

# The Old False Consciousness Shuffle

This book by a Brandeis sociologist and his assistant is the product of eight years of research on the resistance to the proposed building of a highway (the "Inner Belt") through the Middle American Brookline-Elm neighborhood of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The book is intended to be a case study in "classist" oppression, that is, "discrimination by members of one social class against members of another" (p. 13). Fellman is a New Leftist who supports the "liberation" of the Third World, as well as such inhabitants of America as blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, women, students, and homosexuals. But he deviates a bit from other New Leftists in his belief that Middle Americans—that is, lower-middle-class working people—need "liberation" too. It is his conviction that Middle Americans are oppressed by the "rich-and-powerful class" (capitalists *et al.*) by means of its henchmen in the "organization-class" ("bureaucrats, managers, academics, doctors, lawyers, ministers, and other professionals and intellectuals..." [p. 16]).

According to Fellman, the reason why the highway was so threatening to the Brookline-Elm residents was that its construction would have required the destruction of their neighborhood, forcing the residents to move elsewhere. Unlike the organization-class professionals (who were responsible for planning the highway), Middle Americans are "home-centered" people who have a good Burkean love of their "little platoons" and who do not take well to the idea of being forced to leave home and neighborhood. (Lower-middle-class hostility to busing is heavily based on precisely this attachment to home and neighborhood.) Cosmopolitan organization-class professionals, not being "home-centered," are unable to empathize with Middle America; hence, they are "frequently surprised and angered at the extreme emotion and the occasional violent reactions of neighborhood people to the plans for demolishing their neighborhoods. A common first impulse... is to view highly charged opposition to a government plan as old-fashioned sentimentality or the selfish response of a handful of uninformed people" (p. 34). Fellman suggests that this was particularly so in the Brookline-Elm case, since the planning professionals probably saw no value in maintaining a neighborhood which—given their refined lifestyles and "superior" tastes—likely struck them as being a virtual slum.

Fellman is most eloquent and persuasive in his defense of the Brookline-Elm residents. In view of the current busing controversy separating the cosmopolitans and the "parochials," I am especially attracted to his conclusion that "the nature

and worth of neighborhoods should be determined not by supposedly 'objective' other-class outsiders, but primarily through the eyes and values of the people who live there" (p. 35). Fellman will have no truck with those contending that the Brookline-Elm innocents were cognitive and cultural cripples suffering from "false consciousness."

It is, therefore, with utter amazement that I read Fellman's analysis of Middle America's place in American politics as a

## *The Deceived Majority: Politics and Protest in Middle America*

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whole. Fellman is not content to limit himself to an analysis of a single case study. No, he generalizes about all of Middle America—which would be all right were it not for the fact that Fellman's generalizations show that he, himself, has not learned the lesson of Brookline-Elm.

We are all aware that Middle America has been seething with resentments and hostilities. But the trouble, asserts Fellman, is that Middle Americans have been venting their frustrations against the *wrong* groups of people. Whereas they should be attacking the "rich-and-powerful class" and its "organization-class" allies, instead they have been picking on their exploited comrades, the blacks *et al.*, as well as innocuous "eggheads" and dissenters. Why? Well, it's all very simple (if you don't think explanations require evidence and if you can believe in conspiracy theories). What happened is that the Nixons, Agnews, and Wallaces

have "deluded" Middle Americans by "deflecting" their wrath away from the "real issues" onto "scapegoats." Only the McGoverns, we are told, are addressing themselves to the "real issues" (pp. 23-29). Those obtuse primitives in Middle America who have not pierced the veil of mere appearances and phony issues are sorely afflicted with that endemic disease of the brain, *false consciousness*.

What I find so strange is that while our oracular sociologist will exonerate Middle Americans of the charge of false consciousness on the *local* issue of building a highway, he will *not* exonerate them on the really *big* issues such as foreign policy, race relations, law and order, tolerance of dissent and deviance, the integrity of the family, and the like. On those issues, Fellman joins with the organization-class (of which he concedes he is a member) in the perpetuation of "classism" upon Middle America. Fellman implores us to respect the "feelings" (p. 199) of Middle Americans regarding the integrity of their neighborhoods, but all of their *other* feelings (against moral deviants and political militants of all and sundry kinds who, it just so happens, find their safest haven within the precincts of the organization-class) we are not to respect, because here, you see, the supine slob of Brookline-Elm, U.S.A. have been duped by the machinations of scapegoaters in the ruling class.

Amazingly, the Brookline-Elm residents did win their fight against the highway. But Fellman observes that they would *not* have won if it had not been for the fact that their opposition was coordinated and led by powerful defectors from the organization-class, such as John Kenneth Galbraith, 527 other professors from Harvard and M.I.T., and many others. As Fellman very astutely points out, these organization-class influentials fought the issue on their own terms and largely for their own selfish reasons. Says Fellman: "only when urban traffic congestion and pollution affect the organization-class do its members move into action. To put it another way, Middle America's interests are supported by organization-class people when they coincide with their own, but not very often or systematically otherwise" (p. 231).

Where are these organization-class allies, one wonders, now that the Middle Americans in Southie—and all the South Bostons of this land—need them so badly? Has Galbraith come to their rescue? Has Fellman?

Sadly, Fellman is, himself, his own best case study in organization-class duplicity. He will empathize with Middle Americans when their feelings and interests coincide with his own—which is, to use his own words, "not very often or systematically."

## Managing Editor Wanted

*The Alternative* is looking for a managing editor to begin work in Bloomington, Indiana this June. Boneheads, lazyboots, and dogmatists need not apply; we welcome applications only from industrious souls with a good liberal education, a sense of humor, and a mastery of English prose. Please send resumes with references and brief samples of your writing to Adam Meyerson, *The Alternative*, P.O. Box 877, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

## Current Wisdom

**HAUTE CULTURE:** Miss Vivian Gornick, the Alfred Kazin of her milieu, speaks forebodingly of Mr. Woody Allen's intellectual decline—and even more forebodingly of her intellectual burgeoning. When will this prodigious mind be unveiled to a nation desperate for Culture?:

And then one day I found myself sitting through a Woody Allen movie and not laughing at all. The movie was "Play It Again, Sam" and halfway through it I realized that I was not only not laughing, I was angry and somewhat repelled. I felt as though I'd been watching Woody Allen try to get laid for 20 years now, and I did not want to see it *one more time*. Suddenly, the joke was old-fashioned and disgusting to me. The obsessive lechery startled and antagonized me.

—*Village Voice*  
January 5, 1976

**IDEAS:** *The Progressive* offers a peek into a dank place, the mind of Professor George Wald:

I believe our so-called free world is now wholly controlled by such multinational, super-enterprises as General Motors, Exxon, the Chase Manhattan Bank, ITT, Dutch Shell, and British Petroleum.

—*The Progressive*  
December 1975

**MAKING IT:** High-minded vaporings of John Hersey, author, Presidential confidant, and go-getter in the literary marketplace:

Since last April, when my article on President Ford appeared, his open enjoyment of the office, so manifest during the week I spent with him, seems to have flowered into an obsessive determination to hold onto it at any cost. Mr. Ford's conviction that the threat to his tenure comes from the right, from Ronald Reagan, has wiped out any hope there may have been last spring that his face-to-face decency, his wish to be thought of as another Harry Truman and his early undertakings to work with Congress in a spirit of compromise might move him toward the center of gravity of the people's temper. His hard and stubborn side, which I found so disturbing, has come forward to dominate his behavior and his policies. The irony is that Mr. Ford himself will have to pay—certainly in history and probably at the polls—part of the "any cost," for his drift is toward failure in the main task he set himself, of restoring confidence in the Presidency.

—*New York Times Magazine*  
December 28, 1975

**BICENTENNIAL BLUES:** A familiar idiotic lament festooned with Bicentennial angst for the urbane yokelry who read *The Nation*:

Democracy has come to mean pledging

allegiance to the flag, rather than questioning and evaluating what the flag stands for and how these values and goals can be improved.... Indeed, it seems that the Bicentennial has become synonymous with maintaining the political *status quo*, by celebrating a past which cannot possibly be altered, rather than facing a present and future which are open to evaluation and change.

—*The Nation*  
January 10, 1976

**MENTAL HEALTH:** A memorable moment provided by the founder of the Rational Therapy Institute of New York, Dr. Albert Ellis, professional fool:

Santa is bad. Any myth has potential harm. Myths perpetuate untruths and encourage unrealistic views of the world. Persons who believe in them wind up deluded and often with serious problems. People's irrationality misleads them to believe in gods and devils which, of course, have never been proven. If a child asks, "Is Santa real?" say: "No, there's no evidence for this myth." I would also alert children that they might suffer some ridicule as a result of their realistic views. But I would tell them that they should respect the views of others. Everyone has the right to believe anything he or she wants to about Santa Claus. But a parent should have faith that his children can face the truth squarely and still enjoy themselves.

—*Indianapolis Star Magazine*  
December 21, 1975

**DEPT. OF IDEAS:** Another comic moment at the *New York Times*, a newspaper that does not need a "funnies" section:

Mr. Shriver is a man whose honesty and integrity few would challenge. And he is an intellectual who spends a lot of time poring over cosmic questions.

—*New York Times*  
December 31, 1975

**THE LIFE OF THE MIND:** Intellectual reflections of a popular performer on the campus Chautauqua circuit, as reported by one of the most awesome news-gathering organs in America:

"If it weren't for the church and society's mores, the vast majority of human beings would be bisexual. At the extremes would be the straights and the gays," said Leonard Matlovich Sunday afternoon before about 700 persons from 19 states attending a Gay Awareness Conference at Indiana University.

"So many are oppressed that until it's all stopped, no one is safe," said the self-identified gay (homosexual) who recently was forced out of the U.S. Air Force with an honorable discharge because of his sexual preference, and not because there

was anything wrong with his military record.

According to his story at Sunday's conference, he has worked through many things in his own formerly hate-filled life.

"I was a white racist. I hated blacks. I went to extremes to convince those around me I was straight. I hated gays. I didn't know what it was to love or be loved... to desire and be desired," he said.

He said he "came out of the closet" about two years ago. "To meet a bank president, a school teacher and a garbage collector, who are gay... that's when I walk down the street a little prouder," Matlovich said.

"We as gays have to stop history... we, the oppressed, can go forward and teach love... What a crazy world, in which we're rewarded for hating and punished for loving," he said, calling for gays to unite and stop putting down each other.

—*Bloomington [Indiana] Herald-Telephone*  
November 3, 1975

**SOPHISTRIES:** Another trick answer from people who devote their lives to trick questions—the booby-trapped word here is "technology":

We live in a highly lethal society. No society in human history has cultivated the technology of killing and destruction as has Western society under Christianity.

—*The Progressive*  
December 1975

**WHAT IS TO BE DONE:** A timely revolutionary bull from the visionary pages of the *Village Voice*:

If you see a lesbian wearing a dress, point at her, make a face until she switches to the politically proper blue jeans.

—*Village Voice*  
December 15, 1975

**THE MATURE BRAT:** Midst an otherwise boring review of Henry Fairlie's latest book, the precious Dr. Garry Wills suffers a sudden and amusing tantrum wherein he coins another taxonomic preposterosity:

The type is established by Irving Kristol, who can say with a straight face that American colleges "give students academic credit for off-campus rioting." Kristol believes that smoking marijuana is an act "whose purpose is to secede from our society and our civilization, and such a declaration requires a moral answer, not a medical one." Kristol and crew have managed the neat trick of creating a Kooky Middle; and Fairlie seems, at first, to be applying for membership.

—*New York Times Book Review*  
January 18, 1976