. As Schumpeter once shrewdly remarked: The stock exchange is a poor substitute for the Holy Grail.

The central point is that—at first, for the advanced social groups, the intelligentsia and the educated social classes, and later for the middle class itself—the *legitimations of social behavior passed from religion to modernist culture*. And with it here was a shift in emphasis from “character,” which is the unity of moral codes and disciplined purpose, to an emphasis on “personality,” which is the enhancement of self through the compulsive search for individual differentiation. In brief, not work but the “life style” became the source of satisfaction and criterion for desirable behavior in the society.

Yet paradoxically, the life style that became the imago of the free self was not that of the businessman, expressing himself through his “dynamic drive,” but that of the artist defying the conventions of the society. And, as I have tried to show (see pp. 38–41), increasingly, it is the artist who begins to dominate the audience, and to impose his judgment as to what is to be desired and bought. The paradox is completed when the bourgeois ethic, having collapsed in the society, finds few defenders in the culture (do any writers defend *any* institutions?) and Modernism as an attack on orthodoxy, has triumphed and become the regnant orthodoxy of the day.

V

Any tension creates its own dialectic. Since the market is where social structure and culture cross, what has happened is that in the last fifty years the economy has been geared to producing the life styles paraded by the culture. Thus, not only has there been a contradiction *between* the realms, but that tension has produced a further contradiction *within* the economic realm itself. In the world of capitalist enterprise, the nominal ethos in the spheres of production and organization is still one of work, delayed gratification, career orientation, devotion to the enterprise. Yet, on the marketing side, the sale of goods, packaged in the glossy images of glamour and sex, promotes a hedonistic way of life whose promise is the voluptuous gratification of the lineaments of desire. The consequence of this contradiction, as I put it in these pages, is that a corporation finds its people being straight by day and swingers by night.

What has happened in society in the last fifty years—as a result of the erosion of the religious ethic and the increase in discretionary income—is that *the culture has taken the initiative in promoting change*, and the economy has been geared to meeting these new wants.

In this respect, there has been a significant reversal in the historical pattern of social change. During the rise of capitalism—in the “modernization” of any traditional society—one could more readily change the economic structure of a society: by forcing people off the land into factories, by imposing a new rhythm and discipline of work, by using brutal means or incentives (e.g., the theory of interest as the reward for “abstinence” from consumption) to raise capital. But the “superstructure”—the patterns of family life, the attachments to religion and authority, the received ideas that shaped people’s perceptions of a social reality—was more stubbornly resistant to change.

Today, by contrast, it is the economic structure that is the more difficult to change. Within the enterprise, the heavy bureaucratic layers reduce flexible adaptation, while union rules inhibit the power of management to control the assignment of jobs. In the society, the economic enterprise is subject to the challenges of various veto groups (e.g., on the location of plants or the use of the environment) and subject more and more to regulation by government.

But in the culture, fantasy reigns almost unconstrained. The media are geared to feeding new images to people, to unsettling traditional conventions, and the highlighting of aberrant and quirky behavior

which becomes imagos for other to imitate. The traditional is stodgy, and the "orthodox" institutions such as family and church are on the defensive about their inability to change.

Yet if capitalism has been routinized, Modernism has been trivialized. After all, how often can it continue to shock, if there is nothing shocking left? If experiment is the norm, how original can anything new be? And like all bad history, Modernism has repeated its end, once in the popgun outbursts of Futurism and Dadaism, the second time in the phosphorescent parodies of Pop paintings and the mindless minimalism of conceptual art. The exclamation points that end each sentence of the Manifestoes have simply become four dots that trail away in the tedium of endless repetition. And what is there in the end. As Beckett summed it up in his sad dialogue:⁹

Vladimir: Say you are, even if it's not true.

Estragon: What am I to say?

Vladimir: Say, I am happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Vladimir: So am I.

Estragon: So am I.

Vladimir: We are happy.

Estragon: We are happy. (Silence.) What do we do now, now that we are happy.

Vladimir: Wait for Godot.

In the revelation of wisdom, the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk because life had become gray on gray. In the victorious apocalypse of Modernism, the dawn is a series of gaudy colors whirling in strobic light. Today, Modernism has become not the work of serious artists but the property of the *culturati*, the "cultural mass" (see p. 20), the distribution sector of cultural production, for whom the shock of the old has become the chic of the new. The *culturati* have carried over, in rhetoric, the adversary stance against bourgeois orderliness and sobriety, yet they impose a conformity of their own on those who deviate from its guarded canons.

In the 1960s, one beheld the "new" phenomenon of the counter-culture. Yet the very name was a conceit. The "adversary culture" was concerned with art, the use of the imagination to transfigure recalcitrant memory or intractable materials into a *work* that could, in its power, transcend its time. It existed in the realm of culture. The so-called counter-culture was a children's crusade that sought to

⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954) p. 39. Reprinted by permission.

eliminate the line between fantasy and reality and act out in life its impulses under a banner of liberation. It claimed to mock bourgeois prudishness, when it was only flaunting the closet behavior of its liberal parents. It claimed to be new and daring when it was only repeating in more raucous form—its rock noise amplified in the electronic echo-chamber of the mass media—the youthful japes of a Greenwich Village bohemia of a half century before. It was less a counter-culture than a counterfeit culture.

In this double contradiction of capitalism, what has been established in the last thirty years has been the tawdry rule of fad and fashion: of "multiples" for the *culturati*, hedonism for the middle classes, and pornotopia for the masses. And in the very nature of fashion, it has trivialized the culture.

VI

Has Modernism been "co-opted," as Herbert Marcuse suggests? In one dimension, yes. It has been converted into a commodity for promotion and profit. But in the deeper transformations of structure, that process can only undermine the foundations of capitalism itself. The sociological truism is that a societal order is shored up by its legitimations, which provide the defenses against its despisers. But the legitimation of the culture, as I have argued, is the quest for self-gratification and the expression of "personality." It attacks established orthodoxy in the name of personal autonomy and heterodoxy. Yet what modern culture has failed to understand is that Orthodoxy is not the guardian of an existent order, but is itself a judgment on the adequacy and moral character of beliefs, from the standpoint of "right reason." The paradox is that "heterodoxy" itself has become conformist in liberal circles, and exercises that conformity under the banner of an antinomian flag. It is a prescription, in its confusions, for the dissolution of a shared moral order.

Does power still lie in the economic realm, and largely in the hands of the giant corporations? To a considerable extent this is still so in Western society, yet such an argument misreads the nature of societal change today. A capitalist order had historical strength when it fused property with power through a set of ruling families to maintain the continuity of the system. The first deep, internal structural change in capitalism was the divorce of family and property from managerial power and the loss of continuity through the chair of elites. Economic power today lies in *institutions* whose chiefs cannot pass along their

power to their heirs and who, increasingly—since property is not private (but corporate), and technical skill, not property, is the basis of managerial positions—no longer have the traditional natural rights, justifications, and legitimacy in the exercise of that power, and feel it keenly.¹⁰ The larger fact is that a modern society multiplies the number of constituencies and, given the increasing interdependence of economic and social effects, the political order becomes the place where power is wielded in order to manage the *systemic* problems arising out of that interdependence and the increasing competition of other, state-directed economies. The major consequence, as I argue in the section on “The Public Household” (p. 227 et seq.), is the expansion of State power, and the fact that the State budget, not the division of profits within the enterprise, becomes the major arbiter of economic decisions (including the formation of capital), and that competition not between capitalist and workers, but between the multiple constituencies (where corporations still exercise a large degree of influence) is the mode of allocating power in the society.

VII

A final word on religion, which for me is the fulcrum of the book. I do not (*pace* Durkheim) see religion as a “functional necessity” for society, or that without religion a society will dissolve. I do not believe in religion as a patch for the unraveled seams of society. Nor do societies “dissolve,” though in periods of extreme crises (like times of war) the loss of legitimation may sap the will to resist. Religions cannot be manufactured. Worse, if they were, the results would be spurious and soon vanish in the next whirl of fashion.

As Max Weber bitingly observed more than a half century ago: The need of literary, academic, or cafe-society intellectuals to include religious feelings in the inventory of their sources of impressions and sensations, and among the topics for discussion, has never yet given rise to a new religion. Nor can a religious renaissance be generated by the need of authors to compose books, or by the far more effective need of clever publishers to sell such books. No matter how much the appearance of a widespread religious interest may be stimulated, no religion has ever re-

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of that change, see my essay, “The Break-up of Family Capitalism,” in my book, *The End of Ideology* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960).

sulted from the needs of intellectuals or from their chatter. The whirligig of fashion will presently remove this subject of conversation and journalism, which fashion has made popular.¹¹

Religions grow out of the deepest needs of individuals sharing a common awakening, and are not created by “engineers of the soul.”

My concern with religion goes back to what I assume is the constitutive character of culture: the wheel of questions that brings one back to the existential predicaments, the awareness in men of their finiteness and the inexorable limits to their power (the transgression of which is *hamartia*), and the consequent effort to find a coherent answer to reconcile them to the human condition. Since that awareness touches the deepest springs of consciousness, I believe that a culture which has become aware of the limits in exploring the mundane will turn, at some point, to the effort to recover the sacred.¹²

We stand, I believe, with a clearing ahead of us. The exhaustion of Modernism, the aridity of Communist life, the tedium of the unrestrained self, and the meaninglessness of the monolithic political chants, all indicate that a long era is coming to a slow close. The impulse of Modernism was to leap beyond: beyond nature, beyond culture, beyond tragedy—to explore the *apeiron*, the boundless, driven by the self-infiniting spirit of the radical self.

We are groping for a new vocabulary whose keyword seems to be limits: a limit to growth, a limit to the spoliation of the environment, a limit to arms, a limit to the tampering with biological nature. Yet if we seek to establish a set of limits in the economy and technology, will we also set a limit to the exploration of those cultural experiences which go beyond moral norms and embrace the demonic in the delusion that all experience is “creative”? Can we set a limit to *hubris*? The answer to that question could resolve the *cultural* contradiction of capitalism and its deceptive double, *semblable et frère*,* the culture of modernity. It would leave only the economic and political mundane to be tamed.

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January, 1978
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* Charles Baudelaire: “— Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!”

¹¹ *The Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 137.

¹² This is the theme of my Hobbhouse Lecture, given at the London School of Economics, May 19, 1977, as “The Return of the Sacred: the Argument on the Future of Religion,” and printed in the *British Journal of Sociology*, December 1977.