

# Flight from the Satanic City: the American "Mainstream" and the Rejection of Cosmopolitanism

Fred Matthews

Number 15, Fall 1990

Les États-Unis en question

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1002113ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1002113ar>

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## Article abstract

Mainly using points taken from a survey of Californian daily newspapers Fred Matthews tries to dissect and explain the rise of contemporary "Mainstream" America. He introduces us to the way three paradigmatic historians, C. A. Beard, R. Hofstadter and P. Miller, have accounted for the sources of this current which can be seen as an escape from the perils of the open society and a refuge in a commoditized pseudo-*Gemeinschaft*.

## Publisher(s)

Département de sociologie - Université du Québec à Montréal

## ISSN

0831-1048 (print)

1923-5771 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Matthews, F. (1990). Flight from the Satanic City: the American "Mainstream" and the Rejection of Cosmopolitanism. *Cahiers de recherche sociologique*, (15), 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1002113ar>

# Flight from the Satanic City: the American "Mainstream" and the Rejection of Cosmopolitanism.

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Fred MATTHEWS

## Introduction

This essay is an effort to organize a variety of materials relating to contemporary cultural conflict in one small, but arguably influential, corner of the U.S., the central California coastal strip and adjoining Central Valley, and to interpret them as aspects of a massive reaction against urban cosmopolitanism, an attempt to rebuild sheltered enclaves in which their version of "traditional American values" can be protected and transmitted. This effort to repel jagged-edged modernity can be seen as impelled by a familiar psychological mechanism, the avoidance of cognitive dissonance — the co-existence in one's mind of contradictory perceptions or beliefs. The presence of discrepant beliefs can produce psychic energy leading to a number of different reactions: a kind of sophisticated tolerance and pluralism, a "taste for sour," in extreme cases leading to the indifferentism now attacked by absolutist intellectuals like Allan Bloom; or, withdrawal, to restore cognitive consonance by avoiding situations that generate perceptions of dissonance; or, aggression, to eliminate the sources of dissonance in the situation. Aggression, in turn, may be physical or mental, the latter signifying the reimposition of firm categories of judgment that have been challenged by the dissonant situation<sup>1</sup>.

That the modern city is a, perhaps the, uniquely intense geographic centre of CogDis was the assumption or argument of to more universalist categories. Howard Kushner's thorough study of psychiatric and sociological explanations of suicide, up to and including Durkheim, has shown the monotonous insistence on correlating self-destruction with urban plurality and dissonance despite a good deal

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "cognitive dissonance" and "cognitive constancy" are in general learned use; they stem from Lionel Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford, 1957, though several other psychologists had offered similar theories. A brief, cogent restatement is in R. Harr and R. Lamb, (ed.), *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1983, p. 90-93.

of evidence suggesting that traditional rural areas had suicide rates at least as high as Paris or New York. Certainly for American social science, reflecting popular opinion, the industrial-commercial metropolis was the ultimate modern symbol, representing a merger of activity, opportunity, and vulgarity with cultural and normative plurality. "Urban" processes were not totally unique, but were special in their visibility and concentration. The experience of "all those aliens and weirdos on the street" was the paradigm perception for Chicago Sociology, pushing intelligence off in a half dozen directions. For them, in the 1910s, it was exciting as well as dangerous, and that response probably still exists for many people; but we now find an overwhelmingly negative response to the increasing "otherness" of the late 20th century, one which attempts to bracket it as thoroughly pathological tissue in a larger geographic area where the forces of health struggle to contain the spread of infection<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps the intensity of contemporary antiurbanism arises from the quantum leap which occurred in the Satanic Sixties — the moment when the empirical pluralism of urban living changed into positive demands for recognition of an egalitarian ethical pluralism, in which (for example) street people (a salient presence in American metropoli) claimed equal rights to pursue their vocation. Everybody was legitimate, everybody was equal — a point already implicit in much sociological literature, which now became an overt political platform (as in Jesse Jackson's notion of a rainbow coalition). This triggered the most acute kind of CogDis, a direct challenge to Americans' historically-rooted notion of a natural moral hierarchy. The best statement of this process of denaturalizing cultural norms is in a book written before its final stage, Daniel Boorstin's classic study of *THE LOST WORLD OF THOMAS JEFFERSON*. Boorstin noted that the tensions in Jefferson's philosophic system were contained partly by expansive definition of terms like Nature (descriptive laws which served as moral norms) and partly by the human and natural environment itself. The belief in a given, unchanging human nature was bolstered by the slow pace of life, the stable environment, and the relative homogeneity of those people considered people. A century later, the urban world of constant motion, change, and variety, had undercut the visible supports for Jefferson's kind of naturalistic morality, and was encouraging academics to offer new models of human variability and change in terms like "culture" (at least implicitly plural) and the "looking-glass self," which saw personality as fluid, formed and reformed in process, interaction. Boorstin shrewdly quotes a distinguished (and politically conservative) ethical naturalist of the early 20th century, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. For Holmes in 1919, the test of truth was not conformity to an order of Nature or human nature seen as

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<sup>2</sup> H. I. Kushner, "Suicide, Gender and the Fear of the City in 19th Century American Thought," paper presented to the Canadian Association for American Studies Conference, Montreal, November 2, 1990. H. I. Kushner, *Self-destruction in the Promised Land*, New Brunswick, Rutgers, 1989. Comments on sociology drawn from F. Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's Press, 1977, esp. p. 121-126.

external to our wishes, but the test of the market-place. Holmes did not mean simple popularity, but something like Charles Peirce's intersubjective consensus of expert observers; yet the transformation is powerful, and one can see why intellectual conservatives like Allan Bloom focus on Holmes as one of their 'relativists' and 'historicists,' the intellectuals who subverted an essential belief in absolute and knowable truths. A brilliant anthropological essay has treated two apparently opposite theories, Creationism and Sociobiology, as "ethno-sociologies", ideologies (as opponents see them) or folk belief-systems, which are proselyted precisely to re-naturalize, re-inevitabilize conventional American views about morality and "natural" sex roles<sup>3</sup>.

This is the sense in which the city has come to be the "objective correlative" of the central ethical issues of the late 20th century. To phrase it differently, the "cosmopolitanism" which earlier sociologists had found a source of vitality is now seen by very many Californians as pure threat. Cosmopolitanism, of course, is an ambiguous word (its power may derive from the ambiguity) — it may mean a society of sophisticates, or a varied mosaic of closed-off communities connected by some degree of tolerance. The question in California in the 1980s was what degree of tolerance could be maintained; whether intergroup relations would enter a stage of pervasive violence due to the delegitimation of the visibly or suspectedly different. The large California urban areas, the San Francisco Bay Area in particular, afford ideal areas for studying this process, not only because of the Sodom and Gomorrah image but because of the rapidity of change and the extreme and growing ethnic variety. In that area occur the starkest juxtapositions of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition with what academics like to call the Radical Right, but this paper, echoing President Bush and its own self-understanding, will refer to as the "Mainstream."

The term "Mainstream" offends some academics, perhaps because like other professional groups they tend to socialize mainly with the like-minded (another example of CogDis); perhaps also because like other men and women of the Left they hold proudly to the axiom that the People are always Virtuous. There is, however, empirical evidence for the assertion that very many Americans endorse "radical right" moral views (which they regard as the essence of virtue) *when* such views are detached from their social correlates, that is, not identified as the special property of Christian fundamentalists. John H. Simpson had the good idea of measuring the spread of their views by formulating them independently of source, thus freeing them from the stigma of "extremism." The result was revealing — as of 1980, while only 30% supported all four Radical Right tenets (opposition to abortion and homosexuality, support for school prayer and traditional roles for

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<sup>3</sup> D. J. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 243-248; A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987; J. P. Gray and L. D. Wolfe, "Sociobiology and Creationism: two ethnosociologies of American Culture," *American Anthropologist*, 84, September 1982, p. 580-594.

women), sizeable majorities supported every one of them--about 65% believed in traditional roles for women, 62% opposed abortion, 71% homosexual rights. In terms of age groups, the most "liberal" was 20-29, where 56% endorsed three or more of these positions; 3/4 of those in their 40s did. These categories are imprecise, and attitudes may fluctuate; all such studies are open to an infinite regress of methodological debate. Still, with all the possible objections, they should suggest that the "radical right" world view is supported by large numbers of Americans, who think of themselves as the mainstream of opinion<sup>4</sup>.

One finding by Simpson steers us back to Northern California, and may help explain the intensity of conflict there — the most liberal region was New England — 48.3% moral majority in its views, but it was followed by the Pacific states, 55% mainstream. And these gross figures hide very sharp demographic splits, which juxtapose traditionalists and swingers in adjoining communities or even the same neighborhood, leading to various responses from street violence to organizations of Christian fundamentalist computer experts. Simpson's findings date to 1980; there are newer surveys of college students, covering the late Carter and Reagan years, which show dramatic moves away from liberality in both the moral and the economic spheres, with the economic shift to low-tax laissez-fairism coming a couple of years earlier. This economic dimension is peripheral to this essay, but one wonders whether the turn back to absolutist economic doctrine then generated a need to reduce CogDis by returning to absolutist decalogical norms in every area. The dichotomy between economic and cultural issues may be arbitrary; certainly resentment at paying taxes to help morally unworthy persons, whose absence would benefit the society, is a pervasive theme at many middle-class suburban dinner tables. So pervasive indeed, as to raise questions about Kevin Phillips's enticing hypothesis of a new economic-based populism in the 1990s. One definition of the subject here is the reason why Phillips may be too optimistic — the thickness and force of a Mainstream mentality, which has deep historical roots, and defines the world through a mix of absolutist ethical and economic axioms<sup>5</sup>.

One of the sources for this paper is a perusal of the large and small newspapers published around the San Francisco Bay Area from 1986 to mid-1989, to build an impressionistic account of how groups are interrelating, and to build an ideal-typical "mentality," an account of the beliefs through which the Mainstream views the rapidly changing society. There is no claim here of perfect representativeness, only that these things (and more like them) happened and need

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<sup>4</sup> J. H. Simpson, "Moral Issues and Status Politics," in Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (ed.), *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation*, New York, Aldine, 1983, p. 187-205; D. R. Hoge, J. L. Hoge, J. Wittenberg, "The Return of the Fifties: Trends in College Students' Values between 1952 and 1984," *Sociological Forum*, 2, Summer 1987, p. 500-519.

<sup>5</sup> R. Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton, 1988, p. 248-251, p. 257-267.

discussion. A perfectly representative sample of popular consciousness in Northern California from 1986 to 1989 would probably stress shopping, family anxieties, traffic gridlock, and above all, professional sports, which have helped shape the mentality of win/lose, us/them. The second kind of source is the writings of major historians of the United States (not of California or the West) so as to try to show that Mainstream beliefs do have roots, need historical understanding as well as sociological surveys and contemporaristic explanations (like status-deprivation) to be comprehended.

## 1 Mainstream Concerns

In Northern California, at least, on the political level, the Mainstream Mentality centres on a rejection of Jesse Jackson's "rainbow coalition" as illegitimate, the modern equivalent of the "rum, romanism and rebellion" of 1884, outside the community of personal virtue and patriotic devotion which defines Americanism. More specifically, Mainstream beliefs can be seen in a variety of specific expressions — the National Rifle Association, with its extraordinary success in exploiting popular beliefs in autonomy, self-reliance and toughness; the intense emotion invested in the American flag, as sole, sufficient symbol of a homogeneous people united against external and internal enemies; popular willingness to fund massive new prison programs while public health facilities are cut to the point where plans for triage are considered; media campaigns to label environmentalists and slow-growth activists as effete, unAmerican wimps; increasingly intense ethnic conflict in universities. Minor but symptomatic events seem to activate the same emotional sources: the decision in early 1989 by three affluent Bay Area suburbs not to contribute to a county fund for the homeless, since these leafy paradises have no homeless; the strong press and public defense of the police officer who seriously injured a 58-year-old Hispanic grandmother while pushing back a Leftist demonstration against then-candidate Bush in 1988. Near the center of the Mainstream belief-structure is the spectre of AIDS and "AIDS people," who provide a classic metaphor of the contagion of evil, like Poe's Red Death, unite the varied threats to traditional belief, and offer a target for polemicists eager to stigmatize apparently distinct liberal causes. Plagues, of course, have been urban-centered; traditionally people fled the city to lower the risk of contagion<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The "Mainstream" delineated in the essay is an ideal-typical "mentality" constructed from the political and cultural news reported in the two San Francisco daily newspapers, the *Chronicle* (hereafter, *SFC*) and the *Examiner* (hereafter, *SFX*), supplemented by several "alternative" weeklies and many conversations with non-academic EuroCalifornians. Like all ideal-typical constructs, it is more logical and coherent than the belief-structure of most particular individuals. The use of this imagery by political and economic interests anxious to discredit liberalism intensified with a number of events in the mid-1980s: most important, the decisive

A survey of the regional press, and discussions with longtime residents, reveals a radically polarized society, where the conceptual distancing of those "unlike us" must be near the level achieved North and South in the period between Harper's Ferry and Fort Sumter. Perhaps the apparent constriction of human sympathies is more visible to those of us who have pursued careers outside the U.S.A. for many years. Stanley Meisler returned from the Paris Bureau of the *Los Angeles Times* to record that "After two decades overseas, home doesn't look so sweet." Meisler listed a number of features, some of them familiar to intellectuals since the 1910s — strident advertising, ugly and standardized architecture. But two of his complaints are especially relevant to the Californian mainstream: the narrower range of political choice, with a public "bribed by tax cuts and soothed by Reagan-years reassurance" so that it is "content to accept the argument that 'budget

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recall of several state Supreme Court justices believed to be soft on crime, but also the resurgence of anti-growth sentiment in local elections.

A few illustrative citations must suffice. On the crisis in public health care: Don Martinez, "Health Care in Alameda reported near collapse: ethicist's study calls any further cuts morally indefensible," *SFX*, July 29, 1989, A4. On the established conflict between liberals attempting to fund health, and conservatives cutting such programs to find money for police and prisons, see "Governor signs budget — health, welfare cut," *SFC*, July 8, 1989, A1, A6. The same issue nationally: "Bush gets cracking against crime," *SFC*, June 16, 1989, A25, with the President's description of prison guards as "domestic freedom fighters." Background to this sharp turn towards punishment, whose logical final step of mass executions is already proposed in private, can be found in: "Let the tumbrils roll," *Economist*, 311, April 1, 1989, p. 20-22; "Prisons: there must be a better way," *Ibid*, April 22, 1989, p. 28-30; and K. Barrett and R. Greene, "Prisons: the punishing cost," *Financial World*, 158, April 18, 1989, p. 18-22, which notes both the enormous cost and the potential for escalation. Efforts to break up the liberal belt continue, using special elections with low turnout: T. L. Thompson, "Recall Move vs. 3 Liberals: Conservative lashes back in Santa Cruz," *SFC*, July 17, 1989, A4.

On the issue of police tactics towards demonstrators, which continued to generate new subcontroversies into 1989, see J.L. Pimsleur and T. G. Keane, "Huerta case probers charge Chief's brother," *SFC*, July 12, 1989, A1, A14; B. J. Hernandez, "OCC: Jock Jordan obstructed grand jury's Huerta inquiry," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, July 12, 1989, p. 20; W. Hinckle, "Cops Can't Handle Crowds without Chaos," and S. A. Chin, "Mayor, Chief, back conduct of police. Blame agitators for violence at protest," *SFX*, March 23, 1989, A4. For the National Rifle Association, see "The Other Arms Race," *Time*, February 6, 1989, p. 20-26. Local comments on the flag cult: J. Wildermuth, "A rousing Flag Day with Oliver North," *SFC*, June 15, 1989, A18; R. Morse, "Capture the flag and other games," *SFX*, June 28, 1989, A3. On the dramatic rise of expressed hostility towards minorities at universities: C. Rowan, "Running racism off campus," *SFX*, June 28, 1989, A21. On AIDS and homosexuality as paradigmatic in the Mainstream view of liberalism's betrayal of absolute values, see below, note 25, and D. L. Kirp, "AIDS bigotry shows up on radio-TV shows," *SFX*, June 14, 1989, A23. Kirp notes a characteristic personalization in Mainstream thinking: anyone sympathetic to AIDS carriers must also have the infection.

restraints' make it impossible to do anything;" and the belief that social problems are caused by the wickedness of people outside the Mainstream, therefore not American and perhaps not human. Meisler quotes an English observer: "'Let them die.' The number of times I've heard that in this country. 'Let them die. It's incredible'<sup>7</sup>".

It may well be that ever-new California does everything more intensely, with less inhibition, than more settled and rooted regions of the nation. Its intense use of the mechanisms of 'direct democracy' means that a wide variety of subjects are politicized and polarized, with opinion reified in zero/sum fashion. Ernest May recently noted the origin of modern media politics in Richard Nixon's Southern California campaigns of the 1940s, and their appeal to mobile isolated people who had relatively few close ties outside their churches and families, and brought preexisting prejudices to interpret media-hyped events. California is certainly special in the continued presence of an articulate and active political Left — in the north, an uneasy rainbow coalition of academics, environmentalists, ethnics, feminists, former flower children, gays, labor loyalists, old and new Leftists, and miscellaneous Thoreauvians, who usually coalesce into a workable alliance producing large Democratic majorities in the coastal strip from Santa Cruz through Berkeley and San Francisco to San Rafael. This survival of an effective opposition maintains Mainstream anger, and inspires campaigns to split segments off from the rainbow coalition by stressing its rejection of traditional values. Many of the themes of the Republican campaign of 1988, with its successful exploitation of patriotic symbols and the fear of Black criminals, were already familiar in California; and if attitudes there are any index to national trends, then the Bush campaign was so successful because large numbers of EuroAmerican (and perhaps other) suburbanites do believe that liberal politicians, bureaucrats, and academics are conspiring to launch hordes of Willie Hortons up the hills into their backyards. Those who wish to see this Mainstream mentality as the possession of a constricted right-wing fringe might recall not only the election of 1988, but the highbrow best-seller of the 1980s, which was an impassioned polemic against the universities for brainwashing their students into abandoning universal verities in favor of vapid, gum-popping relativism. Whether Allan Bloom becomes the Savonarola of the academy remains to be seen; but the return to commonsense absolutism, the rejection of 'sophistication,' in the sense of the legitimacy of competing interpretations of experience, is powerfully present throughout the culture<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> On the subhuman quality of deviants from the Mainstream, see Gray and Wolfe, "Sociobiology and Creationism," (above, note 3); S. Meisler, "An American views U.S. through foreign eyes: after two decades overseas, home doesn't look so sweet," *SFC*, June 7, 1989, Briefing, p. 3 (B3). For similar testimony on the prevalence of genocidal comments: "Life beyond AIDS," *S.F. Bay Guardian*, June 21, 1989, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> E. R. May, "Crooked paths to greatness," *Times Literary Supplement*, #4565, September 28, 1990, 1024. For a typical foreign view of "direct democracy," *Economist*, 317, 13 October 1990, C1-C24; Bloom, *The Closing of the American*



## 2 Historians

It is time to turn to the insights of professional historians into the sources of Mainstream belief. The New Social History of the last twenty-five years has made an important contribution. It is a mosaic of distinct and often conflicting models, with one unifying theme: that American society lacks coherence and consensus. The finest expression of this root-metaphor, Robert Wiebe's picture of *The Segmented Society*, has molded the interpretation here. Two veteran historians deserve mention: Daniel Boorstin for the concept of "givenness," the tendency of *Americans* to assume, or hope, or struggle to prove, that their values are written into the structure of the universe (possibly not only Americans, this may be a cultural universal of unsophisticated taste, like preference for sweet over sour). Oscar Handlin has had a broad if diffuse impact, with a socio-psychoanalytic reading of American society as uniquely stressful and anxiety-provoking because lacking in the ties of traditional culture<sup>9</sup>.

And, for all the cogent criticism of his work, there is a crucial insight in the work of Charles Beard (1874-1948), the single dead historian of the U.S. whose work still excites large numbers of those still in the minority. For our purpose, the essential Beard is the the Beard of 1913, of *Economic Origins of the Constitution*, who argued that when things happen, it is typically because someone with an interest in the outcome wanted them to happen.

The theories of government which men entertain are emotional reactions to their property interests....Of course it may be shown that the 'general good' is the ostensible object of any particular act; but the general good is a passive force, and unless we know who are the several individuals that benefit in its name, it has no meaning. When it is so analyzed, immediate and remote

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*Mind*, esp. p. 33 for the assumption that academic champions of pluralism and "openness" are likely to have personal motives. For more popular parallels: Gray & Wolfe, "Sociobiology and Creationism" (above, note 3). For an analysis of Bloom's animosity towards historical consciousness": F. Matthews, "The Attack on 'Historicism'" *American Historical Review*, 95, April, 1990, p. 429-447.

<sup>9</sup> W. A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, New York, Dell, 1962; and *The Roots of the Modern American Empire*, New York, Random House, 1969; Richard A. Melanson, "The social and political thought of William Appleman Williams," *Western Political Quarterly*, 31, September, 1978, p. 392-409; F. Matthews, "The Coming of the Marshall Plan: a case study in the analysis of interpretive conflict among historians," *Annals of Scholarship*, 5, Winter, 1988, p. 143-168; G. Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy; an Analysis of Power and Purpose*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969; J. and G. Kolko, *The Limits of Power: the World and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1945-1954*, New York, Harper & Row, 1972; R. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: an Introduction to the Meaning of America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975; D. J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953; O. Handlin, *The Americans*, Boston, Little Brown, 1963.

beneficiaries are discovered; and the former are usually found to have been the dynamic element in securing the legislation.

This axiom for interpreting experience lacks the subtlety, the complexity, and perhaps the emotional rewards of the more sophisticated explorations of culture which have become conventional academic wisdom for many between the 1930s and 1960s. It also contains an element of theoretical naivete, indeed irresponsibility, which is echoed powerfully in the politics of the late 20th century. By assuming that events are caused largely by discrete groups of conscious individuals, Beard helped perpetuate the Jacksonian myth of Virtuous People versus selfish Interests, thus encouraging the citizenry to project responsibility for problems onto 'others,' outsiders, rather than realize their own complicity. This sentimentality is shared by many intellectuals, as can be seen in the narrower versions of hegemony theory, and probably stems from a consolatory need to believe that everything would be fine once the conniving capitalists are strangled. Still, economic interests certainly exist, and certainly attempt to manipulate existing beliefs; Beard is a necessary supplement to the latterly-dominant view of culture as a pervasive pea-soup fog of inherited values and practices<sup>10</sup>.

When historians use the culture concept, as many have done since the 1960s, they tend to borrow from anthropology, especially from the Columbia School of the 1930s and 40s. This vision of culture, which was new in the American Thirties, though anticipated by the romantics, marked a sharp break with Beard's rationalistic progressivism, friendly to change as improvement, taking human beings as conscious, calculating and responsible, that had dominated American learned discourse. The newer vision saw culture as valuable just because it tended to persist, to resist change, to protect us from the loss of ability to share emotional meanings with fellows, to stave off the harshness and despair that a totally instrumental worldview would expose us to. Culture in this reading had a strongly "given" quality; very like the earlier and later notion of a Godlike Market, it conveys a sense of impersonality, inevitability, and often of desirability, to the

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<sup>10</sup> The quotation: C. A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, 2nd ed., New York, Macmillan, 1960; first pub. 1913, 1935, p. 155. An invaluable account of Beard's career is E. Nore, *Charles A. Beard: An Intellectual Biography*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1983. C. and M. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, vol. 2, New York, Macmillan, 1927, p. 441; J. Kukla, "A Political Economy for the Republic's Beardless Youth," *Reviews in American History*, 16, June 1988, p. 210-215; R. Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, New York, Vintage Books, 1970; first pub. 1968, p. 167-346. On Beard's philosophy of history, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988, esp. p. 252-264. A superb analysis of Beard is J. P. Diggins, "Power and Authority in American History: the case of C. A. Beard and his critics," *American Historical Review*, 86, October, 1981, p. 701-730.

axioms through which we interpret experience. Given this honorific notion of culture, the older model of causality as conscious intention becomes obscured, along with the notion of individual variability. Block notions of Culture can encourage stereotyping as much as similar notions of race<sup>11</sup>.

Thus the renewed importance of Charles Beard: it's vital to reaffirm the role of human agency in human events, to insist that much of culture is related to intentionality in a dialectical sense: not only does culture influence intentions, but cultural symbols (like Willie Horton and the flag) become counters in the game of influence, and intentionality may reinforce selected traits of a culture by using them for manipulative purposes. Those California suburbs are blessedly free of the homeless in great part due to their income-specific nature, but also due to the local policy of encouraging non-standard people to depart the area. This policy is not seen as harassment, indeed hardly as a conscious act of will, since *déclassés* "naturally" gravitate to the liberal, pluralist metropolis whose ideology enjoins tolerance; there, the homeless join the varied "others" who lack American-ness, and increase the tax burden assumed by the liberal oases in a conservative society. Beard remains vital not because he provided a foolproof formula, certainly not because he wrote "definitive" scholarship — indeed, we might ask what are the definitive works of scholarship — but because he wrestled with this tricky problem of intentionality and unreflecting attitudes, and rightly insisted that one of the relevant questions is always, *Cui Bono* ? This premodern view of causality is assimilable into the anthropological notion of culture, if we grant that culture is better seen as process, constantly in motion and subject to variation, rather than as a given structure; one part of the process is the incessant dialectic of self-interested motives and attempts to influence through the use of symbols<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> On the rise of the culture concept: J. Rubin, *Constance Rourke and American Culture*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1980; W. Susman, *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the 20th Century*, New York, Pantheon, 1985; F. Matthews, "Social Scientists and the Culture Concept, 1930-1950. The Conflict between Processual and Structural Approaches," *Sociological Theory*, 7, Spring, 1989, p. 106-121. On the danger of the romantic primitivist notion of 'culture,' see D. MacCannell, *The Tourist: a New Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, Schocken, 1989, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> On the Mainstream identification of "America" with the class and race-homogeneous suburb as against the "foreign" city, see B. Mandel, "It's a good time to turn conservative," *SFX*, July 5, 1989, A4. S. McCormick, "Affluent Orinda refuses to aid Homeless, Fund," *SFC*, March 17, 1989, A2. A survey of the problem of the homeless, stressing hidden causes in political decisions to eliminate cheap housing, is "Living under spacious skies," *Economist*, 311, May 6, 1989, p. 21-22; also T. L. Thompson, "Woman jailed for feeding homeless," *SFC*, July 8, 1989, A3; M. N. Maloney, "'Homeless' or Bums?," *SFC*, July 13, 1989, A26, which points up the ideological quality of the choice of definitions.

### 3 Hofstadter

As the problem of the eager public response to some symbols but not all reminds us, Beard's analysis is limited by its relative insensitivity to the noncalculating elements of aculture, to those "pictures in our heads" through which we interpret and respond to experience. With Richard Hofstadter (1915-70) the narrow boundaries of professional history were forced apart, to be enriched by the complex sensibility of the New York intelligentsia, a compound of philosophic and literary awareness with new ideas from psychology and the social sciences. The 1930s and 1940s marked a watershed in esthetics and social science, the turn away from linear, historical, longitudinal explanations towards synchronic, structural or systemic accounts. Psychoanalysis, Columbia anthropology, Parsonian structural-functionalism in sociology, New Criticism in literary theory — all marked a fairly sharp break with earlier American theories that had stressed the normality of change, the centrality of process, and the individual as primary unit. Hofstadter brings this new structural view, deriving from European greats rather than the older American (and English) models, into history, with his remarkable mosaic of essays, *The American Political Tradition* (APT). The book also reveals a sensibility very different from Beard's: Hofstadter employs a pervasive irony worthy of Henry Adams, and quite alien to the linear, relentless, legal-brief style that Beard used. Admirers of Beard can argue plausibly that the Jamesian richness of Hofstadter's prose is self-defeating, since his complex paragraphs cannot easily serve as stimuli to action in the world. Indeed, the qualities which make his work outstanding as examples of historical art are precisely what have made him less interesting than Beard to activist scholars since his death; as one literary critic remarks, there has been a general rejection of irony over the last generation<sup>13</sup>.

In APT a central question is why democracy always seemed to be defeated by capitalism, why opposition to Beard's "selfish interests" was so ineffectual. Indeed, Hofstadter's central question links him not only backwards to Beard but forward to the new social and cultural history of the 1960s and after, much of which had begun with the question why socialism, the "rational" solution to all problems, had failed in America. Many younger historians disliked Hofstadter's answer, interpreting him as a defender of American 'consensus;' but this is to equate understanding with advocacy — a conflation which may rest on the need of political activists to remain Beardians, to visualize a distinct devil, an evil force which can be surgically removed, rather than admit that the barriers to utopia are

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<sup>13</sup> On the "refusal of irony," see E. Spencer, "Experiment is out, concern is in," *New York Times Book Review*, November 21, 1982, p. 7. R. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, New York, A. A. Knopf, 1977; 1st ed., 1948; S. Stout Baker, *Radical Beginnings. Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1985; D. J. Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review*, 89, October, 1984, p. 976-1004.

entrenched in the values and assumptions of the cultural mainstream. Much of Hofstadter's work exemplifies what came to be called hegemony theory, placing Beard's self-interested 'special' interests in cultural context, by describing and analyzing the symbols which made them seem like elements of the natural majority, the general will, as opposed to 'truly' special interests like labor unions, ethnic minorities, environmentalists, etc. *APT* shows the historical justice in Calvin Coolidge's insistence that "the business of America is business." In contrast to Beard's dualistic model of historical dynamics, Hofstadter's was on one level multifaceted if not multicausal; on another level, it was monistic and structural, in that it saw the United States as an unusually stable society with a remarkably persistent system of beliefs established early on. As he said, the "major political traditions...have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man." Further (he was writing in 1947), "Societies that are in such good working order have a kind of mute organic consistency. They do not foster ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements." Here Hofstadter applies the new structuralism of the intelligentsia to the traditionally individualistic and event-centered world of academic history<sup>14</sup>.

While *APT* is Hofstadter's most comprehensive delineation of the constricted banks of the mainstream, the boundaries within which thought can occur without incurring fear and guilt, much of his later work extends the same concern, enriching it in directions which help us to understand that mainstream as it has become more self-conscious and defensive/aggressive in the years since his death. Hofstadter's account of the antecedents of the Radical Right in the Federalist and Christian crusade against the Bavarian Illuminati at the end of the 1790s illuminates the parallels — both are periods of intense political conflict, with the contenders polarized by philosophical differences (in the 1790s, postPuritan Protestantism versus the secular humanism of the Enlightenment) and a sense of desperation engendered by perceived challenges to the social order (the influence of the French Revolution then, the mix of crime, role-revolt and barriers to American energy today). Hofstadter's account has been given greater intellectual depth in a brilliant essay by Gordon Wood, which reveals the roots of the "paranoid style" in what Wood calls the "underlying metaphysics" of 18th century culture, a traditional complex of axioms that stressed human intentionality as the prime source of events. This belief in conscious will stemmed from the mechanistic

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<sup>14</sup> R. Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, Introduction. For "structural" approaches to explanation see F. R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism: the Sovereignty of the Artist, 1885-1925*, New York, Atheneum, 1985. On the contrast between the two explanatory frameworks in American thought, see F. Matthews, "Social Scientists and the Culture Concept." R. Hofstadter, *APT*, xxx-xxi, where he also uses the phrase "capitalist culture" to describe the entity he studied. On the search for precise, reductive causal explanations that can suggest remedial action, see F. Matthews, "Hobbesian Populism: interpretive paradigms and moral vision in American historiography," *Journal of American History*, 72, June, 1985, p. 92-115, esp. p. 108-109.

model of causation offered by Newtonian physics, combined with the humanist tradition of moral responsibility. As the Scots common sense philosopher Thomas Reid said, if men were "not necessarily determined by motives," then "all their actions must be capricious." The paranoid style, in short, emerged from an attempt to rephrase classical moralism in the language of 18th century science; it became a cornerstone of American "givenness." The emergence of characteristically modern modes of thought comes when this classical focus on human intention is replaced by impersonal, sociological, contextual interpretations. But, as Wood notes, the premodern mode never did die out; Beard and Beardians preserve it, and it embodies important ethical and psychological insights. This insistence on personalizing causes, and holding people directly responsible for their actions, underlies the strongly moralistic orientation of mobs, lynching and other forms of democratic expression. As Hofstadter noted, such eruptions were protests against violation of a common-sense belief in a natural order of justice, violation by challengers who were seen as literally alien, if not inhuman. As the young lawyer, who in 1891 led the mob that lynched alleged Mafia hitmen in New Orleans, said: "We looked upon them as so many reptiles<sup>15</sup>."

From Hofstadter's *AntiIntellectualism in American Life*, the most important insight is the association of masculine toughness with scorn for culture and intellect (possibly a universal of covert culture) and with economic exploitation. The first of these can be traced at least to the political slogan of 1828: John Quincy Adams, who can write, Andrew Jackson, who can fight; and it's now routine — Presidential candidates surrounded by Rambo and Arnold Schwarzenegger, boasting of kicking some ass. This is a complex cluster of attitudes; one of the better entries is Roscoe Conkling's famous denunciation of reformers as man-milliners, since that makes the point that unreflecting loyalty, the ability to subordinate Jacksonian ego when team success requires it, is an essential part of the masculine role: my party, my team, my country — but *not* my social class, and perhaps not my ethnic group, because these statuses are ascribed, "defensive," rather than *achieved* in the process of mastering one's environment. Recourse to abstract ideals is the last refuge of the wimp: reformers belittle people by proffering the status of victim<sup>16</sup>.

Perhaps the most important component of this American macho is the centrality of prowess in economic exploitation. As an antiTurnerian, Hofstadter liked to stress this element in frontier culture, noting Jackson's zeal for wealth and

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<sup>15</sup> R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, New York, Knopf, 1966, esp. p. 9-16; G. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: causality and deceit in the 18th century," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39, July, 1982, p. 401-41; R. Hofstadter and M. Wallace, (eds), *American Violence: a Documentary History*, New York, Knopf, 1971, esp. p. 11-12, 335; Page Smith, *John Adams*, vol 2, p. 1784-1826, Garden City, Doubleday, 1962, p. 975-977.

<sup>16</sup> R. Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, New York, Knopf, 1963, esp. p. 157-165, p. 188-189.

the close interweaving of physical force with economic success in the boastings of Davy Crockett, that contrived counter-Jackson puffed up by desperate Whigs trying to appear democratic. This complex of prejudices helps explain salient elements of the contemporary Mainstream — its hatred of Willie Hortons, but relative lack of indignation at Michael Milkens or Frank Lorenzos, who are seen as cleancut competitors from the suburbs, increasing the efficiency of American industry without harming anyone but undeserving minorities. What would seem to an observer to be widely disparate solutions to distinct social problems — controls on fuel emissions and suburban sprawl, subsidies to public transit, efforts to curb clear-cutting of forests and other assaults on a diminishing natural environment — all these are ridiculed as wimpish attempts to curb the exploitative, mastering passion which is the essence of the American male role. These controversies again point to the centrality of the contrast between Jackson, the embodiment of Will, and Adams, the urban-patrician exemplar of Reason, who championed an educated, organized, civilized, "European" society in the New World<sup>17</sup>.

#### 4 Miller

The salience of Mainstream macho in contemporary debates is obviously promoted by interest groups; we need to combine Beard's stress on intentionality with Hofstadter's sensitivity to cultural tradition. Political strategists target welfare queens and black rapists as potent symbols; and Western lumber companies and property developers have discovered the potency of role and cultural symbolism for attacking critics. But without the deep emotional resonance of the symbols, their polemics would always fail. Hofstadter gave the essential sociological and

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* R. Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment: the myth of the frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1985, esp., p. 162-172, is a valuable supplement on Jackson and Crockett. On Milken, see Jim Wood, "King of junk bonds," *SFX*, July 2, 1989, E1, E5; on L. R. McGough, "Pencil-whipping," *Financial World*, 158, June 13, 1989, p. 28-29. M. Mead's *And Keep Your Powder Dry: an anthropologist looks at America*, New York, Morrow, 1942, esp. p. 80-114, offers a vivid psychodynamic model for understanding the internalization of the Mainstream male role from both parents and peers. On John Quincy Adams as "civilized" President, Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party: the First American Presidency 1789-1829*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1984, esp., p. 130-161. An example of conservative anger at bureaucratic intervention to increase automobile efficiency is W. T. Brookes, "Cost of New Mileage Rules will be More Traffic Deaths," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 25, 1989, C3. On counter-attacks against environmentalists, see E. Diringer, "Battle for the Forests: Decision near onold-growth trees," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 17, 1989, A-1, A-8, A-9. Another example of the attempt to classify liberals as anti-working class is "The economic connection to crack," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 20, 1989, A-26, arguing that opposition to the homeporting of the battleship *Missouri* was not only unmanly and unpatriotic, but deprived Black teenagers of shipyard jobs.

historical context for understanding. What he did not achieve was the inwardness, the emotional intensity, with which these symbols are endowed, the depth to which they sink as basic structures of the Mainstream mind. He also failed to understand the centrality of religion in forming this mentality. This has to do with his own position and personality. Like many academics, Hofstadter was thoroughly, and unapologetically, in the tradition of Adams rather than that of Jackson. An admirable preference; but this apparent lack of ambivalence, combined with (perhaps promoting) his preference for a sociological approach to ideas, encouraged a Menckenesque treatment of the Mainstream, rather than the empathy and terror it needs for full comprehension. For this reason, among others, we need to supplement Hofstadter's insights with those of Perry Miller (1905-63) and others who have tried to combine psychological insight with phenomenological reconstruction of mentalities<sup>18</sup>.

Miller's unique empathy with the mainstream probably derives from cultural and psychological congruity; like Edmund Wilson, Miller was self-consciously American, ambivalent towards the European reference-point he took as the principle of contrast in his work. He was also self-consciously tough and democratic in personal style, proud that he got along well with ordinary Cambridge people while offending brittle academics. Miller, in short, *lived* the psychological complexities which Hofstadter studied from outside; he loved, hated, ridiculed his subjects, but as worthy contemporaries rather than odd specimens. Two elements of Miller's approach merge: the ability to convey emotional intensity of belief, and what might be called his intellectual structuralism, his pioneer analysis of "the New England Mind" as a fairly coherent and stable mentality, an interwoven structure of beliefs held in tension and generating emotional energy not only from collisions with experience but from internal gaps in logic or emphasis. Since culture is the system of 'given' axioms, through which the mind organizes and evaluates experience, Miller has a claim to the title of America's greatest cultural historian. He was writing ideal-typical history of the sort later dubbed the study of *mentalites*, even if his sources ranged less widely. The idea of the Covenant became a crucial organizing concept in re-creating the special qualities of Puritan thought; so Miller stressed it even though the word "covenant" was used less frequently by the Puritans than a reader might have assumed. His greatest work reconstructs the inner structure of 17th Century Puritan thought in an historical and philosophical context so broad as to approach the status of a *summa* of Western intellectual history. Much of Miller's power, indeed, stems from the multiple contexts simultaneously present as he explores a text — 'horizontal' contexts of social and economic events, of contemporary ideological opponents, 'vertical' contexts of the European theological background and the 20th century experience through which we attempt to understand the 17th century. The multiplicity of contexts acts as an anti-reductive force, resisting the tendency of the social history of ideas to convert explanation into explaining-away,

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<sup>18</sup> See S. S. Baker, *Radical Beginnings, op.cit.*



by making ideas seem relevant only in the immediate personal and historical context which generated them<sup>19</sup>.

The crucial substantive gift of Miller's analysis to our understanding of the Mainstream is, to adapt Sacvan Bercovitch, the Christian, and most specifically the *Puritan* origins of the American community, cooperating to realize on earth the one true faith as an intentional association of self-chosen Believers. This community may be overtly religious, or a secular republican faith held with "religious" intensity. For many Americans, the lost community of virtue is not only a secular republican one, but is also specifically Christian. For them, Justice O'Connor's letter affirming that America was a Christian society was not an historical gaffe; it simply re-affirmed an old tradition which had been eclipsed by the propaganda of secularists from Paine and Jefferson on to Dewey and his secular-humanist progeny. A Californian journalist asked rhetorically whether America was coming to be an Islamic Republic. If history teaches us anything, it's that old and powerful traditions do visualize America as an intentional community of virtue

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<sup>19</sup> The greatest example of Miller's (re)construction of a mentality is *The New England Mind: the 17th Century*, New York, MacMillan, 1939. He supplemented this with a study of change in *The New England Mind: from Colony to Province*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1953. The ablest critique of the current assumption that contextual explanation of ideas is the "natural" and best mode is John P. Diggins, "The oyster and the pearl: the problem of contextualism in intellectual history," *History and Theory*, 23, 1984, p. 151-169. For a parallel critique of contextualism in literary theory, Frederick Crews, "The Parting of the Twins," *New York Review of Books*, 36, July 20, 1989, p. 39-44. For appraisals of Miller's approach, see M. McGiffert, "American Puritan Studies in the 1960s," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 27, January 1970, p. 36-67; M. Kraus and D. D. Joyce (eds), *The Writing of American History*, Revised edition Norman University of Oklahoma Press, 1988, p. 295-297; F. T. Butts, "The Myth of Perry Miller," *American Historical Review*, 87, June, 1982, p. 665-694.

By "Miller," here, one needs to signify the work of younger scholars, who used psychology more consistently than Miller, and extended his explorations down towards the present. The varied Freudian and Jungian approaches of Michael Rogin and Richard Slotkin are superb extensions of Miller's uniquely intense re-living of experience inside a mentality. The "Millerians" mentioned are: M. P. Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian*, New York, Vintage Books, 1975; R. Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, Middletown (CT), Wesleyan University Press, 1973; *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1860-1890*, Middletown (CT), Wesleyan University Press, 1985; D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, New York, Viking, 1964, p. 62; S. Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975. It seems more accurate to classify them as in the tradition of Miller than that of Hofstadter, because they follow Miller in moving towards contemporary views of the symbolic world as largely autonomous, rather than as a reflection of external conditions.

similar to an Islamic Republic; and Miller's work provides the most thorough understanding of this basic structure of American thought<sup>20</sup>.

Miller's essays also offer insight into the crucial process by which the Puritans' self-censorious introspection, reinforced by the humbling injunction that God's will transcends human understanding, was transformed into the extrospective, anxiously self-congratulatory mentality of the modern Mainstream, with its axioms that the smiling aspects of life are the most American, and that evil emanates from outside the community. Miller offers sociological and theoretical sources — the situation of the 1770s, where the threatening enemy was outside, drew patriotic Americans together in a community of belief and courage; then the reconceptualization of independent America as "Nature's Nation," the natural environment which encouraged benevolent human nature to express its potentialities most fully. The Revivals reinforced the vision of the ideal community as one of activist, exhortatory Christianity, which is always expanding to redeem neighboring areas because of a fear that the existence of unregeneracy threatened the confidence of the elect. The religious intensity of the Puritans was invested more and more heavily in achieving and preserving middle-class affluence and respectability, seen as the ultimate proof of American superiority. One might add to Miller's account that the homogeneous suburb, carefully insulated from urban cultural diversity, became the essential locus of this task once moral hierarchy was challenged<sup>21</sup>.

The intensity of belief and effort so invested explains the Mainstream's radical dichotomization of vice and virtue, its determination to see no complexity or complicity. Perhaps the most vivid recent example is the treatment of the Stockton Schoolyard Massacre, in which a young EuroCalifornian drifter killed a number of Asian children playing in the yard of his own old primary school. Authorities were quick to label the killer a "psychopath," outside the culture, who hated everyone and happened to kill the people in his way when his pathology exploded. But Asian activists suspect, with considerable evidence, that Patrick Purdy was culturally-grounded; his psychopathy lay in acting out a widespread

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<sup>20</sup> On O'Connor, and the strong Christian identity of many Mainstream causes, see B. Mandel, "U.S. out of the uterus now!," *SFX*, July 9, 1989, B3; and G. Rains, "Theocracy buds in the desert," *SFX*, April 23, 1989, A1, A15. Another Christian element in Mainstream thinking is the hierarchical worldview which sees animal and inanimate nature as a gift by God to Man for his "dominion" and use. Viewed through these axioms, all but weak forms of environmentalism can be seen as heretical. For a Christian effort to rethink these assumptions, see M. Coakley, "Symposium looks for specifically Christian type of Environmentalism," *The Newspaper*, November 21, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> P. Miller, *Nature's Nation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 42-49, p. 90-120, p. 150-162, esp. p. 273-289; *The Life of the Mind in America. From the Revolution to the Civil War*, New York, Harcourt Brace World, 1965, esp. p. 8-9.

EuroCalifornian fantasy of recreating a comfortable world in which everyone looks and acts like us, where there are no supercompetitors to marginalize old-stock youth in the job market. Similarly, the standard N.R.A. arguments rest on an absolute dichotomy between innocence and guilt, between responsible citizens, who can be entrusted with AK47's if not atomic bombs, and irresponsible criminals and psychopaths who would do evil regardless, and must be purged. There is no context, no theory of transformation, since these might weaken the responsibility of the villain, and perhaps even force scrutiny of Mainstream culture itself. In 1991 *The Economist*, not a left-wing organ but also not an American one, expressed amazement and disgust at the federal Attorney-General's remark, "We are not here to search for the roots of crime" but to stamp out the "carnage in our own mean streets." The avoidance of causal analysis is rational in context, since the causes would turn out to be intertwined with sacred values like zero/sum competitiveness and firearms as symbols and utensils of American masculinity. To avoid this kind of root-canal surgery, pop-psychiatric categories like "psychopathy," contextless and universal, are used to explain deviant events, severed from the historical circumstances which molded them. In cases like that of Patrick Purdy and the "Montreal Massacre" of female engineering students, pop-psychiatry becomes a tool for defending cultural prejudice against self-doubt. At this point the parallel between the popular Mainstream mentality and such learned, intelligent defenses of it as Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* may become clear. Much of Bloom's rage against academic modernity seems to be directed at the "historicism" which allows students to step outside their parents' worldviews, to view contemporary American beliefs not as 'given,' 'natural,' but as one set of 'prejudices' subject to comparison and criticism<sup>22</sup>.

Writing in the 1950s, Perry Miller saw the positive model, the cult of the smiling suburb, as seriously undermined by the intellectual modernism of some educated Americans since the 1910s. He may have exaggerated the impact of modernism; but a tempting hypothesis suggests that the Mainstream resurgence of the 1980s reflects a crucial change over the last three decades — the democratization of American intellectual life, the final death of a lingering Puritan thought-structure which equated the universities, the upscale press, and the intellectual journals with the speaking aristocracy of a common national culture.

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<sup>22</sup> "Dick Thornburgh and the complacency of crime policy," *The Economist*, 318, March 9, 1991, p. 30. On the N.R.A. and the Stockton Schoolyard Massacre, see M. Rustigo, "Friends ask: Safe to Travel in U.S.?" *San Francisco Examiner*, February 27, 1989. "The Other Arms Race," *Time*, February 6, 1989, p. 20-26. For a psychologist's argument that the latest mass murderer, Ramon Salcido, was not a 'psychopath' but expressed macho anxieties pushed beyond control, see Stephanie Salter, "Salcido Slayings: Patriarchal Violence," *SFX*, April 23, 1989, A21. For a political expression of the purification movement, see B. Diddleback, "Wyoming Candidate wants to rid U.S. of all Nonwhites," *ibid.*, A8. Similar categorizations of the Montreal Massacre of female engineering students as due to cultureless pathology were common in Canada.

Here, as elsewhere, the Mainstream learns from its enemies — the insistence by contemporary scholars that there is no such common American culture may have helped reduce the learned world to just another subcommunity, though not one characterized by loving consensus. The New Right of the 1980s seems to echo the aging New Left of the Sixties: not only the confrontational tactics, but the use of cultural-pluralist language to defend the autonomy of its own view, and its contempt for the centrist liberalism of the 1950s, which had believed in a tolerant, civilized society using scientific method as the model for reasoned discourse. This liberalism used psychiatric models to explain those outside *its* mainstream of reasonableness. As suggested by that parody of therapeutic explanation, *West Side Story's* "Gee, Officer Krupke!," this style of explanation arouses derision or anger in its absolutist, anti-cosmopolitan targets, Right or Left, who preserve the old dichotomy of virtuous People threatened by aggressive Interests. In this case, we can isolate a watershed moment, when the projection of blame onto outsiders triumphed over "mature" self-scrutiny — the electorate's response to Jimmy Carter's speech of July 15, 1979, urging Americans to look into themselves to find the source of the contemporary malaise. By 1980, Carter's Niebuhrian Christianity was as marginal as the pragmatism of Dewey and James; and that hallmark of *fin-de-siecle* America, blaming alien forces, was democratically sanctioned<sup>23</sup>.

Perry Miller, in an earlier era of fearful intolerance, wrote an impassioned assertion of a pluralist, processual view of American identity, which would have pleased James and Dewey, not to mention Emerson and Whitman.

He who endeavors to fix the personality of America in one eternal, unchangeable pattern not only understands nothing of how a personality is created, but comprehends little of how this nation has come along thus far. He who seeks repose in a unitary conception in effect abandons personality. His motives may be of the best: he wants to preserve, just as he at the moment understands it, the distinctive American essence — the covenant, common sense, the natural grandeur, the American Way of Life. But he fools himself if he supposes that the explanation for America is to be found in the

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<sup>23</sup> P. Miller's *Nature's Nation*, p. 287-289 on modernism as an effective challenge. The hypothesis about the universities' loss of influence beyond their own professional segments adapts a point made by Wiebe, *Segmented Society*, p. 187-189, about the foreign policy elite. On New Right and New Left, see Garry Wills, "Evangels of Abortion," *New York Review of Books*, 36, June 15, 1989, p. 15-21. J. Carter's speech: R. N. Current et. al, *American History: a survey*, 7th ed., New York, Knopf, 1987, p. 926-927. The deinstitutionalization of mental patients was another Left/Right collaboration against what was then the liberal center, with intellectual sources running from the libertarian Thomas Szasz across to Michel Foucault, and executors like Governor Ronald Reagan. For some of the intellectual background, see Fred Matthews, "In Defense of Common Sense," in J. Salzman (ed.), *Prospects Four*, New York, Burt Franklin, 1979, p. 459-516.

conditions of America's existence rather than in the existence itself. A man *is* his decisions, and the great uniqueness of this nation is simply that here the record of conscious decision is more precise, more open and explicit than in most countries. This gives us no warrant to claim that we are higher in any conceivable scale of values; it merely permits us to realize that ...being an American is not something inherited but something to be achieved.

We have to recognize, however, that this dynamic subjectivist vision has been one stream of thought, quite possibly that of an educated or otherwise alienated minority eager to relax the conceptual rigidities of its fellow citizens. Indeed, the Academy itself has moved away from Miller's Emersonian view of history and identity, towards more closed and structural views which echo those of the Mainstream but attach opposite value-signs. Once again, the popular Mainstream seems to echo its more articulate enemies, in claiming that a hard, narrow, constricted reading of the national tradition is the "correct," or necessary one<sup>24</sup>.

## 5 Other Perspectives

This paper has offered one interpretation of the current Mainstream, which focusses on historical and literary sources. Other explanations are plausible, especially in view of the argument that the Mainstream, like other aspects of late — 20th Century America, is spontaneous and rootless, the expression of a present-oriented culture already liberated from any sense of the national past. The Mainstream, it has been argued, is no more historically-rooted than reenactments of Civil War battles, or the ubiquitous, standardized shopping "Mall of America," bedecked with flags and chain shops, which reaffirms us in that ultimate modern identity: as Mallory discovered on *Family Ties*, "I shop, therefore I am." Anthropological theory, with its concept of Revitalization Movements, helps us understand the mix of Yes and No needed to answer this objection. Two subtypes of Revitalization movements are germane: the Nativistic, which demand "the elimination of alien persons, customs, values"; and the Revivalistic, which try to restore traditional values to people detribalized and demoralized by the presence of other cultures, other norms. The two tend to merge into the Nativist Revival, which is ideological and self-conscious, selecting and simplifying crucial elements from the messier mix of tradition into a logical package to be promoted and enforced<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> P. Miller, *Nature's Nation*, p. 13. On the academy's move towards more structural views, see F. Matthews, "Social Scientists and the Culture Concept" (note 11); Matthews, "Hobbesian Populism" (note 14).

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Peter Novick for his searching critique of an earlier draft, in which he raised the objection noted in the text. Anthony F.C. Wallace, "Revitalization movements," *American Anthropologist*, 58, April, 1956, p. 264-81; Ra. Linton, "Nativistic movements," *ibid.*, 48, April-June 1943, p. 230-40. On the

Such revivals are always "post-historic" in that sense; but there is also historic depth in what they select for revival. We can see some of these survivals in the more draconian aspects of Mainstream belief. Fierce opposition has arisen to such pragmatic steps as needle exchange to check the spread of AIDS among drug users; such outcasts are seen as so tainted and so threatening that the virtuous community would be cleansed by their absence. Another apparent paradox, that many of those who favor a right to life for the unborn also tend to favor heavy use of the death penalty for offenders over 16, is resolved by grasping the view of life as innocence challenged by experience. As many souls as possible should have the chance to participate in the moral drama of existence; but those who flunk the test of responsibility should not clutter up the great chain of life, blocking their still-innocent successors. These are not new beliefs; they stem from the mix of Protestant and Republican rigor, both affirming a view of life as an infinite series of tests to be passed, as threatened by the presence of the self-indulgent, the uncontrolled, be they Teddy Roosevelt's "mollycoddles" or today's AIDS carriers and drug users. The simplified, comic-strip quality of these beliefs today may disguise their heritage, as also may their existence within the world of modern electronic communication. A fully adequate account would need to include the work of Marshall McLuhan, to explain the pictorial, personality-based nature of Mainstream response to experience, in which appearance and manner become central clues to acceptability, and the warm, diffuse, low-tension personalities predicted by McLuhan seem to have a natural association with sound conservative values. Mainstream beliefs are packaged and "Hollywoodized", bearing the same relation to traditional morality that Hollywood portrayals of happy small-town families did to the history of the middle classes. But, in the era of electronic communication, the Hollywood version of tradition is the operative version, the compelling ideal against which millions of Americans measure experience<sup>26</sup>.

Certainly the historic content of Mainstream belief needs to be placed in comparative perspective, since similar phenomena can be found elsewhere in the 20th Century. Michael Ignatieff, discussing the development of Austrian antisemitism, stresses the centrality of sexual fantasies, the fear of masculinity undermined by 'aliens' — Jews, feminists, homosexuals. Ignatieff's essay appeared in the summer of 1989, just as the alternative press reported a sudden rash of synagogue-desecrations in San Francisco, committed (according to the police) by established gay-bashing gangs who apparently sought new experience. Tolerance

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"Mall of America," (in a suburb of Minneapolis, though that language now misstates the map of economic power), see "Megamall under way," *SFX*, June 14, 1989, D5.

<sup>26</sup> M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964, esp. p. 22-32, p. 308-327. On the idealized and static Hollywood view of "America" as apple-pie small town, and its own sources in the assimilationist drive of newcomers, see J. Gregory Dunne, "Goldwynism," *New York Review of Books*, 36, May 18, 1989, p. 28-33. On needle-sharing, see E. M. Breaker, "Needles and the conscience of a nation," *Drug Policy Letter 1*, March-April, 1989, 5. Also Meisler, "An American views U.S.....," (above, note 7).

may be learned behavior, like a taste for sour, needing constant inculcation; visible minorities may find their acceptance eroding as new generations need targets to express their rage against change.

Another parallel lies in the eruption of efforts to censor or defend allegedly obscene or blasphemous art. It was appropriate that 1991 saw a major retrospective show devoted to the 'degenerate' art banned and mocked by the Nazi government in the 1930s. The esthetic premises of German and American censors seem identical: a Platonic belief that art's function is to provide role-models, primarily through idealized versions of beautiful, noble, strong and sexless human beings, especially when such models are engaged in heroic deeds of dominance and mastery. Anything else—irony, mockery, distortion of classical perspective—threatens the essential function of art in cementing and intensifying those cultural norms which unify and strengthen state and society<sup>27</sup>.

Comparative history leads to the functional explanation that a sociologist might offer, noting that a strong sense of beleaguered orthodoxy is likely to develop in a mobile society where the older immigrants and their descendants feel threatened by critics and newcomers. The magnitude and rapidity of change are awesome; projections suggest that EuroCalifornians of all ethnic groups will be a minority soon after 2000. Northern California, we are told, offers a more varied ethnic mix than any other other part of the nation, and visibly different human types are natural scapegoats, whose presence allows the natives to avoid reflecting on their own beliefs. The tiredest of all local joke-genres involves the global ineptitude of the Asian driver — innocuous, perhaps; except that it often covers the refusal to understand that gridlocked traffic is the logical resultant of interlocked Mainstream beliefs in growth, parsimony, private space and transport. Sociological and historical insights converge in Robert Wiebe's picture of American society as a structure of segments which related, when necessary, through an unstable mix of official norms and covert practices. And Wiebe's account brings us closer to empathy with the Mainstream itself. The current scapegoating phrase, "the 1960s", has Satanic overtones because it signifies the historical moment when renewed and varied immigration and a globalizing economy intersected with the Second Reconstruction, the ideological challenge, working especially through the legal system, to the segmented society Wiebe describes.

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<sup>27</sup> M. Ignatieff, "The rise and fall of Vienna's Jews," *New York Review of Books*, 36, June 29, 1989, p. 21-25. J. Castleberry, "Residents Upset by 'Hate Crimes'", *San Francisco Independent*, June 7, 1989, 1, 8. Also, "Rap group breaks up over remark on Jews," *SFC*, July 1, 1989, C8. On Platonic versus ironic or 'distancing' art (my terms), see G. Mosse's superb essay, "Beauty without sensuality/the Exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, in *Degenerate Art: the fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991, p. 25-32.

The crucial challenge of the Second Reconstruction was its demand that average citizens emerge from their segments and interact as equal individuals, according to abstract norms of justice, with all the diverse human types hiding in other drawers of the societal filing-cabinet. The demand, as seen by the Mainstream, was too sweeping; public space has been profaned by deviants who challenge not only cultural norms but physical safety. A Mainstream slogan exhorts, Give the streets back to the police! who represent the respectable citizenry against the rabble of crazies, dealers, muggers, aggressive panhandlers, and demonstrating leftists. The segment could interact with safety only when moral hierarchy was unchallenged, and enforced by courts and police; once boundaries blurred, value-maintenance relied on physical segregation. The recoil from profaned urban space echoes in the flight to suburban shopping malls, which as private property can exclude with latitude, and generally intoprotected enclaves for living and working. The Second Reconstruction, in other words, threatened the *de facto* exclusions which had made a diverse society workable. Roscoe Conkling's attack on reformers is still relevant: the liberal activists of the 1960s were blind, or hostile, to the covert culture of winks, nods, discriminations, and occasional more forceful practices which kept a volatile society of anxious competitors from revealing its Hobbesian potential. One way to understand the remarkable dumbing-down of politics and culture, the positive preference for the vapid and inarticulate (who often communicate covertly their Conklinian message) is as a response to a decade when the Best and Brightest brought not only Vietnam but muggers and street-crazies, the risking of kids through school busing and the relativizing of absolute values on which America depended<sup>28</sup>.

Whatever lies ahead, we can see that the lack of conceptual tools to deal with cognitive dissonance often leads to what a psychologist might dub the need for dogmatism, or "Ndogmatism." There is Burkean wisdom in this drive to restore moral authority; it seems to illustrate the argument of conservative moralists like Allan Bloom and Alasdair Macintyre that a totally open, totally "rational" and voluntarist culture will be an amoral one. A suburban newspaper editor wrestled with this dilemma in the summer of 1989, warning his staff that they couldnot treat many cultural issues merely as neutral news, since opinions were too intense. The list of sensitive subjects included "family life, children, animals, homosexuals, religion, AIDS, abortion, sexual bias, etc.," but the catalyst was a story which had covered a gay freedom parade as "straight" news, without placing it in a context of pathology<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> R. Wiebe, *Segmented Society*, 8, 24, p. 147-153, esp. p. 165-166. On ethnic diversity: *San Francisco Weekly*, 8, June 28, 1989, 4. A good recent survey: "California: They paved paradise," *Economist*, 317, October 13, 1990, C1-C24.

<sup>29</sup> Bloom's *Closing* is the best-known critique of post-Enlightenment "modernism". A massive philosophic history devoted to establishing the necessity of theoretically closed communities, is in the work of Alasdair Macintyre: *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, 1981; *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?*, Notre Dame, 1988. A related critique, though based more on Edmund Burke's massive respect for "common sense" (here



Thus, two radically different views may be taken of the contemporary Mainstream ideology and its suburban refuge from the CogDis of the modern city. The first would be that taken by academic conservatives — Burkeans, Straussians, constitutional Originalists, perhaps Thomists and neo-Aristotelians. From this perspective the Mainstream, whatever its savageries and simplicities, represents an effort to re-establish, for the first time since the Halfway Covenant, the axiomatic, enclosed moral community — so admired by the philosopher MacIntyre in particular — within which people find refuge from the modernist cultural order where the only universals are self-indulgence and quantitative measures of worth, with status measured by money in the business world and by quantity of publication in the academic. The opposite view, that of the liberal and pragmatic tradition, would see the Mainstream as an escape from the perils of the open society, an exercise in commoditized pseudo-*Gemeinschaft* which resembles European fascism in its desire to impose neo-tribal morality on a society of differentiated individuals. A scholarship which attempted to bridge the chasm between these views would have to violate its own norms to become philosophical and evaluative<sup>30</sup>.

Fred MATTHEWS  
Faculté des Arts  
Université York

## Résumé

À partir d'un survol du conflit culturel vécu dans l'influent enclave de la Californie centrale, Fred Matthews s'attache à disséquer et expliquer la résurgence du conformisme conservateur aux États-Unis. Il examine plus particulièrement de quelle façon d'influents historiens américains comme C. A. Beard, R. Hofstadter et P. Miller ont pu éclairer les sources de ce qui peut être vu comme une fuite devant les périls de la société ouverte et comme un refuge en une pseudo-*Gemeinschaft* commercialisée.

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indistinguishable from "prejudice") is found in the work of the English philosopher R. Scruton: *The Meaning of Conservatism*, Totowa (N. J.), Barnes & Noble, 1980; and especially *Sexual Desire: a moral philosophy of the erotic*, New York, Free Press, 1986. All these works help to understand the dilemma of the suburban editor faced with charges that "news" without guiding moral interpretation is not "objective," but rather destabilizing, like modernist art. See R. Morse, "What's black and white and red-lined?" *SFX*, June 30, 1989, A3. For a parallel case: M. Sandalow, "Fremont drive to recall Gay", *SFC*, July 7, 1989, A26.

<sup>30</sup> On the argument that fundamental divergences of value underly the persistence of interpretive disagreement inside academic disciplines, see Matthews, "Hobbesian Populism" (above, note 14); and the extensive illustration and analysis in Novick's superb, if not definitive, study, *That Noble Dream* (above, note 10).

## Summary

Mainly using points taken from a survey of Californian daily newspapers Fred Matthews tries to dissect and explain the rise of contemporary "Mainstream" America. He introduces us to the way three paradigmatic historians, C. A. Beard, R. Hofstadter and P. Miller, have accounted for the sources of this current which can be seen as an escape from the perils of the open society and a refuge in a commoditized pseudo-*Gemeinschaft*.