

American Thought and Culture

AT THE
END OF
THE 20TH
CENTURY

THE WORLD TURNED INSIDE OUT



JAMES LIVINGSTON

The World Turned Inside Out

Lewis Perry and Howard Brick, Series Editors

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The World Turned Inside Out

*American Thought and Culture at the
End of the 20th Century*

James Livingston

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Printed in the United States of America

This book is for my favorite teachers,

Mike Fennell and Marvin Rosen

The Lord maketh the earth . . . waste, and turneth it upside down. . . . And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest, as with the servant, so with his master, as with the maid, so with her mistress. . . . The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard.

—Isaiah 24:1–2

Certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man. . . . High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine.

—Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”

Social revolution in America has so far proved a dream; cultural revolution has been an important reality.

—Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence*

Foreword

Howard Brick and Lewis Perry, Series Editors

Over twenty years ago, this series on American Thought and Culture began with the aim of offering concise, provocative volumes that, taken together, would survey the long span of American intellectual and cultural life from the sixteenth century to the present. Since then, the output of richly documented monographs in the field has continued to grow, sustaining the demand for inventive historical syntheses. The goal of the series has always been to bring together readable, well-informed books that stand on their own as introductions to significant periods in American thought and culture. There is no attempt to establish a single interpretation of all of America's past, for the range of American experiences and their change over time would frustrate any such attempt. All the authors of the series, innovative practitioners in the field in their own right, bring their own independent research to bear as they strive for a broad reach in interpretation. They aim to explore issues that are of critical importance to the particular period under discussion and, on that basis, to cast new light on the whole of American experience as it both shaped and was transformed by that time.

The series now nears completion with the publication of this and two other forthcoming volumes treating discrete periods of the twentieth century. The culture and intellectual life of the United States remain subjects of heated debate. Scholars of the mid-twentieth century often assumed that the country bore a common culture that could be summed up in a few basic themes or characteristic dilemmas. By the 1980s, historians were more likely to recognize a plurality of thoughts and traditions in the American past. Variation and contention among the multiple strands of American consciousness made it difficult to achieve a synthetic view of the culture in times past. Nonetheless, the relation between the many and the one continues to preoccupy historical observers. Few historians today are likely to challenge a strong emphasis on diversity among subcultures in American life. At the same time, the international primacy this country has attained—for example, as a purveyor of mass culture or the vanguard of a “war on terror”—

again poses the question of what collective identity or cultural wholeness Americans share. As the United States looks out on the world at large, and the world looks back, who are “we”?

James Livingston's book provides the capstone of the series, the volume that treats “American thought and culture at the end of the twentieth century.” In the roughly twenty-five years surveyed here, the multiplicity, tension, and conflict at play throughout American history seemed to reach a high pitch in a transformation of experience and consciousness that Livingston describes as turning the world “inside out.” Historians have become accustomed to seeing the end of the twentieth century as the site of one or more profound “turns”—the “right turn” in U.S. politics signaled by the rise of Ronald Reagan and the sudden reversal Reaganism seemed to initiate in putting “free markets”

place of “the welfare state,” as well as the “postmodern turn” that tended to undermine a trust in science, reason, progress, and moral order that was assumed to characterize U.S. culture in large part since its beginnings.

Livingston weds these “turns” together in ways that profoundly recast what we think they meant. The political, economic, social, and cultural phenomena of the years stretching from the Reagan to the George W. Bush presidencies indicate far less than a conservative ascendancy in American life. Indeed, the apparently vehement disputes between the Left and Right over social policy as well as culture and morals more often than not mistook or masked the drift of things. In economic affairs, public authority and responsibility, as well as the social foundations of market exchange, continued to grow rather than diminish, and in the broad reach of culture, the “postmodern Left” not only secured leadership of what Livingston calls the “pilot disciplines” of academic liberal arts but also proved more in tune with popular sensibility than conservatives did—despite the common charge of “elitism” laid against cultural innovators.

In penetrating analyses of some of the most popular art forms at the end of the twentieth century—horror movies, comics and cartoons, TV shows depicting vampires and their slayers, and hip-hop music—Livingston shows how common it has become for Americans to confront, and in some ways accommodate, the erosion of customary barriers and boundaries that long defined the private family and the public world, masculinity and femininity, sexual norms and “deviance,” the human body and alien creatures, the nation and global affairs. All those things customarily kept apart as “inside” or “outside” the comfort zones of American experience have been shuffled together, and remarkably so. American culture has gamely striven for new kinds of balance amid uncertainty. That does not mean that new and unsettling problems are easily resolved, as Livingston explains in his sober reflections on the course and coming future of U.S. relations with the wider world. But it does show that American thought and culture remains malleable and ever changing in the realm of flux it inhabits.

Preface

The World Elsewhere Is Not

The title of this book is a variation on a theme found in the Old Testament—in Isaiah, it's in the epigraphs—and developed in Christopher Hill's great book of 1972, *The World Turned Upside Down*. The prophet Isaiah predicted what servants and slaves everywhere called "jubilee," the redistribution of property that would change everything. The historian Hill wrote about "revolt within the [English] Revolution" of the 1640s, which, if successful, would have enfranchised more people and more rights than resulted from that extraordinary upheaval. This movement of radicals, of Levellers and Diggers, of beggars, vagabonds, poets, and thieves—this movement, Hill wrote, "might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, [and it] might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic."

There are no "might have beens" in this book. I write about the cultural and intellectual revolution that changed North America and the world after 1975. It was so successful—it was so formative, causative, and measurable—

that we can take it for granted, and then look past it, to the point where some of us even argue that conservatism took over American thought and culture after 1980.

But this cultural and intellectual revolution did turn the world inside out, in three related senses. First, it complicated the ways we could perceive the relation between our insides and all of what we normally designate as outside. The difference between private and public, for example, became a problem rather than an assumption at the end of the twentieth century. So, too, did the distinction between foreign and domestic policy get blurred when the post-Vietnam all-volunteer army rebuilt itself as a social program dedicated to affirmative action and when terrorists without state sponsorship became a central feature of globalization. Meanwhile, excremental visions became the norm, performance art and the mainstream of cartoon politics as anal probes from outer space and the Satan (Satan?) from the sewer challenged Disney's constituency—what had been expelled from our bodies somehow became the raw materials of our revised interiors, that is, the stuff of our thinking.

To put it another way, the personal became political, and vice versa, but not just because feminism said it should—although we must attribute the original slogan and its radical connotations to feminism. We were all confused by the shifting boundaries between the so-called private sector and the so-called public sectors whether we were speaking of economic growth or the relation between our inner selves and our outward appearances. We still are. For example, we still ask, can public spending stand in for private investment? Should the government supplement or replace private enterprise? Does the specter of socialism still haunt the American imagination? We still ask, what is the outer limit of the family, a presumably private domicile? And what is a family, anyway? Where's Dad, the family guy? We still ask, can the government invade this familial space and tell the females that the

don't have control over their own bodies?

Second, the cultural and intellectual revolution of the late twentieth century brought the world that was once elsewhere into the room and onto the screen where we were watching TV or sending e-mails and later Googling ourselves. Either we turned the machine off or we became citizens of the world, no borders allowed. There we were, face to virtual face, with every imaginable kind of person—also every imaginable kind of cyborg, vampire, angel, or demon—and what did we do? We let them into our lives and turned the world inside out. Even the difference between animals and human beings or between machines and men seemed to dissolve at the end of the twentieth century.

Third, and this may be the same thing, all those strangers, all those Others out there—cyborgs, simians, animals, Asians, immigrants, women, homosexuals, people with disabilities, whatever—suddenly acquired substantive identities that required our very close attention and our scrupulous ethical attitude toward their prospects. The world once elsewhere had moved into the cultural space where white, male heterosexuality had long been the norm. All these believably sentient beings were close by, and they were demanding their rights, even the animals and the immigrants and the homosexuals.

This book explores American thought and culture in the aftermath of the fabled 1960s. The argument is that the tendencies and sensibilities we associate with that moment decisively shaped intellectual agendas and cultural practices—from the Congressional Budget Office to the cartoon politics of Disney movies—in the 1980s and 1990s. By this accounting, the so-called Reagan Revolution was not only, or even mainly, a conservative event. By the same accounting, the Left, having seized the commanding heights of higher education, was never in danger of losing the so-called culture wars. At the end of the twentieth century, in short, the United States was much less conservative than it had been in 1975.

This book takes supply-side economics and *South Park* equally seriously. It treats Freddy Krueger, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Ronald Reagan, and Judith Butler as comparable cultural icons. In doing so, it formally recapitulates the aesthetic movement specific to the late-twentieth-century moment “postmodernism”—when artists, writers, and intellectuals working in every imaginable medium, from movies and TV to novels and newspapers, adjourned any remaining distinction between high and low culture. In doing so, that is, by depicting this moment on its own terms, the book recaptures the complexity, the pathos, the idiocy, and the achievements of a past that is not even past.

Everything from skeletons to sexuality came out of the closet toward the end of the twentieth century, and we're still wondering what to do about it. This book could help us decide.

Acknowledgments

My principal debt in writing this book is to Howard Brick, who urged me to write it and then helped shape it with incisive comments. Thanks also to his coeditor, Lewis Perry, whose later reading reshaped it. I hasten to add that neither would endorse all my arguments.

I wrote this book with four audiences in mind, and I would like to acknowledge them here as components of my ideal reader. The first is the students who never got “to the present” in the courses they took in high school and college because their teachers never made it that far. The second is the baby boomers who experienced this late-twentieth-century moment as I did, but probably never got around to analyzing it. The third audience is the literate reading public that craves serious discussion of movies, music, and politics, probably in that order. The fourth is the divided fraction of the reading public that wonders why antirealist art forms like cartoons and comics have such a hold on the American imagination.

Friends, colleagues, former students, and even relatives spent a lot of their valuable time reading and discussing the book while it was in progress. They have helped me to strike the right tone in writing for a broad, nonacademic audience, I believe, and they have meanwhile contested my conclusions, corrected my errors, and laughed at my jokes. I am very grateful, then, to Mike Fennell, Christopher Fisher, Keith Haynes, Bruce Robbins, Marc Chandler, Joan Wallach Scott, Brian Connelly, Jonathan Arac, Patricia Rossi, Jackson Lears, Shannen Dee Williams, Kristoffer Shields, Matthew Rotundo, Andrew Livingston, Leland Livingston, Julia Rossi Livingston, Matthew Friedman, Gregory J. Renfroe, Ross Posnock, Louis Ferleger, Elise Salem, Colin Koopman, the Department of American Studies at Rutgers University, and readers of my blog, www.politicsandletters.com, where I tried out ideas and parts of chapters. My bandmate Matt Friedman also helped with the illustrations and saved me from stupid mistakes in writing about music and singing about architecture.

I inflicted several chapters on three undergraduate classes at Rutgers University, where I teach, because college students are part of the book’s intended audience. Among the undergraduates who were quite critical, but also quite helpful, with their comments and who supplied references from their own research, are Al-Zamar McKinney, Jonathan Lackey, Tracy Dimond, Chris Mindich, Robert Knowles, Sabrina Taylor, Brian Katinas, Dan Devine, Jason Yellen, Elizabeth Jacobs, Mike Vuono, Susanna Policros, and Dylan Errickson. I am also grateful to the students in my spring 2006 course on twentieth-century American culture, who endured the spectacularly awful movie *I Spit on Your Grave* or *Day of the Woman*, then discussed it with wit and intelligence.

At Rowman & Littlefield, Niels Aaboe, Michelle Cassidy, and Elaine McGarraugh shepherded the manuscript through production with expert care, pointed questions, and good humor. It was a pleasure working with them.

Chronology

Books are italicized, movies, plays, and TV shows are shown in quotation marks; an asterisk indicates best picture.

1970 “Little Big Man.”

1971 “Sweet Sweetback’s Badasssss Song”; “Shaft.”

1972 “The Godfather,” the original; “Superfly.”

1973 Supreme Court decides *Roe v. Wade* on grounds of right of privacy; Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries doubles prices of crude oil, inflating consumer price index and contributing to “stagflation”; Congress passes the War Powers Act, limiting presidential discretion in declaring and fighting wars; Latin America’s 9/11, the overthrow of Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile, with U.S. connivance; Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*; Martin Scorsese’s first feature, “Mean Streets”; “High Plains Drifter”; George Gilder, *Sexual Suicide*.

1974 President Nixon resigns in August; “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,” the original; “Chinatown”; “The Godfather, Part II.”

1975 Frank Church’s Senate committee condemns U.S. illegal intervention in Chile and elsewhere; James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime*; Seymour Martin Lipset & Everett S. Ladd, *The Divided Academy*; Gayle Rubin, “Notes on the Traffic in Women,” in Rayna Reiter, ed., *The Anthropology of Women*; Samuel P. Huntington, et al., for the Trilateral Commission, *The Crisis of Democracy*; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*; New York City, on verge of bankruptcy, pleads for federal aid.

1976 Jimmy Carter elected president; “Rocky”*, the original; “Taxi Driver.”

1977 Charles Lindblom, *Politics and Markets*.

1978 Congress passes FISA, the Foreign Intelligence and Surveillance Act, limiting surveillance of U.S. citizens by government agencies; “I Spit on Your Grave,” aka “Day of the Woman”; “The Deer Hunter”*; “Halloween,” the original; Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*; Will Eisner, *Contract with God*.

1979 Iranian Revolution, capture of American hostages; Sandinistas come to power in Nicaragua; Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; “Apocalypse Now”; Jimmy Carter cedes Panama Canal.

1980 Ronald Reagan elected president; Lester Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society*; “Friday the 13th,” the original; Solidarity Movement in Poland.

1981 George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*; “Ms. 45”; Solidarity crushed.

1982 Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*; Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”; “Black Runner”; “Poltergeist”; “First Blood.”

1983 MTV debuts; “Scarface”; Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*.

1984 “Nightmare on Elm Street,” the original; “Terminator,” the original; Ronald Reagan re-elected; Paul Craig Roberts, *The Supply-Side Revolution*; Charles Murray, *Losing Ground*; William Gibson, *Neuromancer*.

1985 Perestroika and Glasnost in USSR: economic reform and press freedom inaugurated by Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev; Solidarity resurfaces in Poland; DeLillo, *White Noise*; “Rambo: First Blood, Part II.”

1986 “Platoon”; Art Spiegelman, *Maus*; David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*; Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.”

1987 “Robocop,” the original; “Lethal Weapon,” the original; Robert Bork nominated to Supreme Court by Reagan; Toni Morrison, *Beloved*; Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*; Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire*.

1988 George H. W. Bush elected president.

1989 Berlin Wall breached; Velvet Revolution begins in Czechoslovakia; “The Simpsons” debuts on FOX; “The Little Mermaid.”

1990 “Dances with Wolves”*; Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals*; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; No Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*.

1991 The “First Gulf War” against Iraq; “The Silence of the Lambs”*; “JFK”; “Beauty and the Beast”; “Terminator 2”; Clark Kerr, *The Great Transformation in Higher Education*; Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

1992 “Defense Policy Guidance” memorandum authorized by Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz leaked from Defense Department; Bill Clinton elected president; “Reservoir Dogs”; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America*; William Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America*; Car Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*.

1993 Terrorist bombing of World Trade Center by al Qaeda associates; federal siege at Waco compound of Branch Davidian sect led by David; Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*; Tom Kushner’s “Angels in America” opens on Broadway.

1994 “Pulp Fiction”; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*; S. H. Fernandez, Jr., *The New Beats*.

1995 Lynne Cheney, *Telling the Truth*; Tim LaHaye & Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind*, Volume 1; “Braveheart”*; “Toy Story”; Terrorist bombing of Oklahoma City federal office building by Timothy McVeigh.

1996 Bill Clinton re-elected president; Robert Bork, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*; Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*; “From Dusk Til Dawn.”

1997 “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” debuts on the WB channel; Project for a New American Century launched by William Kristol, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, et al.

1998 Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*; “Saving Private Ryan.”

1999 “The Matrix,” the original; “Fight Club”; Susan Faludi, *Stiffed*.

2000 Al Gore wins popular vote, George W. Bush elected president by Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore*; Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*; PNAC, “Rebuilding America’s Defenses.”

2001 Coordinated terrorist attacks on Pentagon and World Trade Center, 9/11.

2002 National Security Strategy statement issued by White House; Andrew Bacevich, *American*

Empire; Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*.

2003 American-led invasion of Iraq; Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power*.

2004 George W. Bush re-elected president.

2005 Anti-American insurgency peaks in Iraq.

2006 Insurgency continues in Iraq; housing prices flatten after fifteen years of steady increase.

2007 George W. Bush announces a “surge” of additional troops in Baghdad; global financial crisis begins in August, then intensifies with outright failure, federal bailout, or private buyout of several large investment banks in New York City.

2008 Barack Obama elected president.

“From Dusk to Dawn”

Origins and Effects of the Reagan Revolution

In the very late twentieth century, capitalism seemed triumphant throughout the world—that is what everyone was debating the meaning of “globalization” (on which see chapter 6 below). But in the 1970s, capitalism did not look like the wave of the future. Then, as now, it seemed to be on its last legs. Remember, the Soviet Union—the “evil empire,” as Ronald Reagan would call it—was still intact and was about to invade its neighbor Afghanistan (yes, the very same Afghanistan the United States invaded in 2001). Communist China’s drive to industrialize was in full stride. And socialist movements in Latin America were flourishing; the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, who came to power in 1979, were merely the most visible and effective of these movements.

At the cutting edge of capitalism, however, back in the United States, the economy was a mess and the future of private enterprise was in doubt. The “oil shock” of 1973 to 1975, which tripled the price of imported crude oil—and thus the price of gasoline—still crippled automobile manufacturing, the signature American industry; indeed, the Chrysler Corporation had filed for bankruptcy and begged the U.S. Congress to come to its rescue with outright grants and guaranteed loans. The housing market and consumer spending were severely cramped by double-digit interest rates and unprecedented inflation (to the tune of 20 percent per year). Moreover, occupational safety and environmental protection, the new watchwords of government regulation and public opinion, had apparently trumped the requirements of

economic growth. Back then even the Federal Reserve was clueless. And everybody knew it.

Meanwhile, New York City, the financial headquarters of the capitalist world (then still known in Cold War parlance as the “free world”) was close to bankruptcy. Huge swaths of Brooklyn and the South Bronx were smoldering ruins. Garbage rotted in the streets of Manhattan. The subways were visibly decaying, most dangerously after dark—not because graffiti artists were sculpting a new underground alphabet, but because the physical plant was expiring and the middle-class commuters were fleeing. And the intersection of Broadway and Forty-second Street—Times Square, where the ball drops on New Year’s Eve—was not a tourist destination unless your purpose in coming was pornographic. It was a sexual bazaar, an open-air brothel even in winter, where hustlers, performers, and pimps often outnumbered pedestrians.

Many interested observers—from filmmakers like Martin Scorsese to social scientists like James O. Wilson—saw these mean streets as thoroughfares to the future of the nation; for they seemed to have channeled the social, political, and cultural extremes inherited from the 1960s and then closed the off-ramps. The plight of New York City was, in this sense, a symptom of systemic failure, of disease in

the larger body politic. It was a miniature version of a general crisis in capitalism. And everybody saw it.

At any rate the cultural and intellectual history of the late twentieth century was framed by the perception of this bifocal crisis. For example, the ambivalent yet rigorous defense of capitalism which goes by the name of neoconservatism was a direct result of both the general crisis in capitalism and the specific spectacle of New York City. So too was “deregulation,” the movement to lighten the visible hand of the state which was originally sponsored by liberals like Ted Kennedy and Jimmy Carter. And so was the Reagan Revolution, the touchstone of contemporary conservatism.

The Supply Side

Let us look more closely, then, at the fears and the hopes—and the ideas—this crisis created. Whether liberal or conservative, those who examined the economic problem typically interpreted it as a political issue animated by deeper cultural change that started in the 1960s. Whether liberal or conservative, their short-run solution was ideological exhortation and their long-run solution was victory in a protracted war of cultures that would necessarily engage the hearts and minds of every American. To solve the economic problem was to convince the American people that unleashing market forces would reinvigorate freedom, progress, and morality—or that state-centered planning for growth would underwrite liberty, equality, and democracy. As we shall see, it was a hard sell either way.

The economic experience of the Great Depression and the Second World War had established a Keynesian consensus in Washington which guided both Democratic and Republican administrations during the Cold War (ca. 1947–1989). In fact, the Republican presidents before Reagan were big-government liberals—Richard Nixon imposed mandatory wage and price controls to subdue inflation and Gerald Ford followed suit. The Keynesian consensus, from Left to Right, was based on two assumptions. First, government policies, especially decisions on spending (the federal budget) and interest rates (the Federal Reserve), were the keys to economic growth. Second, the scale of consumer spending was more important than the scope of private investment in determining the rate of economic growth.

This consensus expired in the late 1970s as a result of an economic reality—the new combination of price inflation and lower productivity that went by the name of stagflation—and an intellectual movement that came of age at the same moment. The maturing movement was crucial because it explained the new reality and offered an alternative. In its absence, a larger dose of Keynesian policies would have seemed natural and necessary. This intellectual movement was the supply-side revolution that gave Ronald Reagan the broadband credentials he needed to win the presidential primaries and then the presidency itself. In the name of renewed growth, its proponents—Jack Kemp, Jude Wanniski, Paul Craig Roberts, Arthur Laffer, David Stockman, Irving Kristol—wanted to repeal the welfare state and liberate the private sector from every impediment, including taxes. As Stockman, a Michigan congressman who would eventually run Reagan’s Office of Management and Budget, put it, the supply-side program “required the radical dismantling of state-erected barriers to economic activity.”

It also required tax cuts because increased investment would not happen unless entrepreneurs could keep most of the wealth they generated. This was a matter of incentives, according to the supply-siders, who drew on a large body of research (much of it done by Martin Feldstein of the National Bureau of Economic Research) showing that higher tax rates on personal and corporate income caused lower investment. The loss of tax revenue after the cuts they proposed would be more than offset, the

argued, by the gain in tax revenue generated by the faster growth determined by greater investment which would, in turn, be elicited by the incentive of higher retained earnings. Their argument never made any empirical sense—the numbers just don't add up, as George H. W. Bush pointed out in 1980 when he ran against Reagan in the primaries—but the arithmetic was beside the point. The supply-siders were arguing that individual saving and private investment, not consumer spending and government policies, were the keys to economic growth. They were arguing against history.

For the history of the twentieth century is the record of economic growth accompanied, perhaps even caused, by declining saving and investment, on the one hand, and rising consumption, on the other. It is also the record of massive market failure: No one except the most devoted disciples of Milton Friedman can still believe that the Great Depression was the result of the Federal Reserve's mistake (see the appendix on the 2008–2009 economic crisis). Once you acknowledge these simple facts, the supply-side argument sounds more or less absurd. But it was never offered as merely a recipe for economic growth—it was the blueprint for a moral renewal through which the American people would relearn the virtues of hard money, balanced budgets, and real work. Wealth creation would replace redistribution, as Stockman and many others put it. By this they meant two things. First, the limits on growth animated by markets were artificial bureaucratic conventions, not natural environmental constraints. Faster growth through deregulation would underwrite social justice by generating the jobs necessary to get the poor off the welfare rolls.

Second, a transparent relation between effort and reward, between work done and income received had to be reestablished by the wider application of market forces. Otherwise the American people would continue to shrug off the welfare state's transfer payments, which permitted wages without work. They would continue to be morally corrupted by the state's largesse. As Stockman summarized it: "As an intellectual and moral matter, this comprehensive supply-side doctrine had a powerful appeal. It offered a rigorous standard of justice and fairness, and provided a recipe for economic growth and prosperity—the only viable way to truly eliminate poverty and social deprivation."

The supply-siders called themselves conservatives, of course, but their doctrine was radical, even utopian—it was a "conservatism of yearning," a "rootless nostalgia for roots," as Peter Viereck, an avowed conservative, once put it. The doctrine was radical in the sense that its inventors repudiated that big part of the past that we call the twentieth century. It was utopian in the sense that its proponents constantly cited "classical truths" as if these were impervious to counterargument grounded in historical consciousness and experience. George Gilder's influential body of work in the 1970s is a perfect example. This quirky Harvard grad made his bones by writing a book called *Sexual Suicide* (1973), in which he argued that feminism threatened Western civilization, and then by writing a flurry of magazine articles that would become the core of another book, *Wealth and Poverty* (1981), the most energetic and engaging manifesto of the supply-side revolution.

Historians will someday think of Gilder as the George Fitzhugh of his time—as a man of principle who didn't and wouldn't notice the irreversible tendencies of his century. For now, however, we must treat him as a profoundly important intellectual whose ideas shaped policy and public discourse for at least a decade. *Sexual Suicide* brought him wide notice as well as notoriety. Here he argued that the key to the "intractable problem" of the "hardcore American poor" (a.k.a. black folk) was the lack of married men. Bachelors don't work as hard as husbands, Gilder claimed. So the lack of a marriage contract in the nether realms of American society, where the "underclass" congregated, consigned the poor to a future of poverty. More generally, the breakdown of the family caused by feminist revolt against patriarchal norms had produced a huge crop of men, white as well as black, without attachments to wives and children, men who were meandering through adulthood without the kind

commitments and ambitions marriage and family normally produce. Observers on the Left, among them Barbara Ehrenreich, also noted that a new surplus of bachelors was abstaining from the affective attachments that could become long-term commitments under the emotional tutelage of the family. Their solution to the problem—it echoed the attitude of the nineteenth-century “women movement”—was to search for ways women and children could survive without men, which meant rethinking the nature of the family and calling for public policies that recognized women’s social positions and political concerns.

Gilder’s solution to the problem, so conceived, was to restore the “male role” of breadwinner in the traditional family. His solution, in other words, was to turn back the clock, to sink roots in sand long since washed away by the tides of historical change. For by the 1970s, the traditional family was already becoming an anachronism, and no amount of rhetoric would restore it. The rate of divorce tripled between 1960 and 1982; by the mid-1980s, 50 percent of marriages ended in divorce, and at least 25 percent of all children were growing up with no more than one parent. In 1967, half of all women in their thirties were married mothers who remained at home full time; by 1982, only a quarter were so occupied. More than half of all women, married or not, were in the workforce by the 1980s, and the American family had diversified accordingly. According to the 1990 census, most families did not fit into the “traditional” category because they were headed by single women, or were based on homosexual partnerships, or were otherwise anomalous from the “anthropological” standpoint Gilder adopted. And so on. Gilder may have been urging a worthy cause—although, come to think of it, *The Simpsons* does question the function of our fathers—but he might as well have been denouncing the law of gravity.

Or was he on firmer ground? What if the decline of the traditional family was not the inevitable result of social, economic, and cultural changes since 1960? What if this decline was instead the artificial result of misguided public policy? Gilder didn’t bother to ask—for him, the family was one of those “classical truths”—but Charles Murray, yet another quirky Harvard grad with backing from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), did ask. His startling answers were contained in a book, *Losing Ground*, which was published in 1982 to the delight of the supply-siders. They had already read his AEI research papers of the late 1970s, where he argued that welfare—that is, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) as sponsored by the federal government—had destroyed the traditional family by giving poor women the financial incentive to bear children but stay single (the recipients of ADC could be neither married nor employed). In the absence of this transfer payment, Murray insisted, the family would not be at risk, and neither would the larger culture, because the benefits of marriage and work would no longer be obscured, even canceled, by government policy. Dependence on the dole would disappear, and with it the “urban crisis” exemplified by New York City.

Meanwhile, Murray claimed, a criminal “underclass” that was simply unable to take advantage of job training, food stamps, educational subsidies, or welfare would have to be taken off the street. In this scenario—which could have been borrowed from almost any Western movie from 1939 to 1969, from *Stagecoach* to *Liberty Valence*—a vigilant law and order cleared the way for self-reliance and stable families, and thus for civilization as such. Angry pimps with too many prostitutes and “welfare queens” with too many bastards would soon give way to husbands with jobs and wives with children, just as renegades and outlaws had given way, once upon a time in the West, to the superior force of armed settlers and hired guns. In effect, then, Murray was writing a political screenplay that spoke to the social disorder and ethical ambiguity on display in most films from the 1960s and 1970s. Moral exhortation had already replaced social science. In other words, the imperative mode of argument where personal conviction (“authenticity”) and narrative form count for more than mutually agreeable

exhibits of empirical evidence—where a new, opinionated relativism reigns—had already become the norm by 1980. But notice that it was not the handiwork of the academic Left.

This imperative mode of argument dominates Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty*, the anthem of the Reagan Revolution. Almost every paragraph contains a sentence that begins or ends with the kind of certainty we associate with evangelical faith; phrases like “there can be no doubt,” “no one denies,” “there is no question” etc., sprout in this ideological hothouse so profusely that the reader has to wonder why the book had to be written. In the absence of controversy, after all, writing is unnecessary. But then Gilder was enlisting in the culture war of his moment, when the *sources* of poverty were becoming a new issue. He argued that poverty was, in fact, a structural problem, just like liberals claimed. But the problem in question was, again, cultural, not economic. It was again a result of the shortage of fathers, which in turn meant a surplus of feckless, useless males without attachments, commitments, and responsibilities—that is, without the moral anchor of familial obligation.

Gilder wanted to make the case for the supply-side revolution, however, so he also launched a theoretical assault on the Keynesian consensus. In this airless room of relentless abstraction, the eternal truth of Say's Law—“there cannot be a glut of goods caused by inadequate total demand because “the sum of the wages, profits, and rents paid in manufacturing a good is sufficient to buy it”—is repeatedly asserted, to the point where it becomes an explanation, or at least a label, for almost everything in human history. Indeed, Gilder invokes it to describe the gift economies of aboriginal cultures as well as the investment strategies of modern capitalists; by this historical accounting everyone in every time and place has acted in accordance with its dictates. So he can earnestly announce that “Say's Law, in general terms, is a rule of all organized human behavior,” and then say, equally earnestly, that “Say's Law in all its variations is the essential enactment of supply-side theory.”

The Disregard for Capital

But so what, you might ask, if Gilder insisted that Say's Law is a transhistorical dimension of human nature? What's the bottom line here? What was the “cash value” of these theoretical incantations? Good questions. The assault on the Keynesian consensus was designed to demote consumer demand and to promote private investment as the key to growth; it was designed, that is, to increase the incomes of the wealthy, on the assumption that such a shift in the distribution of income shares would enhance investment. This was not a hidden agenda; it was clearly stated by everyone involved. Supply creates its own demand, as Say's Law stipulates, we should not worry about the scale of consumer demand, and we should not, by the same token, penalize private investment by taxing it heavily. Here is how Gilder explained the program: “But the essential point is fruitless to deny. Producers play a leading and initiatory role in eliciting, shaping, and creating demand. Investment decisions will be crucial in determining both the quantity and the essential [*sic*] pattern of consumer purchases.” Or again: “The crucial question in a capitalist country is the quality and quantity of investment by the rich.”

Now, if “investment by the rich” rather than consumer demand is the engine of economic growth, the policy-relevant question becomes, how do we redistribute national income away from consumption toward saving and investment? In short, how do we reward capitalists for doing their job? The indispensable first step, according to Gilder and his fellow supply-siders, was to cut taxes on investment income, for that move would persuade rich folks to stop buying larger mansions, faster cars, and bigger yachts—to stop consuming so conspicuously—

and start investing their money in goods production. Again, this redistribution of national income was not a hidden agenda. It was articulated as early as 1974 by Alan Greenspan, later of Federal Reserve fame, and it was the centerpiece of Reagan's presidential campaign in 1980.

The supply-siders were fighting a rear-guard action against what Henry B. Kaufman, the Salomon Brothers partner who was the most influential stock market analyst of the 1970s, called "The Disregard for Capital." In a speech delivered at the New York Economic Club in May 1980, the widely circulated as a photocopy, Kaufman declared that the American people were no longer satisfied with the merely formal equalities afforded by the modern liberal dispensation—most of them, he claimed, were now clearly committed to something that resembled socialism. "Fundamental change has been taking place in our society over the last five decades," he noted, and insisted that such change had finally produced a "democracy oriented toward an unaffordable egalitarian sharing of production rather than equal opportunity."

Kaufman's counterpart on Wall Street, Felix Rohatyn—he was the investment banker who steered New York City away from bankruptcy—similarly lamented the advent of a "padded society" that had smothered market forces in the name of income security for all. They both agreed with the diagnosis offered a few years earlier by the Trilateral Commission, a high-profile group of accomplished intellectuals and business leaders from Japan, Western Europe, and the United States, which blamed the "welfare shift" in federal spending priorities—a shift away from defense and toward domestic social spending—for empowering new voting blocs and thus endangering both the future of economic growth and the "governability" of American democracy: "The political basis of the Welfare Shift was the expansion in political participation and the intensified commitment to democratic and egalitarian norms which existed in the 1960s."

Notice that the dissatisfaction with business as usual, and the fear of impending alternatives to private enterprise, together created a consensus that included figures from every part of the political spectrum. The liberal Trilateral crowd upstaged Jimmy Carter by dominating his cabinet; then the "conservative" supply-side crowd chewed the scenery of Reagan's presidency by slashing taxes and burning the budget. But they all agreed that capitalism was broken and needed some kind of fix. More specifically, they all agreed that "a new balance between social and economic objectives," as Kaufman put it, had to be written into government policies. Otherwise the perceived requirements of social justice would continue to block the known requirements of economic growth, that is, personal saving and private investment. So the supply-siders were not a voice in the wilderness; they were just the loudest in a growing chorus of critics which doubted that capitalism would survive the 1970s unless it received the equivalent of shock treatment. In this sense, the intellectual origins of the Reagan Revolution were not exclusively conservative.

Even the die-hard Keynesians, and there were lots of them, understood that the stagflation of the 1970s represented a new challenge to their theoretical assumptions and policy prescriptions. Lester Thurow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, wrote a book called *The Zero-Sum Society* (1980), which fed into Rohatyn's almost apocalyptic writings of the early 1980s by arguing that the enfranchisement of new interest groups had created political deadlock in Washington. Economic policy had accordingly become an illogical, even idiotic patchwork of pork-barrel compromise. Like Rohatyn and Lloyd Cutler of the Trilateral Commission (he would become Carter's White House counsel), Thurow proposed to solve this problem by streamlining and centralizing policymaking in the executive branch. Robert Reich and Ira Magaziner, both later employed by the Clinton administration, meanwhile wrote books like *Minding America's Business* (1979), which recommended Japanese-style "indicative planning"—low-cost government loans to rising industries, higher interest

rates, and worker retraining for declining industries—as the cure for what ailed us. The Keynesian diagnosis of stagflation led, therefore, toward state capitalism.

So maybe David Stockman was right to suggest that he was a soldier in “the war between the statist and the anti-statists, between those who wanted government to dominate every aspect of American life and those who didn’t.” Surely Ronald Reagan’s campaign rhetoric tapped into the powerful antistatist tradition of American politics. He knew as well as anyone that the revolution which created the United States of America was animated by commitment to the sovereignty of the people, not the state or its agencies. The founders understood the appeal of classical republicanism, especially its reading of virtue as the product of political action; they nonetheless believed that the sphere of liberty was society, in market transactions among equals under law, and that the sphere of power was the state, where domination and corruption rather than mutuality ruled. Reagan restated and amplified the opposition between liberty and power by insisting that “government is the problem, not the solution.” His supply-side principles, however belated, were an integral part of his attachment to the antistatist of “original intent.”

By 1980, American voters were willing to try an alternative to the Keynesian consensus—the big government liberalism—that had characterized the programs of every president since Calvin Coolidge left office in 1929, in part because they knew that public policy wasn’t solving their economic problems, in part because they hoped that increased private investment would. They were always skeptical of Reagan’s programs (every poll of the 1980s showed they liked the man better than the policies), but they rolled the dice and hoped for the best.

Conservatism Old and New

Meanwhile conservative opinion was becoming more visible, more respectable. William F. Buckley Jr., the founder of *National Review* who had opposed the civil rights movement and who had once proposed to limit the vote to property-holders, still appeared weekly on public television (the fourth channel in most households) as the “moderator” of a wonkish talk show. Then conservative icon Milton Friedman, the famed economist from the University of Chicago who won the Nobel Prize in 1978, was featured as the talking head of a PBS series that let him expound on his ideas about the causative relationship between markets and freedom. This was a breakthrough for conservative opinion, even though his monetarism—the rate of growth in the money supply determines everything, he argued—was inconsistent with the implied activism of supply-side doctrine. For the guileless Friedman indirectly introduced millions of viewers to Friedrich von Hayek, the Darth Vader of modern economics, as if he were just another theorist from the mainstream.

Hayek was the Austrian who insisted that socialism was preposterous as well as evil because he supposed that the market could be subordinated to reason. For Hayek, as for Friedman, market forces were the source of freedom precisely because they could not be known from any standpoint—precisely because they could not be manipulated by individuals or companies or governments. As long as the rights of private property were inviolable, they assumed, and as long as everyone was subject to the same anonymous laws of supply and demand, liberty and equality were possible. From this premise, they argued that only capitalist societies could be free societies. They also argued that the citizens of a free society could not even try to create a just society; for to do so would be to modify the arbitrary results of market forces in the name of justice and thus to stanch the economic source of freedom.

As Irving Kristol, by all accounts the founding father of neoconservatism, noted at the time, the argument’s rigorous indifference to justice would be simply intolerable to most Americans. But he

didn't reject it because it wouldn't play in Peoria. He rejected it because it denied modernity itself, the moment when consent—not force and not chance—became the principle of social order and political innovation. “But can men live in a free society,” Kristol asked, “if they have no reason to believe that it is a just society?” In a word, no. The “historical accidents of the marketplace,” as Hayek and Friedman portrayed them, could not be “the basis for an enduring and legitimate entitlement to power, privilege, and property,” not any more than the historical accidents of birth could make the claims of hereditary aristocracy seem reasonable.

Kristol was trying to detach conservatism from its schizophrenic devotion to free markets on the one hand and tradition on the other. He knew that you can't revere tradition if you admire the “creative destruction” that capitalism brings to life. He knew that you can't insulate the nuclear family from the heartless logic of the market if you accept the dictates of free enterprise. He knew that conservatism had to become more liberal if it were to sound like something more than hidebound devotion to a phantom past. A “combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal,” he declared, “most desperately wanted,” and cited Herbert Croly, the original big-government liberal from the Progressive Era, as his source of inspiration.

Kristol also knew that the competitive, entrepreneurial economy Friedman and Hayek posited as the source of freedom was a mere fantasy. Capitalism had long since become a system in which large corporations, not small producers, dominated the market—those anonymous and unknowable laws of supply and demand which once made all producers equally subject to the discipline of market forces had been supplanted by the visible hand of modern management: “There is little doubt that the idea of a ‘free market,’ in the era of large corporations, is not quite the original capitalist idea.” Some producers had more market power than others: some persons (and this is how corporations are legally designated) were more equal than others. So everyone was not “free to choose,” as Friedman would have it, simply because he or she inhabited a market society. Corporate capitalism remained a moral problem. For in “its concentration of assets and power—power to make economic decisions affecting the lives of tens of thousands of citizens—it seem[s] to create a dangerous disharmony between the economic system and the political.”

We might then say that neoconservatism was born when that problem was acknowledged and addressed by ex-liberals like Kristol. We might also say that Friedman's PBS series was an “elegant tombstone” marking the death of an older conservatism in which the state was a passive spectator and in which the moral problem of market logic—if everything is for sale, how do we preserve public goods (like democracy) that have no cash value?—was happily ignored. Certainly George Gilder was trying to make an ethical case for capitalism by claiming that investing in the hope of private profit was the equivalent of gift-giving in the name of social solidarity. Kristol was trying, too, but he was more subtle and more skeptical than his colleagues on the supply side.

God, Family, Markets

One of his many protégés, Michael Novak, was writing a book at the same historical moment which exemplifies both this ambition to dress capitalism in new moral clothing and the institutional environment that enabled the ambition. Like Kristol and many other neoconservatives, Novak was a former radical disillusioned by the oppressive idiocies of actually existing socialism and disheartened by the political postures of the largely literary Left. As a genuine theologian and moral philosopher—before he joined the American Enterprise Institute as a senior fellow, he was the Watson-Ledden chair of Religious Studies at Syracuse University—he knew that the defense of capitalism required something more than jolly slogans and militant assertions. That knowledge propelled Novak onto the

contested terrain of classical social theory, where Karl Marx and Max Weber were still the landlords and into the fractious space of contemporary religious debate, where “liberation theology”—a distant echo of the early Christian concern with its original constituency among the poor and the outcast—was now the real alternative to received doctrine in the Catholic Church itself.

Novak had two aims in writing *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (1981), whose title was a conscious parody of Weber’s classic statement, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904, 1930 in English translation). On the one hand, he wanted, like Gilder, to demonstrate that capitalism as such neither impaired the moral capacity of any individual nor contradicted the moral standards of modern society: “There is a strong consonance between the virtues required for successful commercial and industrial practice and the natural moral virtues.” In this sense he was rebutting the long-standing claims of socialists—keep in mind that these were also the deeply felt suspicions of most Americans—and addressing the questions Kristol had recently raised. On the other hand, he wanted to directly confront liberation theology and in doing so provide a positive theoretical alternative to Marxism. In pursuing both aims, his itinerary consciously and closely followed the map drawn by Reinhold Niebuhr, the Christian socialist of the 1930s who turned cold warrior in the 1950s.

Novak was using Niebuhr’s example to argue with Daniel Bell and Charles Lindblom, two giants of American intellectual life in the 1970s. Bell was the Harvard sociologist who had drawn deeply on Marx in writing *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973)—he was, not incidentally, a close friend of Irving Kristol, with whom he had founded *The Public Interest*, a hugely influential journal—and Lindblom was the Yale political scientist who had similarly drawn on Marx (as well as Adam Smith) in writing *Politics and Markets* (1977), a quietly incendiary book that explained why capitalism and democracy were at odds. Each of them posited a pluralist order in which there were three separate but interlocking systems (economic, political, cultural). But Bell had discovered a disturbing disjuncture between the economic and the cultural systems—the new capitalist hedonism had trampled the older bourgeois values (what Novak had called “the virtues required for successful commercial and industrial practice”)—while Lindblom had (re)discovered a dangerous discrepancy between the economic power of corporations and the political power of individuals (note that the same concern was expressed at the same moment by Kristol himself).

Novak insisted that the moral/cultural system was not out of phase with the economic system because “the most profound of economic motives is almost always—and must necessarily be—family-oriented.” Indeed, the “fundamental motive of all economic activity” turned out to be “family-regarding.” Deferring gratification, saving for a rainy day, promising to meet one’s obligations, all the bourgeois virtues that were visibly decaying in Bell’s account of postindustrial society remained intact in Novak’s account of democratic capitalism: “self-interest” was just an ugly label for devotion to family. This is a compelling argument, of course, but only insofar as the traditional nuclear family functions as the moral anchor of modern economic man. In its absence, all bets on the future of capitalism are off. Perhaps that is why we still try to read that uncertain future in the fractured state of the family.

Novak also insisted that Lindblom was peddling social science hokum. Corporations were not “disproportionately powerful” actors on the pluralist political scene, as Lindblom had argued; they were leading men, to be sure, but they were directed, for the most part, by governments. Here Novak forgot his own homage to the corporation, “a novel social instrument,” as the key structural element of democratic capitalism. But then, his description of the corporation sounded very much like his defense of the family as the device by which self-interest was converted to social purpose: “The assumption behind this invention is social, not individualistic. It holds that economic activity is fundamental

corporate, exceeding the capacity of one individual alone. It requires a social life form which goes beyond the power and the lifetime of one individual.”

So Novak settled the ongoing debate about markets in organizing social life and individual opportunities by reference to institutions that either stood apart from markets (families) or actively administered them (corporations). It was an honorable attempt to demonstrate the continuity of capitalism and character, then, but it ultimately failed because it wouldn't address the moral problem of market logic. In fact, Novak defended capitalism by celebrating the “social life forms” that limit the reach of markets in the name of purposes that have no prices—for example, he declared that “the family is a form of socialism that corrects the exaggerated individualism” created by modern market economies. He might as well have claimed that capitalism is tolerable as long as socialism contains its excesses.

Novak's concluding critique of liberation theology was rather less than compelling; for his doubts about the moral contents of free markets were already on display. It also ran counter to the U.S. Bishops' 1982 statement on the economy, which promoted state intervention in markets on behalf of equality. But it did clarify the deepening fissures in American religious thought of the 1970s and 1980s. Liberation theology was not officially launched until 1968 at the conference of Latin American bishops in Medellin, Columbia, when revolutionary hopes in the Western Hemisphere were highest; it had, however, been percolating within the Catholic Church, north and south, since the 1950s. In many ways, it was a theological version of dependency theory, which held that the former European colonies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America remained poor because they were still locked in exploitative economic relations with advanced industrial nations (especially but not only the United States). To abstain from these disadvantageous relations was to act on a “preferential option for the poor,” to treat the people who had been left behind by capitalism as if they were the future of the church.

The seminal statement of this radical vision came from the Second Vatican Council of 1965, in *Gaudium et Spes* (“The Church in the Modern World”). Here the gathered clerics announced that “equity and justice” demanded the immediate removal of the “immense economic inequalities” separating rich and poor nations: “For excessive economic and social differences between the members of the one human family or population groups cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace.” They also insisted that the real purpose of “economic production” was neither growth nor profit; it was instead “to be at the service of humanity in its totality.” So they concluded that the ancient criterion of need, the criterion on which their church had been founded, had a modern application: “Therefore everyone has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for themselves and their family. This has been the opinion of the Fathers and Doctors of the church, who taught that people are bound to come to the aid of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods.” Indeed, the poor were now deputized to redistribute the wealth on hand when required, as in the biblical injunctions of the Old Testament prophets: “Persons in extreme necessity are entitled to take what they need from the riches of others.”

The sequel to *Gaudium et Spes*, which was published in 1971 by the Synod of Bishops as “Justice for the World,” was in some ways even more stridently anticapitalist. It recognized, for example, the new issues residing in discussions of the “biosphere,” and proposed, accordingly, to limit economic growth in the name of environmental integrity. And it posited a universal human “right to development” which makes participation in political decisions the equivalent of access to economic resources. But “liberation through development” required the eradication of existing inequalities between nations and peoples so that “a new form of colonialism” would not again victimize the poor, wherever they lived.

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