



IN PRAISE OF DECADENCE

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The year is new; the decade is nearly spent. And commentators of every political and cultural persuasion are scrambling to characterize, even to pigeonhole the '70s. Ben Wattenberg of the conservative American Enterprise Institute has rushed to inform the readers of the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and his own bi-monthly magazine, *Public Opinion*, that the '70s is best characterized as a "great backlash against the sensibility of the 1960s", as a "move to the right" by Americans opposed to the "eroding moral standards", the monetary inflation, and the international slip in status the United States has learned to live with in the past decade.

For Wattenberg, all these evils may be laid at the feet of "the sensibility of the 1960s", though he is careful never to be too intelligible about what exactly that sensibility was or exactly how it has led us to eroded moral standards, eroded money, and eroded world status. Perhaps his is a studied unintelligibility: perhaps Watten-

berg, like Oscar Wilde's Lord Darlington, is afraid that "now-a-days to be intelligible is to be found out."

For, to take up Wattenberg's catalogue of evils in the reverse of the order in which he presented it, the international status of the United States has *not* deteriorated in the past decade—at least, as that status is reflected in our prestige abroad. From the years of the Vietnam war, when the U.S. government was despised all over the globe, there has been nothing but dramatic *improvement* in U.S. status abroad. And while inflation is undeniably real and rapacious, it is extraordinarily difficult to see in what way it proceeds from "the sensibility of the 1960s". It proceeds, in fact, from one thing and one thing only: from U.S. government tampering with the money supply. And whatever the new leftists and counterculturists of the 1960s may have advocated in their not infrequent moments of political madness, they never advocated tampering with the money supply. It wasn't their kind of issue. Nor is it associated with them.

Their kind of issue has been typified, and not without justice, as the "personal freedom" issue: the freedom to smoke marijuana, to obtain an abortion, to refuse the slavery of military "service", to rear children without the interference of either the medical establishment or the public schools. For Wattenberg, presumably, the choice to do any or all of these things is evidence of "eroding moral standards"—but that is not how the majority of Americans sees the issue. Marijuana draws closer by the day to the legal-but-regulated status now enjoyed by the favored drugs of Wattenberg's generation, alcohol and tobacco. "Abortion-on-demand" has lost both its legal and its social stigma. The draft is gone, and efforts to resurrect it have, so far, failed. Home birth and midwifery have become almost *de rigueur* among middle class suburbanites, as have private schools. Far from joining a "backlash" against the "eroding moral standards" of the '60s, Americans are enthusiastically embracing those eroded standards: smoking pot, aborting their unwanted

pregnancies, having their babies at home, sending their kids to private schools, dismissing from their minds all the prattle they hear from commentators like Wattenberg about the moral crisis posed by homosexuality and pornography, deciding to devote their energies instead to pleasing, even indulging, *themselves*.

It is hardly possible to exaggerate the cultural importance of this phenomenon, but is easily possible to misapprehend and misname it, whatever your politics. Thus Wattenberg looks straight at all this culturally acceptable self-indulgence and calls it a "conservative backlash" against the ethos of the '60s. And Henry Fairlie ventures a remarkably similar analysis in the pages of the liberal *New Republic*, under the title "A Decade of Reaction." Fairlie too sees the conservative opinion maker as the natural leader of the '70s, but he reveals in his closing paragraphs that he uses the word "conservative" in what can only be called a Pickwickian sense. "We are being led by the conservative intellectuals," he writes, "into the garden of weeds and nettles that Ayn Rand helped to prepare for us. If that seems too vulgar, it must be said that one of the key conservative works of the 1970s, Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, is no less vulgar in a radical libertarianism, as we are asked to consider it, that is really nothing but a self-indulgent permissiveness—which any true conservative should resist by instinct—speciously given the dignity of a moral system."

Murray Rothbard has argued that traditional liberals and traditional conservatives are gradually becoming indistinguishable and have even, in some cases, begun explicitly proposing a merger of forces to do battle with a new enemy called "permissiveness." Here, it would seem, is one of those explicit calls for a merger. Both the liberal and the conservative recoil in horror from the moral degeneration they see around them in our culture. And both locate the origins of the problem in the cultural upheavals of the 1960s.

The '60s, to Fairlie, was a decade of "general social concerns"; a decade in which "social and not personal questions" dominated public discussion and debate—dominated even the bestseller lists. And, as Fairlie sees it, all this gave way to the hedonistic, self-centered culture of the '70s only after a massive betrayal.

Standing at the end of the 1970s, our instinct is to ask why the apparently furious social protests of the 1960s led to the new sensibility, to the in-turning of the self. But our question is wrongly put. Much of the social protest of the 1960s was primarily that of personal theater, which only seemed to have a public concern because it took place on the streets. This was most obviously true of the Yippies, such as Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, but it was no less true of someone such as H. Bruce Franklin of Stanford who, as late as the early 1970s, was still being presented to us a revolutionary martyr, although his "revolutionary Marxism" was, to all who heard him, the merest fig leaf for his self-indulgent theater. What could be seen only by some in the 1960s, but is now clear to all but a few, is that the new left was, from its beginning to its end, in a self-destructive alliance with the counterculture, and that the counterculture swallowed up the new left. If it had been seriously political at all, the new left would have fought the counterculture tooth and nail. It would have cut all connections with the hip and the junky. It would have had nothing to do with those who saw all society as the enemy of the individual, a posturizing that was soon extended to the belief that all *reality* is the enemy of the individual. When we listen today to Tom Hayden's account of his one-time associates—"Jerry Rubin continues his quest for a therapeutic revolution. . . . Abbie Hoffman has literally dropped out, since he's forced to live as a fugitive to avoid a long jail sentence on an old drug charge. . . . Rennie Davis has dropped political activism—and that to undertake a spiritual life. . . ."—we are listening to a self-serving mythologizing of one of the great political betrayals of all time.

So here we have it: a leading conservative hailing the '70s as the decade of long-awaited backlash against the moral turpitude of the 1960s; and a prominent liberal damning the '70s as the decade in which the promise of the '60s—the furious devotion to social issues—collapsed into a singleminded devotion to the personal, to the self. To make sense of the '70s, it would seem, we must first make sense of the '60s.

The meaning of the sixties

Like Fairlie, Carl Oglesby, who presided over Students for a Democratic Society in 1965-1966, conceives the '60s as the work of two distinct groups: the new left and the counterculture—or, as he calls it, "the hip culture." But unlike Fairlie, Oglesby approaches his subject matter with first hand knowledge. And his account of the relationship between the two groups is accordingly more realistic. "The difference between the hip scene and the New Left movement," he writes,

was something the activists were constantly aware of. How could it have been otherwise? The hip thing was fundamentally a mass introspection, a drug-boostered look in. The New Left, on the other hand, went out to the world from a set of shared moral precepts about race, war, and imperialism; it was a recreating of a private moral judgment as a public political act. Of course, the normal hippie's every instinct indisposed him to war and made him wholly eager to demonstrate this, provided that someone else set the stage. But he was satisfied to act without strategic thought, without any sense of political plan, except that the more people there were who smoked grass, the better off the country would be.

Earlier in the same essay ("The World Before Watergate," *Inquiry*, May 29, 1978), Oglesby identified the "core idea" of the new left as the idea

that the United States and USSR were in a process of "convergence": Russian Communism and American capitalism were coming to mean much the same thing. Both systems had been badly tarnished in the Cold War struggles and had lost their former ideal purity and moral simplicity. Therefore (ran the early New Left argument), true progressives, classical liberals, humanistic revolutionaries, and libertarians needed to strike out beyond received liberalism and dogmatic Marxism in search of new comprehensions, a new sense of politics, and a new general project for the left.

It seems noteworthy to me that this description of the cultural and ideological underpinnings of the new left contains not a single reference to the economic issues commonly associated with the left in general. The students were not out in the streets during the '60s demanding that factories be turned over to the workers or that the poor of America be given a guaranteed annual income or that medicine be socialized. Instead they were demanding an end to war and the roots of war—U.S. imperialism—and an end to institutionalized, governmentally mandated racism and sexism. And their reasons for issuing these demands were largely personal and individual—as Oglesby suggests when he calls the new left a "recreating of a private moral judgment as a public political act." Those of us who were college students during the turbulent '60s opposed the war in Vietnam and the U.S. foreign policy of global interventionism and imperialism because we were individually appalled at the prospect of being ordered by the leading government of the "free world" to murder other human beings whom we did not know and with whom we had no quarrel, and to act as standing targets for those other, equally armed and dangerous, human beings. We opposed the officially sanctioned racism and sexism of the period because we believed

that each human being was, like ourselves, a unique individual, and was entitled to be regarded and approached as such, rather than as an anonymous member of a group which had arbitrarily been awarded second class social status on the basis of irrational prejudice. We opposed laws against marijuana because we didn't want to get busted for smoking a little grass. We opposed government efforts to silence dissent and impose conformity because we didn't want to get busted for saying what we thought. We were not so much new leftists, perhaps, as new individualists.

This is certainly the conclusion to which one is drawn, at any rate, upon learning from Carl Oglesby that fully two of the four constituencies represented by the original new left were classical liberals and libertarians, both of whom adopt a very un-leftwing approach to economic issues by insisting on absolute protection of individual rights. It is also the conclusion toward which another survivor of the '60s, Jim Hougan, has argued, in his recent book, *Decadence* (William Morrow, 1975). In Hougan's mind, the counterculture was the central significant fact of the '60s. But it was a shapeless, undefined, and possibly undefinable fact. It was "a loose agglomeration of sects, systems, and disengaged youths who didn't have enough in common to constitute a 'movement' in any meaningful sense of the word. What the counterculture shared with itself was a set of rejections, a preoccupation with consciousness, a belief in exemplary action, and the certainty that the planet's fate rested upon the shoulders of the young."

Loose as this agglomeration was, Hougan argues, it posed a genuine threat to things as they were. It held within itself the potential of a genuine revolutionary movement—but a *cultural* movement, not a strictly political one, and certainly not one devoted to achieving the program of the new left. "Its alliance with the New Left was mostly fictitious," Hougan writes, "a combination of cultural expedience and political propaganda." In fact,

if one is inclined toward conspiracy theories, it may be tempting to believe that the answer to the question—Why are we in Vietnam?—is that our presence there offered an irrelevant Left the fulcrum needed to co-opt a truly dangerous mass phenomenon. (As with all conspiracy theories, this one wildly overestimates the perception and chutzpah of the bad guys.) Certainly, in the absence of the Vietnam diversion, the anti-authoritarian young would not have tolerated the rhetoric, puritanism, materialism, centralism, or totalitarian style of the Left.

In effect, the Left was the only political element of any importance in American society which opposed the Vietnamese war, and so, by default, found itself in a position to take over intellectual leadership of a mass movement which was actually much more broadly based. "Exploiting Vietnam as an opportunity for recruitment," Hougan writes, "the Left sought to co-opt the counterculture, to reforge the latter's cultural discontents into the political framework ordained by Marx a century earlier. It was an awkward, painful fit." Moreover, "in the arrogant takeovers of underground newspapers, in the 'politicization' of cultural institutions such as food co-ops, and in the Leninists' blatant subversion of organizations such as SDS, the Marxist Left demonstrated its appalling bad faith and dogmatism."

If the picture of the '60s, the new left, and the counterculture painted by Oglesby and Hougan is an accurate one (and it jibes far better with my own memory of the decade than do the caricatures of Ben Wattenberg and Henry Fairlie), then the true meaning of the '60s, culturally speaking, is a kind of individualism. The loose agglomeration of disaffected, anti-authoritarian young people which came to

be called the counterculture was unified by its opposition to authority, its belief in the fundamental importance of freedom and dignity for the individual, its devotion to the idea of consciousness (along with the various methods and substances used in altering it and the various theories and therapeutic techniques used in adapting it to the rigors of living), its idealism, and its belief in itself as a generation. Those among the young who were politically inclined quickly recognized the threat posed to the individual in this country by the U.S. government, and began vigorously opposing the most blatant of its oppressive acts: the mass murder in Vietnam, the drug laws and repression of dissent at home, the institutionalization of racial and sexual discrimination. Recognizing an opportunity when it saw one (and genuinely sympathizing with most of the positions it was co-opting), the forces of the left moved in—and were, for the most part, welcomed. After all, what other American political organizations were actively seeking to join the young in their cause? They were told that their causes were leftwing causes, and they believed it. They were told that they were the new left, and they called themselves the new left, and they came to be called the new left.

But the fact is, as we have seen, that they were not, most of them, leftists at all. So, inevitably, they parted company with their leftist mentors and fellow-travellers. And when they did, how the howling began! Henry Fairlie's already quoted complaint is fairly typical: "If the new left had been seriously political at all, it would have had nothing to do with those who saw all society as the enemy of the individual, a posturizing that was soon extended to the belief that all *reality* is the enemy of the individual."

This comes, remember, from the same writer who considers libertarianism "self-indulgent permissiveness speciously given the dignity of a moral system." And it is fairly typical of leftist responses to what has happened to the counterculture since the '60s, since the end of the draft and the end of the war ended its need, if ever there had been one, for an alliance with the left. As description it is wholly inadequate. Does Fairlie really believe that the young people of the '60s began by believing that all society is the enemy of the individual and now believe that all reality is the enemy of the individual? Where has he been?

Perhaps he's been inhabiting the same hideaway as Susan Stern, who writes for *Seven Days* and *In These Times*, and who announces in the Christmas 1978 issue of *Inquiry* that a group of families "could not be described as 'hippies' or members of the 'counterculture' " because most of them "were supported by gainfully employed fathers and lived in single-family dwellings with one or two cars in the garage." How do Fairlie and Stern think all those millions of young members of the counterculture have been staying alive all these years? By collecting welfare and food stamps? By being supported by their parents? Or do they think all the flower children have literally died out and we have somehow failed to notice the dramatic loss in population?

The fact is, the campus radicals of the 1960s, who never really became devoted to the Marxist economics their leftwing comrades were peddling but who found it plausible enough and palatable enough, have spent the last few years learning hard practical lessons in the economics of the real world. They've been out here in the marketplace, finding out first hand about inflation, government regulation of business, and the laws of supply and demand which they used to comprehend in terms of "exploited labor" and "greedy capitalists." A growing number of the retail merchants, restaurateurs, doctors, lawyers, journalists and business-

people of today are the flower children and campus radicals of yesterday:

Allen is a paramedic and lab technician at one of the largest and most modern hospitals in metropolitan Los Angeles. He earns a little extra money by growing and selling marijuana. He lives, with his wife and three children, in a three bedroom ranch style house in a suburban middle class neighborhood. He meditates daily, eats no meat, burns incense in every room of his home and also in his car, and decorates his walls with psychedelic and Indian posters. Twelve years ago, when he was at City College, Allen was a "new left" radical. Today when he gets involved in political conversations, he's fond of turning his friends on to a film he saw on public television, "The Incredible Bread Machine," which presents the case for a free market.

To the north, in Berkeley, Greg, Jim and Jerry are finding out first hand what it's like to be a businessman, an entrepreneur, a capitalist. Ten years ago, Greg was telling hundreds of students at an anti-war rally in Houston's Hermann Park that they ought to tear down the buildings of nearby Rice University "brick by brick." Today he owns and operates a successful "alternative news service" for radio stations. Ten years ago, Jim and Jerry were writing and distributing radical literature, occupying buildings, issuing demands. Today they're in partnership in the solar energy business. Jerry and his wife have two kids and a station wagon, and one of their favorite topics of conversation is the difficulty you have finding decent schools.

Dave was a staff writer for the Los Angeles Free Press ten years ago, a regular on one of America's largest and most influential underground papers. Today he's an up and coming realtor with a home in the Hollywood hills.

Dennis is a street artist. You can find him most Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays along the San Francisco waterfront peddling his handmade leather goods. His wife Rina is a registered nurse, who also teaches natural childbirth classes for extra money. They live, with their two children, in a \$150,000 house in Piedmont, one of the most fashionable addresses in the San Francisco Bay area. They buy all their groceries at health food stores. In November of 1978, they voted for Ed Clark, the Libertarian Party candidate for Governor of California.

None of these people (and there are hundreds of thousands of others like them) has abandoned his old countercultural habits of thought. All of them are finding themselves more in agreement than ever with their original commitment to peace and individual freedom, but newly skeptical of their original notions about the role of government in promoting "economic justice" as they once called it—and increasingly skeptical, therefore, of the role of government period.

"The electorate is skeptical," writes U.C. Berkeley political science professor Jacob Citrin in the premier issue of a new magazine called *Taxing and Spending*, "if not wholly contemptuous, of government's ability to solve the nation's problems." He cites figures from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research showing that nearly 75 percent of the electorate believe "the government wastes a lot of tax money"; 60 percent believe "the government in Washington can be trusted to do what is right only some of the time"; 50 percent believe "public officials don't care much what people think"; and 45 percent believe "the people running the government don't know what they are doing."

And these attitudes are, of course, turning up at the polls. CBS news reported on January 14 that slightly less than 50



Oscar Wilde by Max Beerbohm

percent of those eligible to vote in the November 1978 elections had bothered to go to the polls. According to a Census Bureau spokesman, these non-voters could not properly be described as apathetic; rather, he said, they were politically alienated—increasingly uncertain that voting changed anything or could change anything, that elections were anything more than a fraud or a charade. Moreover, the Census Bureau told CBS, it was likely that even more Americans are staying away from the polls than the figures would seem to suggest, since it's widely known that many people lie when asked if they voted in the last election.

Possible confirmation of that last gloomy speculation came early in February, when the British magazine, *The Economist*, released its privately conducted survey of participation in the November 1978 elections. *The Economist* found that only 37 percent of the electorate had bothered to vote.

And it is almost certain that one of the largest factors in the growth of this non-voting, politically alienated segment of the electorate is the progressively more important role the generation of the '60s is playing in the public life of the nation. As Jim Houghan puts it, the flower children of the '60s are now in the adolescence of their middle age. They are on the verge of becoming the establishment. *And more of them are flower children today than were flower children in the '60s*—if by "flower children" we mean advocates of the countercultural values of peace, freedom, consciousness, and youth. Madison Avenue has seen to it that these values have been spread through the culture and made acceptable, in some cases, even to those who despised them at the time they were new.

"Counterculture and women's liberation are classic ex-

amples of movements 'processed' by the Avenue," Hougan writes.

The most strategic ideological battles took place. . . in the suites of Avenue account execs, in the minds of copywriters, on television, and on the advertising pages of the nation's magazines.

It was there that America accommodated itself to the new ideas or rejected them. What made those ideas virtually impossible to ignore was the economic strength which the young possessed and, just as important, the attention they commanded from their envious elders. In co-opting the young and the women's movement, the Avenue exercised its usual care for the stability of the social boat, going to extraordinary lengths in its efforts to separate the movements' styles, slogans, symbols, heroes, and catchwords from their essences and contents.

Thus were we treated, during the '60s, to pitches for Angel Face makeup, "for the natural look"; Right Guard's new "natural scent" anti-perspirant; the Powers modeling school's "liberating" modeling course; Ma Griffe perfume for the liberated woman; "New Generation" shoes from Hush Puppies; "Female Chauvinist" shirts from Ultressa; and the list goes on and on. "The young's reaction was predictable," Hougan writes.

They complained about "cultural exploitation" and co-optation, but saw little that they could do about it. What they didn't seem to understand, however, was that co-optation works both ways. The Avenue co-opted the symbols and rhetoric of the young in order to sell their clients' products but, in doing so, it also sold the thing which it'd co-opted. Advertisements for Angel Face, Dep, Jim Beam, Levis, Ma Griffe, H.I.S., Hertz, and Right Guard hawked the values of the counterculture and women's lib even as they touted makeup, hair conditioner, bourbon, pants, deoderants, and perfume. Women's liberation became exactly as acceptable as Ma Griffe, and equally chic. It doesn't matter that industry's endorsement of the movement was mercenary and ripe with hypocrisy. What counted was the effect of that endorsement: women who were ambivalent or skeptical about the movement understood, at least subliminally, that its values were literally "in *Vogue*." Not to accept those values, or to neglect the rhetoric, was tantamount to being "lame," unattractive, and cloddish. Ma Griffe spoke to the fashionable young women of America, and pronounced them "liberated"; in doing so, the perfume makers struck a greater blow for the women's movement than all the books about *Vaginal Politics* and all the "consciousness-raising sessions" held to date.

One may question Hougan's assertion that "industry's endorsement of the movement was mercenary and ripe with hypocrisy." Samuel Brittan, in his recent book, *Capitalism and the Permissive Society*, writes that "the values of competitive capitalism have a great deal in common with contemporary attitudes, and in particular with radical attitudes. Above all they share a similar stress on allowing people to do, to the maximum feasible extent, what they feel inclined to do rather than conform to the wishes of authority, custom or convention."

Of course, as Brittan reminds us, "competitive capitalism is far from being the sole or dominating force of our society. . . But to the extent that it prevails, competitive capitalism is the biggest single force acting on the side of what is fashionable to call 'permissiveness', but what was once known as personal liberty."

This is certainly, as we have seen, what happened in the United States during the '60s. Through the medium of advertising, capitalists helped to spread and legitimize the values of the counterculture—values, which, as we have seen, are more properly regarded as individualistic and libertarian, than as collectivist and leftist. As Brittan puts it, "the basic arguments for the so-called 'permissive' morality were developed by thinkers in the 19th-century liberal tradition from John Stuart Mill onwards. . . Many of the classi-

cal ideas of 19th-century liberalism did not come on the statute book until the 1960s. The battle is still far from won, as can be seen from the sentences still passed on 'obscene publications' or the hysterical and vindictive attitude adopted by so many authority figures towards the problem of drugs." And again: "the contemporary New Left—and even more the less overtly political 'youth culture'—is both hedonistic and suspicious of authority. It is the end road of the libertarian and utilitarian ideals professed by the bewigged philosophers of the 18th century and Victorian political thinkers in their frock coats."

Similarly, Murray N. Rothbard has described the new left (in "Liberty and the New Left," *Left and Right*, Autumn 1965, pp. 35-67) as "a striking and splendid infusion of libertarianism into the ranks of the Left." In the same piece, he approvingly quotes a student activist who argues that the new left has "taken up a 'right wing' cause which the avowed conservatives have dropped in favor of defending corporations and hunting Communists. This is the cause of the individual against the world."

The cause of the individual. Hedonism. Suspicion of authority. The meaning and true legacy of the '60s. And what then of the '70s? Thanks to the power of advertising, and to the power of an idea whose time has come, the whole country is now moving to the beat of the ghostly drummer who set the rhythm for the flower children and campus radicals of a decade and more ago. And we are plunged full tilt into decadence.

The decay of authority

The word "decadence" has been much used of late in descriptions of our cultural milieu. Jim Hougan called the '70s decadent back in 1975, but neglected, in a 250-page discussion filled with useful insights, to offer a straightforward, clear definition of the term. *New Times* magazine devoted its farewell issue, the issue of January 8, 1979, to an analysis of how and why the culture of the '70s was decadent. The cover depicted a bound and helpless Uncle Sam lying ignominiously on the floor; above him, with one foot on his midriff, stood a beautiful, scantily clad young woman, brandishing a whip. "Decadence," said the cover, "The People's Choice." But the fifty-odd pages of text shed little more light on exactly what decadence was than Hougan had. One emerged from reading them with the vague feeling that decadence meant having a good time, or perhaps that it meant looking for thrills, living the life of a libertine, engaging in extravagant self-indulgence.

This is also the feeling about decadence one gets from reading Hougan. In his closest stab at a definition, he writes that "its edges are defined by a preoccupation with the senses, an affection for the moment, and an insistence upon the supremacy or inconsequentiality of an individual's existence or acts. Decadence takes place at the extremity of self-indulgence, but it is seldom, if ever, marred by self-importance."

Russell Kirk, in his newly published *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*, invokes the shade of C.E.M. Joad, whose 1948 treatise, *Decadence: A Philosophical Inquiry* characterized decadence as "a preoccupation with the self and its experiences, promoted by and promoting the subjectivist analysis of moral, aesthetic, metaphysical, and theological judgments." His fellow academic (and political opposite), Christopher Lasch, in his newly published *The Culture of Narcissism*, invokes the spirit (and an echo of the

terminology) of Marx: "This book," he writes in his preface, "describes a way of life that is dying—the culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self."

The one characteristic of decadence which all these commentators—Lasch, Kirk, *New Times*, Jim Hougan—seem to agree upon is selfishness: self-indulgence, self-preoccupation. "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion," Lasch writes, "—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity." Or, he might have added, for your contemporaries. The '60s admonition to "do your own thing" has become the one remaining cultural norm of the 1970s. And doing your own thing entails deciding in your own mind what your own thing is and making your decision according to your own standards, not the ones you've been taught by various authorities—church, school, family—that it's mandatory you respect.

Russell Kirk grasps this issue better than most other contemporary commentators, and quite accurately traces the origins of our present period of decadence to the college campus of the early 1960s, where authority first began seriously to decay. "Why should we believe anything or do anything?" Kirk asks rhetorically. "On what authority?"

That question, although put into words by few students during 1961, lay uncomfortably just below the daily consciousness of many of them. In every generation, among every people, the young who are about to enter upon independence make some such inquiry. Ordinarily answers are given, whether or not these replies are wholly satisfactory, and the young accept the answers, if grudgingly. Authority is pointed out to them, and in general they submit.

But the liberal democratic age after the Second World War, in America and western Europe, seemed to provide no answer to the question "on what authority?"—or at least no answer that satisfied the restless and uncertain rising generation. . . . Once upon a time, a bishop or a famous preacher had been an authority; an eminent public man or a strong-minded general had been an authority; great books had been authorities; a university president or a confident learned professor had been an authority; a parent had been an authority. And above all these authorities, in the old culture of which American society in 1961 was a continuation, had stood the authority of God, as expressed through the Bible or the church's tradition.

But these old authorities were enfeebled by 1961, or had even repudiated themselves.

And well they should have. For the generation that came of age in the '60s and inquired then as to why they should believe anything or do anything found that the authority of previous generations was a sorry spectacle indeed. God was a fiction; his representatives on earth, the bishops and famous preachers, were con-men who enriched themselves and their churches at the expense of their mostly poverty-stricken "flocks"; our public men and our generals had lied us into imperialism and mass murder around the globe, the Vietnam war being only the grossest of many examples; university presidents like Clark Kerr of the University of California were telling their students in so many words that the function of their schools was to service State capitalism by supplying it with its experts and technicians, and by training students to accept, even to welcome, the "new slavery" of working for the bureaucrats of the Corporate State.

And the more closely the young of the early 1960s examined these authorities, the worse they looked. Not only had they lied us into war; they had lied us into massive expenditures to stamp out a drug menace which had turned out, on examination, to be no menace at all; and they had



H. L. Menckin in 1924 by William Gropper

lied us into believing we lived in a society of equality of opportunity, when in fact one could be barred from advancement by force of law if one belonged to the wrong sex or race.

Naturally, the young rejected these authorities—rejected them outright. And in so doing, they posed their own revolutionary answer to the questions of why they should believe anything or do anything, and on what authority. They answered that each person must be his own authority and must "do his own thing". And a generation destined by its elders to become a cohesive society split up into its component individuals.

"The word 'decadence,'" wrote the French novelist and essayist Paul Bourget in 1883,

denotes a state of society which produces too great a number of individuals unfit for the labours of common life. A society ought to be assimilated to an organism. As an organism, in fact, it resolves itself into a federation of lesser organisms, which again resolve themselves into a federation of cells. The individual is the social cell. In order that the whole organism should function with energy, it is necessary that the component organisms should function with energy, but with a subordinate energy. And in order that these inferior organisms should themselves function with energy, it is necessary that their component cells should function with energy, but with a subordinate energy. If the energy of the cells becomes independent, the organisms composing the total organism cease likewise to subordinate their energy to the total energy, and the anarchy which takes place constitutes the decadence of the whole.

And the fact is that in every major period of cultural decadence, libertarian ideas—including the idea of anarchy—have been among the most discussed and written about. The period with which the concept of decadence is most commonly associated, the 1890s and the turn-of-the-century or *fin de siècle* years generally, must surely mark an

all time low for the standing of the State among intellectuals and the young.

Oscar Wilde, that living emblem of the '90s, did his best to disregard all governments. When he passed through customs on his way into the U.S. and was asked what he had to declare, he replied that he had nothing to declare but his genius. He is said once to have told a disgruntled tax collector that he would not pay his long-delinquent property tax, though he was, as the government alleged, the householder, and did, as the government alleged, live there and sleep there; because, as he explained it, he slept so badly. In his famous essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," he wrote:

Every man must be left quite free to choose his own work. No form of compulsion must be exercised over him. If there is, his work will not be good for him, will not be good in itself, and will not be good for others. And by work I simply mean activity of any kind.

All associations must be quite voluntary. It is only in voluntary associations that man is fine.

... there is no necessity to separate the monarch from the mob; all authority is equally bad.

There are three kinds of despots. There is the despot who tyrannizes over the body. There is the despot who tyrannizes over the soul. There is the despot who tyrannizes over the soul and body alike. The first is called the Prince. The second is called the Pope. The third is called the People.

The turn of the century saw the literary resurrection of the individualist Max Stirner—a biography by John Henry Mackay and several new translations of his magnum opus, *The Ego and His Own*, notably the one commissioned by the American libertarian Benjamin R. Tucker and published by him in 1907. Tucker's own individualist journal *Liberty* reached its peak of international circulation and influence in the '90s. And the American critic James Gibbons Huneker, whom H.L. Mencken called "the chief man in the movement of the nineties on this side of the ocean," wrote at that time of Max Stirner as "the frankest thinker of his century" and of *The Ego and His Own* as a "dangerous book . . . dangerous in every sense of the word—to socialism, to politicians, to hypocrisy. It asserts the dignity of the Individual, not his debasement."

Mencken himself, the Great Libertarian, was the most important intellectual influence on the decadent American '20s. He edited *The Smart Set* and *The American Mercury*, the decade's most overtly, outrageously decadent magazines (the rough equivalents, one might say, of *The Yellow Book* the decade's most overtly, outrageously decadent magazines (the rough equivalents, one might say, of *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, the magazines so closely associated with the '90s in London). He also wrote introductions and helped to select titles for the Modern Library, probably the most culturally significant publishing phenomenon of the '20s. The Modern Library was founded in 1917 by Horace Liveright, who chose Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* as the first title in his new series of inexpensive editions of "classics in the modern spirit," and proceeded in the ensuing eight years, until he sold the firm to Bennett Cerf in 1925, to publish virtually every writer of substantial popularity during the '90s—including Max Stirner, whose *The Ego and His Own* was number 49 in the series. And Modern Library editions were then as paperback thrillers are now—they paid the bills for the publisher. In the eight years Liveright published the Modern Library, it became the financial backbone of his firm and accounted for annual sales of around 300,000 books. The readers who greeted Albert Jay Nock's essay "Anarchist's Progress" on its first appearance in magazine form (and, subsequently in the same decade, in book form)

were also unable, apparently, to get enough of the literary and political radicals of three decades before.

And we can feel fairly confident that the literary radicalism was at least as attractive to the readers of the '20s as the political radicalism, that they were responsive not only to the reissue in 1924 of Benjamin R. Tucker's essays, but also to the reissue in 1919 (by the Modern Library, who else?) of the essays of the French critic Remy de Gourmont, who called for "individualism in art." For literary authority was in decay in the '20s as well. On both sides of the Atlantic, imaginative writers were breaking away from conventional ways of writing fiction and poetry. In New York and in Paris, the writers who would become known as the modernists—Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner—were experimenting with narrative technique, with characterization, even with grammar and syntax themselves. In New York and London, the writers who would become known as the "exquisites" or "decadents"—George Jean Nathan, Carl Van Vechten, Elinor Wylie, James Branch Cabell, Ronald Firbank, Logan Pearsall Smith, the Sitwells—were once again practicing a kind of literature which had last been seen in the '90s with Oscar Wilde and Edgar Saltus: a literature of novelty and idiosyncrasy, of elaborately crafted style and exotic—even bizarre or fantastic—subject matter; a literature calculated to embody and express the unique individuality of its creator.

We are taught in school these days that the literary '20s in America means Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. But until the end of the decade, Hemingway and Faulkner were known mainly to the readers of small-circulation avant garde literary magazines; and Fitzgerald was generally regarded, and rightly, as a talented and glib but superficial popular novelist—the John O'Hara or Ross Macdonald of his day. At the time, the writers who were of the new wave, the writers who were the darlings of the media and the young radical contingent of the literary establishment, the writers who were hot, were the writers grouped around H.L. Mencken—especially Cabell, Van Vechten and Nathan. The writers who were hot at the time, in effect, were of the mold of Oscar Wilde: iconoclastic, individualistic, satirical, devoted to perfection of style.

And it is no accident that a strikingly similar group of writers best represents the literary culture of our own decadent time: Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, Tom Wolfe, William H. Gass, Ken Kesey. Surely the memory of *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, *The Dead Father*, *Mauve Gloves and Madmen*, *Omensetter's Luck*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is sufficient to dispel Henry Fairlie's lament that "no previous decade in this century has been so barren of anything . . . in literature to which one might think of attaching the label of greatness." And if it be protested that of anything . . . in literature to which one might think of attaching the label of greatness." And if it be protested that most of the titles just named come not from the '70s but from the '60s, let it be remembered that the '70s is properly understood as a continuation of the '60s. And for that matter, there is no shortage of serious major works in the '70s itself: Wilfrid Sheed's *Max Jamison*, for example, or Ursula K. LeGuin's *Orsinian Tales*, or Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, which, like Vonnegut's early novels, has been forced to appear first in paperback and establish a massive cult following for itself before being honored with hardcover publication and serious critical notice. And if one takes account of the fact (as Fairlie does not) that the essay is beginning to supplant the novel as the favored prose form for serious lit-

erary artists in this culture, then the list of important works of the '70s grows even longer: William H. Gass's *On Being Blue* and *The World Within the Word*, Robert Harbison's *Eccentric Spaces*, and Delany's *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* come immediately to mind.

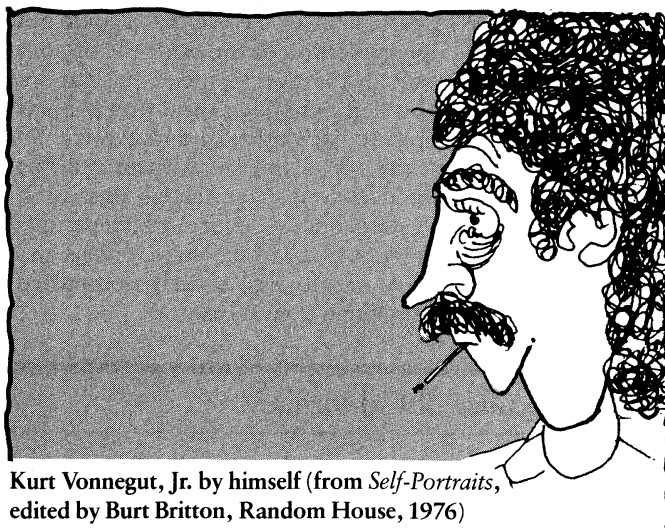
Contrary to Fairlie's assertion, ours is an era of important literary and artistic work. Like every decadent period before it, it is a period of innovation and high craftsmanship in the arts, and of passionate commitment to ideas in all the intellectual spheres. When an individual chooses his ideas for himself, judges them for himself, and does with them what he wishes to do with them, he is much more likely to devote himself to ideas with enthusiasm and dedication than when he is forced to rely on an authority to decide for him what is worth studying and what use should be made of it. To be sure, many of the ideas to which individuals devote themselves are false, and lead only to foolishness. And in decadent periods, when authorities are in decline and the many feel free to violate their precepts, such false ideas often win large followings. The decay of scientific authority has led to renewed popularity for parapsychology, occult studies, and astrology—in the 1890s, in the 1920s, and in our own era. The decay of medical authority has led to renewed popularity for chiropractic and naturopathy—in the '90s, in the '20s, and in our own era. The decline of religious authority has led to the formation of thousands of sects and cults—in all three eras. The decline of moral authority has led, on the one hand, to the "permissiveness" of homosexual chic and porno chic and the "sexual revolution" and the casual, semi-public use of illegal psychoactive drugs; on the other hand, the decay of moral authority has led to development of a pacifist movement and an animal rights movement devoted to principled vegetarianism. When "deprived" of moral authority figures, it seems, some become libertines, others attempt to become saints.

It is particularly ironic, in fact, that the Freudian-Marxist critic Christopher Lasch should portray the current decadence as a period of "war of all against all." The phrase itself is not surprising, of course, except in the context of Lasch's book (*The Culture of Narcissism*), which is otherwise quite free of clichés and slogans. But it is particularly ironic in a period when pacifism is making a comeback to be told that the culture is plunged into civil war. In fact, there is not only a new pacifism on the scene, there is also that *sine qua non* of international peace, a movement for a non-interventionist foreign policy.

A recent *New York Times* poll indicated that "Americans in increasing numbers want a peaceful world, and oppose any United States involvement in foreign crises." And it is clear that they have come to this point of view through the efforts of a variety of opinion makers from all parts of the political spectrum. As Norman Podhoretz has pointed out,

It would be a great mistake to assume that these people, the new isolationists, are all liberals (or what is nowadays called liberals). Many, or even most, so-called liberals today are indeed isolationists, but so are many "conservatives." . . . we are now witnessing the emergence of a consensus in support of the new isolationism which cuts across party lines and unites a wide variety of otherwise divergent ideological groupings.

Precisely. The anti-war movement of the "new left" during the '60s united a wide variety of ideological stances into a single, individualistic effort. And out of that anti-war movement has grown, not an "isolationist" movement, strictly speaking—there is no serious opposition to economic and



Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. by himself (from *Self-Portraits*, edited by Burt Britton, Random House, 1976)

cultural exchange with those in other countries—but a *non-interventionist* movement.

Podhoretz sees this movement as dangerous. The April, 1976 article from which the above remarks are quoted was entitled "Making the World Safe for Communism." And the following year, in the pages of *Harper's* magazine, in an essay called "The Culture of Appeasement," he dwelt on the by now predictable parallels between the growth of the contemporary pacifist and non-interventionist movements and the growth of such movements during the '20s and early '30s. Pacifism and non-interventionism led us to the rise of Nazi Germany, Podhoretz announced, and to the Holocaust and to the War. Are we going to learn from that lesson, he asked, or are we not?

A telling question, certainly, and one to which another should be added. Was World War II in fact a consequence of a policy of "appeasement"—that is, a policy of non-intervention in Hitler's efforts to regain German territory which had been unjustly and imprudently seized by the victorious Allied powers under the infamous Treaty of Versailles? Or was it rather a consequence of the British "guarantee," with Roosevelt's assent, of the "territorial integrity" of Poland—that is, of the *failure* to consistently pursue a non-interventionist foreign policy? Since it was Britain and France which declared war on Germany, and not the other way around, might not a foreign policy of non-interventionism, pursued consistently by both Britain and France, have led to Hitler's initial goal of a war between Germany and Russia instead? And might that not have exhausted both totalitarian giants in the process? Growing numbers of historians and foreign policy analysts have suggested precisely this, to wit, that a policy of "appeasement," correctly seen as a non-interventionist policy, and consistently pursued, would not only have averted a second World War, but would also have diminished the chances for development of the strong Soviet state of which Podhoretz is now so frightened. Bruce M. Russett has recently argued that there was *No Clear and Present Danger* to the United States posed by Germany, and Earl C. Ravenal has claimed, in his 1978 book, *Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign Policy Failures*, that the alleged "lesson" of Munich and "appeasement" is not so simple, and can be interpreted in more ways than one. What about *these* perspectives on appeasement and war?

But Lasch's bromide about a war of all against all is absurd not only in its literal sense, but also—and perhaps particularly—in the figurative sense in which it is intended. Not only is the tendency of our decadent culture toward international peace and harmony; it is toward peace and harmony

at home as well. As Friedrich Hayek has argued, it could not be otherwise. The implementation of the principle of non-coercion can only result in the development of a "spontaneous order", which both accommodates the different plans of millions of individuals to each other and maximizes all their chances for success. It is not decadence, but the authoritarian state, which leads to a war of all against all. It is not the authoritarian state, but decadence, which permits the avid, unmolested pursuit by all of the myriad ideas and ideologies to which they are so passionately committed because they have chosen them themselves.

The significance of California

There is political commitment during periods of decadence too, for all that the detractors of our decade claim otherwise. Christopher Lasch asserts, in his new polemic on *The Culture of Narcissism*, that

After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to "relate," overcoming the "fear of pleasure." Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past.

On the contrary! All this decadent behavior is by no means a repudiation of the political ideals of the '60s. Listen to another veteran of the movement discuss the issue—Dave Dellinger, writing in *Seven Days*, December 8, 1978: "When did it become inconsistent with the struggle for a classless society to struggle against personal alienation from our own deepest satisfactions—in work, in personal relations, in art and nature, in the search for understanding of the mysteries of life, death and processes of the universe?" When indeed? The politics of the '60s were always individualistic at root, and not at all opposed in spirit to the ethos of the "Me Decade." As Lasch himself points out, "what looks to political scientists like voter apathy may represent a healthy skepticism about a political system in which public lying has become endemic and routine. A distrust of experts may help to diminish the dependence on experts that has crippled the capacity for self-help."

More important is Lasch's assertion that Americans have "retreated from politics." They have not. But they have adjusted their politics slightly from the 1960s, to better take into account the nature of a society which is coming apart. Former SDS leader turned establishment politician, Tom Hayden puts it in almost exactly that way. "What there is is a coming-apart of society," he told the *Los Angeles Times* in December. "And it's most extreme," he added, "in California."

California is in fact where the decadence is the most far gone, and therefore where the politics of the '60s have adjusted most completely to the '70s—retaining their basic character, but modifying their outward appearance.

The radicals of the '60s learned an important political lesson even before they learned the economic lessons of entering the economy of the '70s. They learned that the system is set up to screw you; that the Right is in on it and the Left is in on it; and that neither of them is to be trusted. They learned that most elections are farces. So they started registering as independents, rather than as Republicans or Democrats.

30 They started staying away from some elections entirely, and

voting in others only on the issues, not on the candidates.

Examples? In California, Proposition 13 has been overwhelmingly approved, and the Briggs initiative which would have removed homosexual teachers from the public schools has gone down to ignominious defeat—and in each case, voter turnout for the ballot propositions was much higher than for the elective races on the same ballots. The world has been put on notice that Californians welcome diversity but will not tolerate greedy government. And, as is usual with California, each of these election outcomes has reverberated far beyond the borders of the state. Proposition 13 has kicked off the major political movement of the '70s, the tax revolt. The defeat of Briggs has given new impetus to the already burgeoning gay rights movement.

And—need it be said?—each of these election outcomes is fairly representative of the decadent, politics of self-interest which characterizes California. It's not hard to see how in the case of Prop 13, but it may be hard in the case of Briggs, at least at first glance. The fact is, though, that *all* the politics in California, Briggs included, fits the self-interested pattern. It was in California, remember, in November of last year, that the Libertarian Party scored the largest vote for a third-party candidate for Governor in more than thirty years. And it was of California that *Politics Today* analyst William Schneider wrote in the last months of 1978 that political causes there

draw support from those who feel secure about their own values and resentful that the rest of society does not appreciate them. Goldwater and Reagan supporters say, "We live honest, moral, and virtuous lives. Why should we support a government infested with immorality, wastefulness, and disloyalty?" Those on the left say, "We practice tolerance and abhor violence. Why should we support a government that oppresses minorities and perpetuates aggression?"

It is worth noting that the values with which these California voters feel so secure are *self-chosen* values in more instances than not. California, gigantic as it is, encompasses mind-taxing diversity. But it is probably fair to say that a larger proportion of those in California are living their lives as *they* see fit—however that may be—than almost anywhere else in the country. And the sense of commitment they develop for these ideas and values they have discovered and implemented in the absence of any authority carries over into their very attitude toward politics. "The left and the right in California are completely opposed in their issue preferences and ideology," Schneider writes,

but they do share a certain similarity of political style. That style is expressive and moralistic: politics is a *contest of values*. It is opposed to the more pragmatic style, namely, politics as a *contest of interests*. Interests can be compromised but values cannot. How can one willingly go along with what is wrong?

It is significant that *Harper's* editor Lewis H. Lapham, a former Californian, has chosen to publish an attack on California in the February, 1979 issue of his magazine, and to conclude that attack with a confession. "I left California," Lapham writes, "because I didn't have the moral fortitude to contend with the polymorphousness of the place."

He's right. Moral fortitude is exactly what it takes to forego authority, to take responsibility for one's life, and to live affably in a society in which anything goes. Moral fortitude is exactly what it takes to deal with diversity, pluralism, heterogeneity—all the synonyms for cultural decadence. To those who lack it and find themselves unable to summon the will to develop it, decadence is obviously a frightening, unsettling phenomenon. To those who can meet the test, it is the gift of a lifetime: an opportunity to join in an era of unexampled liberty, creativity, progress, and peace. □

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The Myth of Monolithic Communism

MURRAY N. ROTHBARD

For decades it was an axiom of conservative faith that international Communism was and must be a monolith, that Communism in all its aspects and manifestations was simply pure evil (because it was “atheistic” and/or totalitarian by definition), and that therefore all Communism was necessarily the same.

For one thing, this meant that all Communist parties everywhere were of necessity simply “agents of Moscow.” It took conservatives years to disabuse themselves of this mythology (which was true only during the 1930s and most of the 1940s). Tito’s courageous break with Stalin and world Communism in 1948 was considered a trivial exception; and for many years after the bitter China-Russia split, conservatives clung to the fond hope that this split must be a hoax designed to deceive the West. However, now that China has shifted from attacking Russia for not being opposed enough to U.S. imperialism, to urging the U.S. ever onward to a war with Russia; and now that the Vietnamese Communists have crushed the Cambodian Communist regime in a lightning thrust, this myth of a world Communist monolith has at last had to be abandoned.

Why *should* all Communist parties and groups necessarily form a monolith? The standard conservative answer is that Com-

munists all have the same ideology, that they are all Marxist-Leninists, and that therefore they should necessarily be united. In the first place, this is an embarrassingly naive view of ideological movements. Christians, too, are supposed to have the same religion and therefore should be united, but the historical record of inter-Christian warfare has been all too clear. Secondly, Marx, while eager enough to criticize feudalism and “capitalist” society, was almost ludicrously vague on what the future Communist society was supposed to look like, and what Communist regimes were supposed to do once their revolution had triumphed. If the same Bible has been used to support an enormous and discordant variety of interpretations and creeds, the paucity of details in Marx has allowed for an even wider range of strategies and actions by Communist regimes.

Moreover, ideology is not all. As libertarians should be aware, whenever *any* group, regardless of ideology, takes over a State, it immediately constitutes a ruling class over the people and the land governed by that State. It immediately acquires interests of State, which can readily clash with the interests of other State ruling classes, regardless of ideology. The splits between Yugoslavia and Russia, China and Russia, and now Vietnam and Cambodia, were mixtures in varying proportions of inter-State and ideological clashes. And generally when one of these conflicts launched the fray, the other soon caught up.

But if everyone must now concede that there can be and are clashes and even bitter warfare between Communist states, libertarians have been slow to realize that Communism is not a monolith in yet another sense—in the sort of “domestic” or internal regime that Communist rulers will impose. There are now vast differences among the various Communist regimes throughout the globe, divergences that literally spell the difference between life and death for a large part of their subject populations. If we want to find out about the world we live in, therefore, it is no longer enough for libertarians to simply equate Communism with badness, and let it go at that.

This necessity for grasping distinctions is particularly vital for libertarians: For our ultimate aim is to bring freedom to the entire world, and therefore it makes an enormous difference to us *in which direction* various countries are moving, whether toward liberty or toward slavery. If, in short, we consider a simplified spectrum of countries or societies, with total freedom at one end and total slavery at the other, different varieties of Communist regimes will range