THE CULTURAL CIVIL WAR AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH

Christopher Lasch

From the beginning capitalism is identical with dynamic economic growth. In the United States, the absence of a feudal past, a huge continent into which to expand, and the construction of an over-seas empire after the limits of continental expansion had been reached combined to create a uniquely favorable setting for capitalist expansion. Expansion in turn helped to spare American society some of the turmoil and class conflict capitalist development brought to Europe. The assumption that the next generation would live better than the present one mitigated the hardships of working class life, and the assumption that the wealth of society would increase drew some of the bitterness out of conflicts over its distribution. Quarrels over an expanding sum of goods are bound to be conducted with more restraint than quarrels over a pool of goods no longer expanding.

The assumption of unlimited growth is untenable today. The long cycle of capitalist growth has reached its end. This consideration makes more urgent than ever an understanding of the role of social class in American life—a subject we could ignore in better times. In an economy no longer expanding, struggles over the distribution of wealth and resources will become more bitter. Class conflict will intensify. Fear that this conflict will get out of hand, threatening the rule of the corporations and the corporate rich, will encourage demands for charismatic presidential leadership, even for some form of dictatorial control.

Accepted ways of thinking about "class" hardly promote clear understanding of the subject.

According to a well-established social myth, the United States has become an overwhelmingly middle-class society. Those who hold this opinion argue that the number of blue-collar jobs has shrunk in relation to the number of white-collar jobs. They claim further that workers increasingly enjoy a middle-class standard of living, that skilled workers often make more money than college professors, and that the working class as a whole thinks of itself as a middle class and shares middle-class values. In fact, however, the expansion of the white-collar working force reflects for the most part increases in the number of clerical and sales workers, who usually receive even lower pay than most blue-collar workers. The two occupational

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categories growing most rapidly are the categories described by the *Bureau of the Census* as operatives and clerical workers: The clerical category consists largely of working-class women. "The existence of two giant categories of labor—operatives and clerical workers—as the two largest major occupational classifications and the composition by sex of each of these categories leads to the supposition that the most common occupational combination within the family is one in which the husband is an operative and the wife a clerk." This supposition in turn suggests not only that blue-collar and white-collar jobs are becoming for many purposes indistinguishable, but also that working-class families find it more and more difficult to get along on one income alone. So much for the myth of working-class affluence.

If we classify as indisputably working-class occupations craftsmen, operatives, clerical workers, sales workers, service workers and non-farm laborers, and exclude salesmen of advertising, insurance and real estate and salesmen employed in wholesale trade, we would have to estimate, according to Harry Braverman (*Labor and Monopoly Capital*, p. 397), that the most reliable figures indicate that the percentage of *workers* compared to the total labor force has actually risen during the course of the twentieth century—from about fifty percent in 1900 to seventy percent in 1970. And if we examine income levels instead of occupational categories, we find that sixty percent of American families in 1970 lived on less than $10,000, in other words lived below the "intermediate" level as defined by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. (Andrew Levinson, *The Working-Class Majority*, p. 32). "The average worker [I think he really means the average family] earned $9,500 in 1970, much closer to poverty than to affluence." (*Ibid*, 33) Like Braverman, Levinson notes that "more than anything else, it is working wives who have made possible even the modest standard of living workers enjoy" (34). As for the notion that affluent workers often make more than professionals, the so-called affluent workers make up only fifteen percent of the working class, and in any case the average salary of an assistant professor in 1970 exceeded the earnings of a skilled worker by more than $1000 and included a three-month vacation. "The popular concept of workers as grossly overpaid craftsmen with their speedboats is about as valid as the image of all blacks as welfare cheaters with Cadillacs. For all the cliches and myths, workers and the middle class are divided by a real and profound inequality" (*Ibid,* p. 37).

It is unlikely that many working-class people think of themselves as members of the middle class. Without savings, they are far more vulnerable to catastrophe—to unemployment or disabling illness—than are members of the middle class. They work at jobs that are often boring, disagreeable, dirty, and physically dangerous. As consumers, they are so heavily in debt that a working man's pay check is already spent before he gets his hands on it. Although workers' children go to college in growing numbers, many of them attend two-year community colleges, and higher education by no means assures mobility into the upper ranks of society. Indeed the income structure of the United States has remained remarkably stable since the 1920s, with a third of the nation living at the poverty level and the upper one per cent of the population controlling over twenty-five percent of the nation's wealth. (Richard Parker, *The Myth of the Middle Class*, pp. 79-81). In view of the persistence of such glaring inequalities, over many decades, it is not surprising that most workers remain cynical about the myth of equal opportunity. They are convinced that the "people who got the money," as one steelworker puts it, run the country (Levinson, 152). Even the skilled construction workers interviewed by E. E. LeMasters in a Wisconsin tavern—men who enjoy their jobs and hardly contemplate an overthrow of the established order—believe that men like themselves have nothing to say about the way the country is governed. "I find myself somewhat surprised," LeMasters writes, "at the depth and extent of the suspicion and distrust the blue-collar workers have of the white-collar middle and upper classes. [They] feel isolated and forgotten. Almost all of the television programs feature white-collar people (unless you consider Archie Bunker blue-collar); the movies feature white-collar men and women; mass magazines deal largely with the middle class; and advertisements are overwhelmingly white-collar. Thus the blue collar worker seldom seems himself portrayed [in the national media]." (LeMasters, *Blue Collar Aristocrats*, p. 199).

Far from assimilating middle-class values, the working class feels increasingly alienated from the dominant culture. This alienation has expressed itself, in recent years, in working-class support for George Wallace; in large-scale working-class defections from the Democratic party in 1972, (when the McGovern campaign identified itself with feminism and other varieties of middle-class cultural liberation); in failure or refusal to take part in elections (otherwise known as "voter apathy"); in the growing number of wildcat strikes; and in the growing number of union contracts voted down by the rank-and-file. Working-class people are convinced that their leaders have sold them out, and that neither politicians nor union officials can be

counted on to represent working-class interests. They believe "nobody speaks for us." The disaffection of "middle America" translates into public opinion polls which show that growing numbers of people think politicians are crooked, that government can't be trusted, that it doesn't matter who gets elected to office, that government can do very little to reduce crime or bring down inflation to acceptable levels or control unemployment or lower the tax burden, and neither the country's prospects or their own personal prospects are likely to undergo significant improvement.

The dominant values in American society have little appeal to workers. A permissive, therapeutic morality that demands sympathy and understanding for criminals, sex offenders, and juvenile delinquents offends working-class ideas of justice, according to which people should accept the consequences of their actions. The campaign for legalized abortion calls up some of the same feelings. Women's liberation impressed working-class women as a movement dominated by professional women and indifferent to the harsher conditions experienced by the masses. "They are talking about women's rights, but which women? They're not talking about the masses of people." The speaker, a black woman from Atlanta who had organized a union of domestic servants, has no illusions about men or any temptation to put them "on no pedestal either." But the brutal conditions of the ghetto make her see the relations between men and women in a different light from the way they appear to middle-class women, who can dispense with the protection of males insofar as they have come to enjoy the protection of the state. "I've been a free woman all my life," says Mrs. Bolden. ". . .But a man is your protection" (Nancy Seifer, *Nobody Speaks for Me!*, pp. 170-72). Another working-class woman, also a labor organizer, captures some of the same feelings when she doubts whether Gloria Steinem "had to go through what we've had to go through. . . .I feel like maybe we've had to deal with life more realistically, having problems presented to us that maybe were never presented to her" (*Ibid*, pp. 247-48).

Middle-class intellectuals and radicals should submit to the useful experiment of looking at their own way of life through the eyes of their servants—for example, through the eyes of a white Catholic woman from Somerville, Massachusetts, who works for an affluent professional family in Cambridge, and who thinks the woman she works for is "crazy" to enter the job market when she doesn't need the money. She reports that her employers spend much of the day weighing themselves, worrying about being "depressed," and trying on new clothes and "looking in one mirror and then another mirror." When the wife has arguments with her husband, she cries or withholds her sexual favors. "I'd never do that!" the maid says indignantly. "I'd rather scream and shout and throw dishes than hold out on my husband that way. It's being sneaky and dishonest."

> *The house is full of talk* [she goes on] *even early in the morning. He's read something that's bothered him, and she's read something that's bothered her. They're both ready to phone their friends. The kids hear all that and they start complaining about what's bothering* them—*about school, usually. They're all so* critical. *I tell my kids to obey the teacher and listen to the priest; and their father gives them a whack if they cross him. But it's different when I come to fancy Cambridge. In that house, the kids speak back to their parents, act as fresh and snotty as can be. I want to scream sometimes when I hear those brats talking as if they know everything.*
> (Robert Coles, "The Maid and the Missus," *Radcliffe Quarterly*, June 1978, pp. 78-80).

The construction workers studied by LeMasters take an unsentimental view of marriage and family life. Many of them are "disenchanted" with their own marriages. Nevertheless they recognize that family life represents a stabilizing influence, a source of personal discipline, in a world where personal disintegration remains always an imminent danger. "I've seen what happens to some of these guys when they leave their wife and kids; most of them start to drink too much, begin chasing women, and the first thing you know they're in trouble. I've seen that happen to quite a few men in the past twenty years" (LeMasters, *op. cit.*, pp. 40, 48). The well-publicized campaign against the nuclear family, conducted not only by feminists but by middle-class radicals, the helping professions, and other spokesmen for progressive points of view has little appeal for the working class, which does not subscribe to the dogma that personal liberation lies in emancipation from family ties. Nor do these people have much sympathy with child-centered approaches to education and child-rearing. They believe that children need the guidance and discipline of adults, and for this reason their child-rearing practices are often stigmatized as hopelessly "authoritarian" by enlightened middle-class observers.

Upper middle-class culture, a culture of secular humanitarianism and therapeutic enlightenment—the culture of narcissism I have discussed elsewhere—stresses the values of creativity, self-expression, and self-actualization. Its style of social control and socialization is manipulative rather than authoritative. It prefers to avoid confrontations that might release angry emotions. It seeks to avoid moral recrimination and guilt. When things go wrong it blames bad social conditions, not human selfishness or stubbornness. This culture has lost the sense of sin. Indeed, it regards sin a kind of sickness, curable by psychiatric intervention or by social programs designed to prevent the spread of mental illness and social pathology. It believes that the penal system should concern itself not with punishment or retribution but with rehabilitiation. It believes that young people represent all that is best in society, and it ritually defers to youthful "idealism" in discussions of pedagogy, discipline, or politics. Upper middle-class parents self-consciously try to make children feel loved and wanted, even though they no longer know very clearly how to take care of them. Upper middle-class culture sides sentimentally with the underdog. It is easily moved by appeals to white liberal guilt—moved, if not to action, at least to tears and to rhetorical self-castigation. It believes in moral relativism and the paramount value of tolerance, which in practice works out to doing your own thing. Since it upholds no moral standard except the endless variety of moral standards, it hesitates even to enforce the minimal prudential consensus of the community, for instance by putting a murderer to death. It believes in the sanctity of human life, but what this really has come to mean in our society is that life must be carefully hoarded and preserved, protected from danger and risk, and prolonged as long as possible.

I have exaggerated the unattractive features of the prevailing therapeutic morality in order to make two points. First, the obvious, that these therapeutic values are profoundly repugnant to people whose simpler and more direct, and I would argue more realistic, moral perceptions, reflect the harsh material conditions under which they live. Second, the not so obvious point that working-class culture, working-class authoritarianism as it is labeled with little understanding, cannot be explained simply as a backlash to the civil rights movement, the student movement of the sixties, the woman's movement, and other campaigns to liberalize American society. This is the usual explanation of the "cultural civil war" that is emerging more and more clearly as the background of American politics. My judgement is that this "cultural civil war" represents the cultural dimension of class conflict, and that in the last analysis it grows out of the economic disparities that have characterized American society for a long time and are bound to widen as our economic resources shrink. But this is not the interpretation accepted by most observers of the contemporary scene. A few years ago, Michael Miles, in a book on the student movement (*The Radical Probe*) wrote that "student revolt has generated counter-revolt and a cultural civil war within American society. This 'cultural civil war,'. . .fundamentally, . . . is a simple political reaction, whose point is to suppress a radical movement which by its nature poses a threat to the *status quo* distribution of power and wealth" [cf, Lipset, Bell, and other neoconservatives]. Thus Miles neatly identifies cultural conservatism (if that is even the right term) with political reaction, as if the "white ethnic minorities" who lead the cultural counter-revolt, had a class interest in the existing distribution of power and wealth. This idea that the "cultural civil war" represents a "simple political reaction" rests, then, on the familiar assumption that America is a middle-class society, and that since workers are already middle-class in their outlook, they can be expected to oppose any movement for change.

A corollary of the middle-class myth of American society—the concept of status politics—serves Miles, as it serves many neoconservatives, as an additional argument with which to condemn working-class culture as politically backward and reactionary. Because working-class consciousness, according to Miles, "has never transcended the parameters of American capitalism," class consciousness in the United States is "manifested only as class resentment." The working class and lower class "resent the youth culture both because it is an upper-class phenomenon and because it offends their petit-bourgeois sensibilities" (*Ibid*, p. 56). In other words, people of working-class origin, recently promoted to middle-class status, feel threatened by the counterculture, resent the advantages enjoyed as their birthright by middle-class children (for which they have had to struggle and save), and take out their anger in an ill-tempered "politics of morality." "They have learned property values from the suburban life," and their individualism is "further reinforced by a heritage of fundamentalist Anglo-Saxon Protestantism" (*Ibid,* pp. 51-2). Although "their social integration is ensured for the immediate future by economic growth and general prosperity," they are culturally so "insecure" that they embrace the right-wing politics of moralistic authoritarianism in order to vent their envy of their betters.

This interpretation of working-class politics, besides resting on the assumption of "economic growth and general prosperity," which the events of the 'seventies have called into question, is objectionable also because it incorporates so many of the prejudices of upper middle-class ideology. This interpretation attempts to disguise snobbery as sociology—the typical reaction of middle-class intellectuals faced with a working class culture they do not understand and find morally repugnant. In fact, the so-called cultural civil war goes much deeper than Michael Miles imagines. Working class people do not reject middle-class values because of status anxiety or resentment—the maid interviewed by Coles says in so many words, "I don't envy the rich women I see over in that Cambridge house!" Rather, they regard that culture, with its talk of universal tolerance and understanding, as a sentimental lie. The permissive morality of self-actualization does not offend the "petit bourgeois sensibilities" of working-class men and women, it offends their sense of reality. They distrust the ideology of personal and social uplift because it too often conceals class exploitation and class contempt beneath a veneer of good intentions. They distrust politicians, not because they suffer from cultural "insecurity," but because politicians have too often lied to them.

The so-called crisis of confidence in our society arises not from some indefinable "malaise" or from "narcissistic" self-indulgence but from the realistic perception, on the part of working people, that things are getting worse instead of better and that political and cultural elites are cynically indifferent to popular needs. The crisis of confidence, in short, reflects a failure of every kind of leadership: a failure not merely of our political and cultural leaders themselves but of the institutions through which leadership is exercised, including not only the state but the school, the family, the political party, and (by no means the least important) the church. If "these men don't trust politicians," as LeMasters writes, and if their "attitude of cynicism is generalized to include business leaders and trade union officials" and all the "'big wheels' in our society," these facts argue not merely for a failure of moral and political leadership but for a pervasive crisis of legitimacy.

Religion. The recent growth of "non-traditional religions"—of cults adhering to fundamentalist interpretations of religious truth and going in for faith-healing, snake-handling, shouting, and other forms of frenzy—has occasioned much alarm in liberal circles. As we should expect, enlightened opinion scorns such bizarre expressions of religiosity as further proof of the backwardness of the proletarian mind. The struggle against religious fundamentalism, after all, has been one of the formative experiences of American progressivism. Ever since the 'twenties, liberals have associated fundamentalism with rural reaction and have done their best to stamp it out. The discovery that they have failed, and that fundamentalism, far from being confined to benighted rural parts of the country, is spreading to the cities (and even making inroads among middle-class youth) comes as a rude surprise.

But surely the explanation of this development lies not in popular ignorance and superstition but in the failure of the mainline churches, Protestant and Catholic alike, which have capitulated so completely to the spirit of secularism that people turn to fundamentalism by default, as the only spiritual alternative to the industrial, bureaucratic, capitalist order. I do not mean that popular religions are explicitly hostile to capitalism or that they aim at its destruction. Most of them are completely apolitical. But they do speak to needs that capitalist societies have ignored. They are expressions, sometimes highly perverted and reactionary expressions, of the need for community, stability, and authoritative moral leadership; the need to find meaning and order in life; the need to submit to a rigorous and demanding spiritual discipline, and to give oneself to a cause higher than the self. A culture of hedonistic self-indulgence cannot provide moral satisfactions of this kind, and neither can religious organizations that equate piety with psychic health and self-awareness (and political relevance.)

The failure of the mainline churches does not lie in their political conservatism. The point is not that they are slavishly subservient to the political status quo but that they oppose to it a bankrupt vision of social change, one that culminates in a cult of politics and the state, a vision that confuses political change with spiritual salvation. Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of the social gospel remains compelling today, and it has implications that reach beyond the failure of the American intelligentsia. The social gospel, in the beginning at least, represented an attempt to recover some of the original meaning of Christianity and to identify religion with the interests of the common people. But the preachers of the social gospel, according to Niebuhr, in their effort to make the church socially

relevant ended by absorbing the secularized culture of progressivism and giving it a religious veneer. They not only became social reformers, socialists, and even revolutionaries—which was perhaps a step in the right direction—they identified socialism itself with the Kingdom of God. Some of them became apologists for Stalinism on the grounds that communism represented the highest form of moral perfection. The exponents of the social gospel, according to Niebuhr, forgot that the aim of political action is not moral perfection or brotherly love or any other kind of salvation, but justice. Niebuhr's concerns are found in the pages of this journal, this citation a decade ago: social gospel preachers went out into the world but took little of the church with them. "We have turned to the more scientific and neutral documentation for such preaching as we have done on the subject [of social justice and racism]. [Having rejected fundamentalism,] we turned away from seeking answers in the Scriptures. Our flocks have rejected social analysis and political meddling as none of the preachers' business—as they should have done (though their reasons were wrong)—so that our congregations have been left to flounder in the mire of religion. . ." (*Up to Our Steeples in Politics*, pp. 42-43, *passim*).

I don't know of a better explanation of the collapse of the civil rights movement, at least in its cultural dimension. The genius of Martin Luther King, Jr., lay in his ability to politicize religion without giving up the idiom of unsophisticated popular religiosity. Most of his allies however, most poignantly in the case of his white allies in the South, were uncomfortable with this idiom and sought to justify political action against racism with arguments drawn from modern sociology and from the scientific refutation of racial prejudice. In doing so, they ceased to offer their congregations anything Christian, anything that could not just as easily be found in institutions of higher learning or studies of the race problem sponsored by foundations or the reports of governmental agencies. Since their congregations were looking for religious guidance, not sociological expertise, they turned away from these "pathetic efforts to inject morality and high-mindedness into politics"—"to bring moral dimensions to the great issues"—and embraced fringe churches that are fundamentalist, apolitical if not downright reactionary, and often militantly anti-intellectual as well.

Gary Wills (*Bare Ruined Choirs*, pp. 89-90; 98-9; 135; 250) makes the same point about Catholicism. Its recent history, he argues, shows a "basic failure in authoritative standards." The presidency of John F. Kennedy, which coincided with the papcy of John XXIII, seemed to herald a Catholic revival, just as the civil rights movement in the same period seemed to represent the cutting edge of social change. The hopes of the early sixties—the ruins of which we live in today—seemed to be embodied in those heroes of the modern church, Martin King and Pope John, but also in John Kennedy's New Frontier. Instead of stamping its imprint on the modern world, according to Wills, the Church capitulated to it. Catholic liberals took Harvey Cox's celebration of consumerism and the secular city as the last word on modernism. Cox in turn acknowledged the influence of Teilhard de Chardin, whose works enjoyed a posthumous vogue in the sixties because they managed to equate spiritual progress with technological progress. Another admirer of Teilhard, Sister Jacqueline Grennan (later Mrs. Wechsler), president of Webster College and then of Hunter, spoke of him as the "one who had the most profound influence on my own thinking." Mrs. Wechsler's eagerness to identify herself with the cause of progress, her efforts to "laicize" Catholic education and to get rid of the "medieval habits" worn by nuns, her boundless admiration for Kennedy and his New Frontier, her ceaseless travels to attend high-level meetings and to introduce the fresh Catholic point of view into high-level discussions of world problems, in short her "hopefulness toward any new situation," as Wills puts it, exemplified the church's surrender to the dogma of progress. In view of all this, it is not surprising that a real Catholic radical like Daniel Berrigan moved away from his early infatuation with Teilhard to an understanding of our "obscene Olympianism based on technology"—even as he moved toward a "Gospel conservatism," thereby retracing (in a different form and in a Catholic context) Niebuhr's spiritual and political journey forty years earlier.

Much serious religion tends, today, to be politically radical and theological conservative" (Wills). The point can be stated in broader form: political radicalism increasingly has to identify itself with values usually identified with cultural conservation. Political conservatives have too long monopolized the values of family, law and order, patriotism, and continuity, and it is time for radicals (if indeed it is not already too late) to reclaim the ground that they have ceded to their political opponents. The problem is not merely one of political tactics. The culture of scientific enlightenment, therapeutic morality, and personal hedonism has developed by turning its back on the world of experience, which includes not only practical know-how

but the collective traditions of humanity—"those divine reservoirs of collective experience, religion, science, art, philosophy, the self-subordinating service of which is almost the measure of human happiness" (Van Wyck Brooks). The gap between knowledge based on experience and knowledge based on scientific analysis expresses itself politically in the ascendancy of the expert, the ascendancy of a professional and managerial elite which monopolizes esoteric information inaccessible to laymen. Culturally it takes the form of the so-called crisis of the humanities.

The study of history, religion, and philosophy now model themselves on science or, what's worse, confine themselves to "values clarification," which in practice usually boils down to putting the best possible face on the actions taken by the powerful. Because sophisticated knowledge has given up the task of refining and criticizing experience, because it no longer addresses common problems or uses common speech, common people are turning to superstitions and "floundering in the mire" of faith-healing and spiritual quackery fostered by the media and what is worse, politics.

However unattractive these manifestations of the spirit may strike sophisticated observers, the needs that produce them can no longer be ignored or stigmatized as culturally backward. On the contrary, it is in many ways the culture of modern scientific and humanistic enlightenment that is backward. Their failures become more obvious, and more appalling and dangerous in their consequences, with the passage of time.☐