



Midge Decter

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO AMERICA?

The First Lady of Neoconservatism diagnoses the national hypochondria and judges that the Republic is too young to die.

In the past fifteen years or so, American society has been positively riven by public disagreements. Shall we keep the peace by being strong or by being accommodating? Shall we render justice to previously mistreated minority groups by changing our laws, the condition of our hearts, or our traditional political and economic arrangements? Shall we in turn alter the economic balance of the country by confiscating the disproportionate wealth of the wealthy or shall we turn them loose to create even greater wealth for everybody? Should we be pursuing an increase in the national wealth at all or should we rather recall ourselves to a less expansive, less extravagant way of life?

About one thing, however, I think it fair to say that there is universal agreement: Something is wrong with us. While no two groups might share a common understanding of where that something lies or by what name to call it, that there is a general uneasiness—a sense that is the very opposite of a sense of social well-being—seems to be beyond question.

Let me cite a few random symptoms from my own reading of our current dislocation.

In a time when contraception is easier, more effective, and more accessible than ever before, in several major cities in this country abortions are outnumbering live births. Say what you will about abortion, that it is a crime or on the other hand that it is a basic human right, the one thing you cannot say is that it is or ought to be the most convenient and most pleasant available method of birth control.

Or take another, less freighted symptom. In a time when all across the land people have arranged their lives so that they jump into an automobile to get from where they are to the nearest corner—you might say we have become a nation of the legless—hordes of people of all ages daily put on

special costumes and special shoes, risking permanent damage to spine, knees, shins, and ankles, in order to jog to nowhere and back again.

In a not unrelated example, people have been campaigning most vociferously, sometimes violently, against foreign substances in the air, water, and food, claiming that their lives are being shortened by these alien substances and that therefore those who are responsible for their introduction into our natural atmosphere are little less than murderers. At the same time, many of these very same people (for this particular example is, of course, what they call class-specific) grow ever more accustomed to the use of cocaine, tranquilizers to offset the effects of that cocaine, hallucinogens to heighten their senses, sleeping pills to blacken them

out—all of this accompanied by the admittedly perilous solvent of alcohol.

Again, these people attend classes and therapy sessions whose purpose is to teach them how to get into connection with others—how to touch, how to feel, how to, forgive the expression, *relate*—and at the same time have become a vast new market for a piece of equipment called the “walkman” by means of which in all conceivable circumstances, at work and at play and in between, they literally shut themselves off from the outside world in order to march, as it were, to their own private and invisible drummers.

And what might we recount to one another about that whole area, absolutely central to human existence on earth, called the relations between the sexes? We might produce whole libraries devoted only to sad or absurd or ugly stories on the subject. A few suggestions will have to suffice.

Researchers report to us that a large, and increasing, number of boys and girls commence to sleep with one another in early adolescence. This is at the least acquiesced in and frequently positively encouraged by the relevant adults in their lives—in the name of health and naturalness. By the time of college, the girls profess to feel themselves manipulated and mistreated by males, and the boys . . . the boys line up in droves at the student health services seeking help with a problem whose initial presentation is depression and lack of energy and whose reality, once unmasked, is either the fear of, or the actual onset of, impotence.

Young women in the name of their individuality, independence, and self-fulfillment as women follow the herd into law schools and business schools, the same law schools and business schools whose male graduates they on the other hand decry for being unfeeling, driven, and so



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involved in the pursuit of success that they neglect wives, families, and the whole necessary range of instinctual and emotional life. In one and the same breath such young women have been heard to say that the heretofore male-dominated world of affairs has been a heartless and love-denying place, one they seek to liberate men from, and that in their own ambition to participate in this world they demand the right to be relieved of the necessity to marry and have children if they do not feel like it. If, on the other hand, for some reason they *do* feel like it, they further demand the right not to have to give primary attention to the needs of spouse and children. The shorthand description of this bent of mind is "heads you lose, tails I win." In a speech delivered a couple of years ago, Ms. Gloria Steinem stated the matter thus: "What has happened," she said, "is that we are becoming the men we once wanted to marry."

This might be presumed to be, as Ms. Steinem does in fact presume it to be, a satisfactory state of affairs—call it "the equality of condition." There is only one small hitch. The men that "we" once wanted to marry have responded to this assault on their worldly directed masculine untenderness in one of two ways—and in many, many cases in both ways simultaneously. First, they have withdrawn from the rigors of their allegedly no-longer-wanted and no-longer-needed performance as successful providers and protectors of the household. Female-headed households have become probably the single most active growth stock on the American market of social phenomena. Meanwhile, men have begun to display an unprecedented degree of preoccupation with what were once by and large held to be feminine concerns: such as, the care, beautification, and ornamentation (including perfuming) of their bodies; the state of their emotions, finely calibrated and openly discussed; decor; and the quality of their orgasms. But for normal differences in voice quality, eavesdroppers on conversations in those places where young men and women congregate to introduce themselves and become acquainted—singles bars, beaches, cocktail parties, adult education courses, and so on—might have difficulty in discovering which is the man and which is the woman. Who is telling inside stories of the flummery or incompetence of this or that chief executive officer, and who is offering the fruits of a new insight into this or that aspect of some personal relation?

A happy outcome, from the point of view of those wishing to eradicate distinctions between the sexes. But it somehow does not seem beside the point to ask, if this is a condition to be desired, how come there is so much resentment and discontent on the faces and in the voices of both sexes? And how come there is so much joyless bed-hopping and so much divorce for so little traditional cause?

The second response of men—and its difference from the first is not so great as it might appear—has been to shrug and to accede, largely for the sake of peace, to the demands of the women they hope, and mean, to sustain relations with, whether as wives, girlfriends, colleagues, or even daughters. If the woman is a colleague, a man responding in this fashion will be careful to mind his tongue and manners. He will, for instance, be careful to say "person" instead of "man" when referring to a general case, as in chairperson, or fireperson, or journeyperson. He will expunge from his vocabulary the word "girl," referring to every female over the age of two as a "woman." He will vacillate between holding open a door or going through it first, between taking a check or leaving it to be divided, depending on the signals he is given, as well as on how accurately he is able to interpret them. And he will keep his own thoughts, his own signals, and his own responses to himself—or perhaps share them with the boys on locker-room-type occasions.

If she is a serious girlfriend, he will accede again, this time taking a kind of relieved, if grim, advantage of the fact that his attentions to her now need be merely symbolic, that when it comes to the genuinely difficult demands of his traditional role—all those demands for protection, strength, attentiveness that are roughly summed up in that now-obsolete word "manly"—he can be absent.

I noticed the onset of this new arrangement many years ago. I have three daughters, and during their adolescence came to be aware that the American enlightened middle class was no longer training its young sons to such forms of masculine protectiveness as calling for their female companions of an evening and, above all, of seeing them home again late at night. These young men were very soon to pay for this lacuna in their upbringing. They were to pay internally by a massive class-wide case of neurasthenia whose symptoms ranged from persistent fatigue all the way to sexual impotence, as I have already noted. And they were to pay externally with the contempt and hostility of their female contemporaries, by then of college age, who played such tricks on them as sharing their dormitories, their rooms, even sometimes their beds, while keeping themselves sexually unavailable, or who derided them publicly, as in the early, rumbustious days of Women's Lib. The doffing of the brassiere and the raising of the hemline to crotch height of the late sixties and early seventies may have been mistaken for sexual invitation by these boys' uncomprehending fathers, but *they* got the message of teasing contempt which was the real meaning of that particular fashion among their female contemporaries. Moreover, it is one of America's many unpublished secrets of the time that more often than not the various undertakings of the student radical movement,

while they may have been conceived and articulated by young men, were carried off through the hostile and doubly directed energies of the young women who pretended to be their comrades.

To return to adulthood, the adulthood we are witnessing now, the symbolic accession to the demand that men cease to distinguish themselves from women naturally

"A philosophic system is an integrated view of existence. As a human being, you have no choice about the fact that you need a philosophy. Your only choice is whether you define your philosophy by a conscious, rational, disciplined process of thought... or let your subconscious accumulate a junk heap of unwarranted conclusions..."

PHILOSOPHY: WHO NEEDS IT by AYN RAND

Author of *The Fountainhead*
and *Atlas Shrugged*

The last work planned before her death, this collection ranges to every corner of our culture. Miss Rand's pen writes with the dispassionate clarity and passionate eloquence that her many admirers have come to expect. Many of the essays appeared in *The Ayn Rand Letter*; none have been published before in book form.

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takes on its most serious forms in marriage—in all those marriages that are indeed leading with such bewildering frequency to divorce. Here let me offer one example that can stand in for the whole: the case of birthing and tending to babies. For perhaps the primary act of denigrating what is natural to masculinity and attempting to create a universal feminine takes place nowadays over the issue of childbirth. Giving birth to babies has fashionably become something that wives demand of their husbands up to the fullest extent possible. Since biology obdurately continues to refuse the interventions of both government and social fashion, the demand that men, too, give birth to babies must be limited to their participation as spectators only, but to the entire process from beginning to end. Husbands are not only being permitted but are being *morally required* to remain in full attendance in the delivery room, taking the detailed measure of what they have wrought. What is more important, they are being morally required to profess this to be the most profound experience of their lives. Now, since, as every woman knows, the process of delivering a baby is apt to involve behavior on her part that is far more spectacularly obstreperous to witness than it is to experience—and certainly far more memorable—her husband will very likely be far more impressed and frightened by it than she. The object of this exercise, as advertised, is to help the father to achieve a more tender, intimate, and natural, that is, more motherly, relation with his baby. And no doubt a higher degree of immediate familiarity between the father and his newborn—traditionally a somewhat anxious-making object for most men—is achieved by this new obstetrical fashion. So one hears about the experience, along with professions of its wonder and profundity, from the raft of men who have in recent years been pressed into it.

Yet there is something else one hears in the talk of such men as it goes on, something of fear and trembling, of helplessness and uselessness and, yes,

revulsion, and something else again: the suggestion of the sense precisely of their insignificance to the whole process. That they will *father* their children—work hard, if need be unpleasantly, to support them, to protect them, to keep a roof over their heads and a threatening world at bay, that they will take on the far from easy obligation to instruct them in the ways of that world—all this has been set at virtually naught.

Once the baby has been brought home, its enlightened, acceding father continues his maternal participation, feeding, when possible, diapering, soothing, rocking, fetching, carrying. And its mother? In many, many cases she on the other hand will be ticking off the days of her obligation until she is permitted to resume her so-called “real” career, downtown in the office. She will be investigating the various kinds of day-care available, and negotiating with her husband the necessary arrangements for their sharing of maternal tasks in the hours that surround the working day. Fortunately, the memories of infants retain almost no specific content. Otherwise the baby who is the object of this negotiation might before long find himself in the condition of someone who, for a brief while enjoying the attentions of two mothers, has with bewildering suddenness been thrust into a life in which he no longer enjoys the attentions of even one: his father, convinced by the whole world that he has no special role to play, having felt released to take off for parts unknown; while his mother, having demonstrated her preference for the manly role of breadwinner, is now forced by necessity to play that role for keeps. Who has not seen them, in the precincts of the very poor, of course, but also of the forward-looking enlightened middle class—the army of gallant young women setting off each morning to deposit their toddlers somewhere so that they may earn the keep of the households they have been given to head?

And what of the young families who stay together? Here I make a prediction. In ten

years’ time among these there will arise a new women’s movement. It may not call itself by that name, nor hold conventions—nor, certainly, receive government recognition or foundation grants—but of statements, manifestoes, angry declarations there will be many. And the gist of these will be: What has happened to the men? Why will they not make it possible for us simply to be women?

More than anything else that has gone wrong with us, this recent episode in the war between the sexes will one way and another make its consequence felt for a long, a very long time. A society like ours can swing from intellectual and social fashion to intellectual and social fashion with relative ease—indeed, there are fortunes to be made from it; ask the publishing and entertainment industries. But it cannot with impunity engage in an effort to overturn the natural order. And that a man is a man and a woman is a woman, and that life on earth is only made tolerable by the collaborative contributions of the uniqueness of each, is about as good a definition of a fundamental aspect of the natural order as any.

Perhaps it is our technology, which has so altered the nature and experience of work. Perhaps it is our atheism, which has invited us to believe we can make our own rules for everything. Perhaps it is merely our greed, which has made us ungrateful not only for the good things of life—such as our health, the comfort and bounty in which we are privileged to spend our days, or even just the way we take for granted that the children born to us will survive—but ungrateful for life itself.

Whatever accounts for it, we are in the grip of a great national wave of hypochondria. The hypochondriac is the most perfect representation of the will to overturn the natural order. He pursues illness in order to deny death. Anyone who has watched a hypochondriac closely knows that this is so. He is a person in the grip of a magical formula: He pre-emptively secures for it an endless round of pre-emptive cures in order to protect himself from the deeper animal knowledge that he is, like all things of nature, passing through an inevitable cycle of ripening, aging, decaying, and dying. He will beat death with his facsimile maladies, and will live forever, forever a sick, or potentially sick, man. Franz Kafka, who was himself a hypochondriac of no mean dimension, once remarked to his friend and biographer, Max Brod, “The trouble with us, Max, is that we treat our health as though it were a disease.”

Treating our health as though it were a disease is not a bad description of *The Way We Live Now*. Consider: Never have people eaten better, grown larger, or lived longer in better condition than we, yet has



there ever been a society more obsessed with the various harmful properties of what we put into our mouths? To read the daily papers of the last, say, fifteen years or so is to be kept constantly in mind of menace. Everything edible, it seems, is at one time or another scrutinized for the richness of its carcinogens or the emptiness of its calories. To watch television—particularly, for some reason, to watch television late at night—is to be bombarded with the message that every minute so and so many of our fellow Americans are dying of this or that arcane disease. The very unfamiliarity of the names of the maladies now stalking one in ten, or one in twenty, or one in two hundred might be thought to reassure us of just how hale and hardy we have become by comparison with our forebears. But no, the message is the opposite. Of course, we know why we are being warned in this way—as an appeal for our support for various worthy institutions or organizations undertaking medical research. The impression, however, is unmistakable: With enough money and enough research and enough scientific ingenuity, no one ever need die of anything.

So we are healthy but always in danger of illness—figuratively as well as literally, spiritually as well as physically. As doctors and drugs to the individual hypochondriac, so something called “society” must be made to prescribe to our collective denial of nature. Society must make it possible for the young to remain children and for the

old to remain young. Society must arrange it so that relations between the sexes, especially sexual relations between the sexes, are entirely without weight or consequence. Society must invent a way for women to be mothers and men fathers, if for some reason they choose to do so, without the need for any selflessness on their part. Society must banish all inequity, all discomfort, all necessity, all tragedy, and above all, everything for which the individual has hitherto been responsible.

Some have described the condition from which we suffer as narcissism. I do not think the name of this condition is narcissism, a term which in any case is all too often confused with just plain selfishness. I think we suffer from a massive denial of human limitedness, which is, as I said, just another way of describing hypochondria.

It makes no difference that the diseases of the hypochondriac are imaginary. Hypochondria is itself a mortal disease. The young may wish for society to keep them children. They do not thrive, do not prosper, are not happy, satisfied, vital, if they are permitted to do so. The old may wish for society to keep them young, but they lose the richness of their lives, the golden rewards of all their travail and experience, when such a pretense is made possible. Men and woman may wish for society to render their entanglements of no consequence. Without weight and consequence, even unhappy consequence, to

give them meaning, these entanglements are pure pain and poison. Mothers and fathers may wish for society to take over their burden of selflessness. Without precisely that burden, the knowledge that another's existence and needs mean more to one than one's own, life becomes an ever more accelerating accumulation of trivia—of evanescent junk—without sustenance and without satisfaction.

All of this is what really threatens us. Not air pollution, not carcinogens, not viruses, not too much wealth or too much poverty, not too much technology or too little spontaneous feeling. It is the rush to denounce our connection to the eternal and inevitable order of things: that we are all born, male or female, that we spend a short, sometimes tragic, often comic, time on the scene, that we generate others, look after them, and one day, hopefully without being too ugly about it, make way for them.

Those of us going through this cycle in twentieth-century democratic society, in American society, do so in physically, socially, and politically privileged surroundings. This is our blessing of health, but, as Kafka said, we seem determined to treat it as a disease. In our determination, we have succeeded. We are ill—of something it will take more than a new political climate to cure. □

Maurice Cranston

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LIBERALISM?

After a summer spent in our nation's capital reading the blowzy literature of a blowzy movement, one of England's foremost political philosophers expresses his astonishment.

Liberalism in America is thought at the moment to be unpopular. Its actual situation is much worse, for to judge from what is being written and said by the leading liberals in the United States today, a once great system of political thought has degenerated into a sorry mess of contradictory opinion, prejudice, fantasy, passion, and trivia. How is this to be explained? Before his death in 1979, David Spitz, a distinguished American political philosopher who specialized in the theory

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of liberalism, wrote a number of essays which have now been posthumously published,* exploring what he called the “authentic tradition” of liberalism and trying to ascertain how that tradition had come to be, as he put it, “sidetracked.”

His argument was that liberalism, in its essentials, is a doctrine about liberty, a doctrine which assigns priority to the freedom of the individual, and notably to freedom from the constraints of the state. This was the liberalism of John Locke and—in some at least of his writings—of

**The Real World of Liberalism*, by David Spitz. Chicago University Press, \$20.00.

John Stuart Mill. David Spitz believed that this was still the only genuine form of liberalism, and the credo he devised for liberals in the twentieth century began with the maxim: “Esteem liberty above all other values, even over equality and justice.”

Spitz did not, however, think that liberalism could, or should, be brought unaltered from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Earlier liberals had fashioned their political programs in contrast with, and usually in opposition to, conservatives. But liberals were no longer in the same situation. “The decisive issue for our time,” Spitz wrote, “is not Mill versus