

Those who cheer or deplore the Seventies as a “return to normalcy” may be ignoring the signs of prerevolutionary ferment

Why America Has Not Taken to Radicalisms

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Why has the American polity been largely unreceptive to the radical ideologies of both left and right that have aroused such enthusiasm elsewhere? Why, for example, have Communists and fascists not been able to attract a significant following or secure electoral support in the United States? There are, I believe, seven factors that together have formed a mosaic of resistance to sundry radicalisms. These factors might now be in a state of decline.

First and obviously, the British legacy has had considerable influence on the American approach to radicalism. Like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the United States inherited much of its culture from Britain. The language, political system, legal network, religious life, and literature built on the British experience. A high percentage of the populace traced its origin to the British Isles, while later immigrants ordinarily assimilated to the Anglo-Saxon value system. The members of the ruling élites have almost without exception been anglophiles. Even the Irish-Catholic John Kennedy would cap his education with study at the London School of Economics. Britain’s vulnerability to a continental threat played a major role in America’s entry into two world wars.

The British deference to continuity, evolutionary change, and tradition represents the antithesis of radicalism. Numerous historical examples of British rejection of radicalism exist. The English Reformation settlement attempted to avoid continental extremes and to work out a *modus vivendi* acceptable to those of Catholic and Protestant persuasion. The later rise of British socialism contrasts with the continental experience; Fabian socialism sought to avoid European dogmatism and to reconcile itself to British tradition. Despite the curiosity value of an occasional red dean or an Oswald Mosley, communism and fascism offered little to appeal to the British. In the philosophical sphere, the eighteenth-century Edmund Burke produced the most

persuasive treatise against radicalism—*Reflections on the Revolution in France*—which acquired canonical status for those resisting revolutions since then. This British syndrome of antiradicalism could not but affect the American polity, given the bonds of interest and affection that linked the two nations.

Second, the ubiquitous Lockean tradition, a vital element of the American experience, seems antithetical to twentieth-century radicalism. The Lockean vision was especially meaningful to the young American polity with a transplanted population, plentiful land, abundance of resources, and high optimism. The Founding Fathers invoked the Lockean tradition in justifying the American Revolution, and their patristic writings are saturated with Lockean assumptions. They charged that a people had rebelled against an oppressive condition, had asserted their natural rights, and had forged a new contract to protect those rights. They appealed to the individual, to individual rights, especially property rights, to the social contract, and to limited government. The success of the Revolution and the canonization of the Founding Fathers accorded Lockean philosophy a kind of establishment status.

Obviously the Lockean milieu conflicts with twentieth-century radicalism. A philosophy that venerated the atomized individual, natural rights, property, and limited government runs counter to the spirit of twentieth-century radicalisms. Contemporary radical philosophies have generally fostered a monistic truth that attempts to monopolize the instrumentalities of the state and to demand the undivided loyalty of the individual. There is a search for an all-embracing worldview, with the individual immersed in the totality. Thus both fascist and Communist ideologies seem alien to the American Lockean tradition.

A third reason for the failure of American radicalism might be termed the co-optation factor. Traditionally the nation possessed the means of buying off or satisfying those who might have been vulnerable to a radical appeal. It offered abundant natural resources, unlimited land, expansion room, and

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unprecedented opportunity. It lacked the Old World's feudal and class structures that frustrated so many. The average individual could hope to secure the material good life, and there existed numerous examples of persons similar to himself who had excelled. If he failed, he could still hope that his children might succeed. Thus the Horatio Alger myth proved its power, and most people saw little reason to trade the opportunities of the existing system for the promises of an alien and unproved one.

A *fourth* factor related to the mentality of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century immigrants—those who, given their economic and social status, ought to have proved most vulnerable to radical appeal. Usually these immigrants tended to compare their new status with that of kinsfolk in the old country, rather than with that of the ascendant WASP. While they might lack the affluence of the old Americans, they had surpassed their Old World cousins, and they believed that the opportunity and mobility of the system promised a bright future. The Old World traumas—Irish famines, Eastern European pogroms, Italian and Polish feudalism—were not forgotten and were contrasted with the New World situation. Thus they did not find their status unbearable, they did not fault the system, and they found little attraction in radical critique and radical utopianism. Further, their family, community, and religious ties, coupled with their desire to be American, prohibited flirting with obviously “un-American” dogmas.

A *fifth* consideration might be termed the religious factor. European radicalism often attracted the secularized and de-Christianized populace, thus filling a vacuum, the need for religion. But such a vacuum has not existed throughout much of American history. Despite recent secularization efforts—for example, some Supreme Court decisions—the Americans have seemed obsessed with religion. Millions of the original settlers came seeking religious freedom, and the later immigrants often were integrated and Americanized by their churches. The New World environment generated numerous new sects, and church attendance, when compared to European standards, has been unusually high. The anticlerical tradition, so important in European politics, has been of minimal importance. Protestantism has demonstrated a greater endurance in the United States than in the Reformation heartland. American Catholicism has evolved a life and vitality found in few other countries, as manifested by recruitment to the priesthood, the vast school system, and numerous institutions of self-help. Finally, the denominational variety and the lack of a single established church have meant that disillusionment with one tradition need not turn the individual to a secular church. There are other churches available.

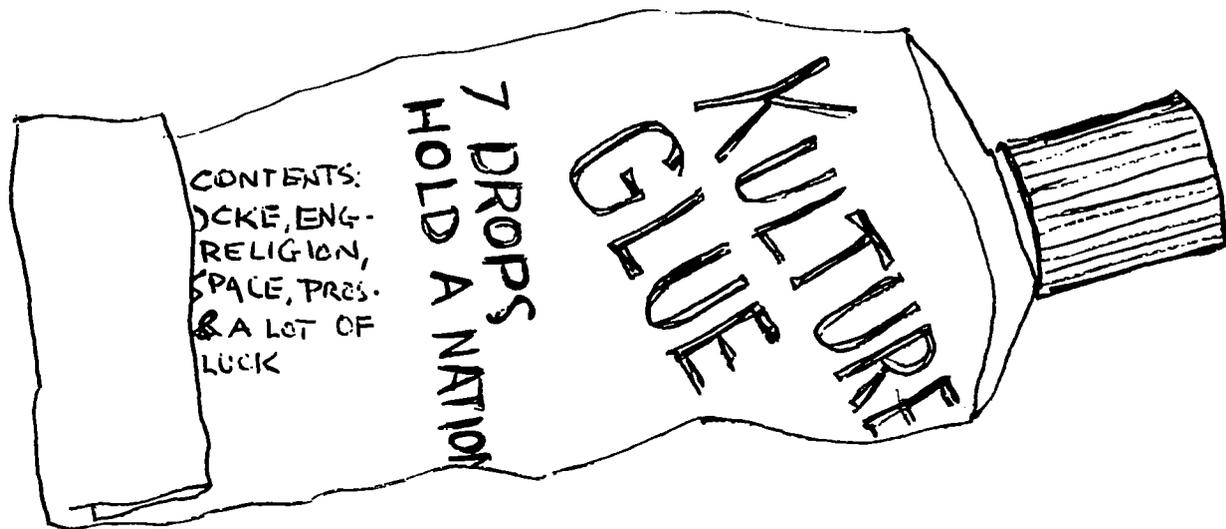
The implication of this traditional religiosity was that much that was sought elsewhere in radical involvement could be found here in the church. The American did not need to turn to a secular church for a worldview, for answers to the ultimate questions, for purpose in life, for community, for enthusiasm.

A *sixth* factor in American antiradicalism involves the morale of the ruling élite. Classical theorists such as Plato and De Tocqueville cited the importance of élite demoralization in the radicalization of a society. That is, a split in the élite, together with widespread self-doubt about role legitimacy, often prefigured revolution. The prerevolutionary French and Russian aristocracies seemed especially marked by two related characteristics: a burning sense of guilt and a common boredom. These qualities permeated the philosophy, literature, and drama of these prerevolutionary periods. A significant sector of each élite had lost its sense of legitimacy. It tended to blame itself for the tragedies of human existence and to reject the duties and responsibilities that had satisfied its forebears. It searched for a more romantic, more exciting lifestyle—for example, the Rousseauistic escape to the state of nature.

This élitist legitimacy crisis, with its symptoms of guilt and boredom, traditionally presented no problem for the American polity. Members of the élite were socialized to respect the system. Knowledge of the national history, the development of democratic institutions, the openness of the society, and the willingness to welcome immigrants discouraged any sense of guilt. Rather there was pride in the American accomplishment and a tendency to compare it favorably with the rest of the world. Likewise the opportunities and challenges in taming a continent removed the boredom temptation, as did the sense of novelty in the American experiment.

Legitimacy was even less a problem for the general populace. Appeals to guilt made little sense to most people. The very notion seemed absurd to people who remembered what their own forebears had suffered. While many would sympathize with the blacks, Indians, and other disadvantaged groups, few felt that they bore the guilt for past abuse. Many charged that the nineteenth-century slave, for example, suffered no more than their own Old World forebears. There were those who believed that the twentieth-century black should be thankful for the progress made in a progressive, affluent country, especially when contrasted with life in the Third World. Likewise, given the opportunity, challenge, and flux of American life, few individuals could afford the luxury of élitist boredom.

A *seventh* factor relates to the ability of the existing governmental institutions to process systemic demands without “overload.” By a combination of flexible institutions and historical luck, the level of popular expectation from governmental institutions has been within the realm of the possible. One might contrast the American experience with much of the postcolonial Third World. In the latter there was often promise of the utopia at independence. There was the need, simultaneously, to create a sense of common nationality (nation-building), to evolve acceptable rules of the political process (constitutionalism), and to fashion the relationship between the state and the economy. Often these Third World systems collapsed under the strain. In the United States these problems could be processed one by one over an extended period of time. There was an early sense of



nationality forged first by the common dangers and strengthened by the Revolution. The constitutional questions were thrashed out later, and the approved constitution quickly acquired legitimacy due to Federalist prosperity. Later demands for democratization and enfranchisement of new groups came one by one and were separated by time. The welfare demands came even later. Thus this fortunate combination of flexible institutions and "demand processing" allowed the appearance of relative systemic success and undercut radical appeals to the malcontented.

The post-Vietnam, post-Watergate lull is interpreted by some as a "return to normalcy"; it might also be viewed as an exhaustion period following a time of troubles. There now exists a growing literature that warns about America's long-term future should current cultural trends persist. Such scholars as Robert Nisbet (*Twilight of Authority*), Henry Fairlie (*The Spoiled Child of the Western World*), and Daniel Bell (*The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*) have examined the erosion of traditional values that have supported the American social, economic, and political structures. They address the problem that Bell perceptively labels the "disjunction of realms" and caution that the American superstructure increasingly rests on the capital accumulated by previous generations.

In truth, the seven factors of resistance to radical success seem to be in a state of transition. We may in fact be facing a less tranquil future. The American pride in its Anglo-Saxon legacy and identification with the mother country are apparently passé. And Britain's postwar status as the "sick man of Europe," with its economic problems, labor disturbances, ethnic quarrels, and Irish trauma, also stimulates little admiration. To label an approach as "British" by no means legitimizes it, as it once tended to.

The eighteenth-century Lockean assumptions no longer enjoy their previous homage. The faith in the atomized individual, the mechanistic view of the cosmos, the appeal to natural rights, and the contractual concept of society are tenets espoused by few profes-

sional philosophers. Nor does the eighteenth-century American environment of self-sufficient individuals, unlimited land, abundant resources, and relative isolation now exist. Thus the philosophy that inspired the American origins as well as the environment that conformed to that philosophy have been undermined. How long will it take for the mass population to realize that the sacred myths of the founding documents have been rejected by the schools? What philosophy will replace Lockeanism as the basis of order in the future America of limited resources, external threat, and domestic conflict?

There are also problems in the continued functioning of what we have called the co-optation factor. The frontier is gone and there is increasing awareness of the limited nature of the country's resources. The oil crisis makes future projections risky. Resource and labor costs and the inflation rate make it difficult for new families to own property. Meanwhile many literati stigmatize the search for comfort—the effort to secure homes, automobiles, consumer items—as gross materialism. They charge that the United States is a "cannibal nation" having 5 per cent of the world's population and monopolizing 45 per cent of the wealth. The Third World is poor because the United States is rich!

The immigrant factor is in the process of change. The traditional source of immigration has shifted, as has the government's policy toward the immigrant. Although historically the assimilation process was never as total as melting-pot theorists assumed and ethnic enclaves did survive, still, in the past, the rewards were with assimilation. The immigrants were discouraged from importing their ethnic conflicts, and America, despite its diversity, avoided Lebanonization. Now, instead of rewarding assimilation, the government policy tends to award nonassimilation (affirmative action programs). The son of a Mexican immigrant, for example, as a case in point, is given strong incentive to continue to identify himself as a Chicano. Third World immigrants are encouraged to think in terms of previous exploitation and expected reparation. Meanwhile most "old" Americans are further and further removed from their own immigrant origin and hence less aware of the opportunities offered by the United States in contrast with the Old World. The old country is often romanticized. For many the norm of comparison in evaluating their present status is no longer

ones' forebears or ones' Old World kinsmen but a platonic level of expectation. Consequently there is greater occasion for frustration.

The indicators on the religious factor are unclear. On the one hand, there is interest in the study of comparative religion and a proliferation of new forms of religiosity. Church involvement in the peace, poverty, and civil rights movements convinced some individuals of the relevancy of the churches. The "evangelical" groups are growing, and an unapologetic "born-again" Christian occupies the White House. On the other hand, traditional institutions of religion seem to be waning as a factor in American life. Despite some recent signs of new vitality, post-Vatican II Catholicism remains stationary, and the mainstream Protestant denominations have declined in number and influence. It is unlikely that the college-educated, who will mold the future, will be attracted to Protestant fundamentalism despite its dynamic growth. Thus it is possible, barring a religious revival of major proportions, to project a future American population with an unchurched majority and an unchurched élite. Eventually many could be looking elsewhere for the solace once provided by the religious tradition.

The children of the traditional American élite showed signs of vulnerability to the prerevolutionary syndrome during the late 1960's. There was a questioning of systemic legitimacy while both guilt and boredom were in vogue. The young were encouraged to internalize personal guilt over the past suffering of blacks, Indians, women, the Third World, et cetera. American affluence was attributed to thievery and Third World exploitation. Revisionist history presented the national legacy as one of terror and violence. It faulted the United States for the cold war and suggested that almost any atrocity found elsewhere could be matched domestically. If there was some difficulty with specifics, there was always "institutionalized violence." Exercises in guilt revivalism fluctuated with exercises in boredom. The boredom

syndrome manifested itself in the dropout rate, the drug cult, fads of Eastern mysticism, and the occult. The orientation of the élite offspring in the late Sixties was in many ways reminiscent of the French and Russian prerevolutionary scene. The end of the draft, the disengagement from Vietnam, and the economic insecurity stemming from the recession seemed to alleviate the situation, at least temporarily.

Finally, there could be a change in the ability of American institutions to avoid demand overload. While there have been local, state, and national revolts against governmental expansion, as well as the rise of a respectable academic school—Kristol, Glazer, Bell, Nisbet, et al.—concerned with the negative implications of governmental dependency, still it seems doubtful that there will be a turnabout in the growth of government and the reliance upon the governmental sphere. Administrations committed to fiscal conservatism seem involved rather more in holding actions than in actual reversals. Many persons and agencies advocating governmental cutbacks conveniently exclude their own sinecures. Ecological campaigns stressing the beauty of smallness seem aimed at business rather than government. The public has been conditioned to expect government service in unprecedented areas. A governmental remedy is sought for virtually every problem. The American polity appears to be moving in the direction of the Northern European welfare states, while at the same time there are projections of an aging population and a declining work force. The fortunate past combination of flexible institutions and staggered demands could be ending.

I have attempted, then, to account for the failure of American radicalisms of the Left and of the Right. The seven factors that together formed a pattern of resistance might well be in the process of decay. Contrary to the expectations of those who cheer or lament the Seventies as a return to a more stable social order, the American future might prove considerably more turbulent than the American past.