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Introduction: Consumption, Narcissism, and Mass Culture

Materialism and Mass Culture Denunciation of American "materialism" has a long history, but recent events have given it new urgency. The energy crisis, the American defeat in Vietnam, the hostage crisis, the loss of American markets to the West Germans and the Japanese have revived old misgivings about the links between cultural decadence and national failure. American know-how, it appears, no longer dominates the world. American technology is no longer the most advanced; the country's industrial plant is decrepit; its city streets and transport systems are falling to pieces. The question arises whether the faltering of the American economy and the failure of American foreign policy do not reflect a deeper failure of morale, a cultural crisis associated in some way with the collapse of "traditional values" and the emergence of a new morality of self-gratification.

In the right-wing version of this argument, governmental paternalism and "secular humanism" have sapped the moral foundations of American enterprise, while pacifism, "survivalism," and movements for unilateral disarmament have emasculated American foreign policy and made Americans unwilling to fight for freedom. Another version, more acceptable to liberals and neoconservatives, stresses the bad effects of consumerism. In July 1979, President Carter attributed the national "malaise" to the spirit of self-seeking and the pursuit of "things." The conventional critique of narcissism, as we might call it, equates narcissism with selfishness and treats consumerism as a kind of moral lapse that can be corrected by exhortations about the value of hard work and family life. It deplores the breakdown of the work discipline and the popularization of a "fun morality" that has allegedly crippled productivity, undermined American enterprise, and thus weakened the country's competitive position in the race for markets and national greatness.

A third position has recently emerged in reply to the critique of "narcissism." A number of journalists and social critics—Daniel Yankelovich, Peter Clecak, Paul Wachtel, Alvin Toffler, Theodore Roszak, Philip Slater, and Marilyn Ferguson, among others—have begun to argue that the apparent increase in self-absorption is only a by-product of more encouraging cultural changes. They dismiss the idea of a national malaise or crisis of confidence. Industrial society may be sick, in their view, but it is already giving way to a postindustrial society that will consolidate the achievements of industrialism on a new basis. Critics of consumerism, they argue, miss the movement away from competitive status-seeking toward self-sufficiency, self-exploration, personal growth, and nonmaterialistic forms of "self-fulfillment."

Those who take a hopeful view of recent cultural changes disagree among themselves about the difficulty of the "transition" ahead and about the nature of the society to which it is leading. The only thing that justifies treating them as a group is that all of them reject the diagnosis of our society as "narcissistic." As Yankelovich puts it, the "American quest for self-fulfillment" cannot be reduced to the "pathology of narcissistic personality disorders." Narcissism "is not the essence of the recent American search for self-fulfillment." "Far from being its defining characteristic, narcissism is a betrayal of it."

The controversy about narcissism, which revives in a new form earlier controversies about mass culture and the American national character, raises important questions and helps to call attention to the connections between social and economic changes and changes in cultural and personal life. Nevertheless, much of it is deeply confused. For one thing, the concept of narcissism remains elusive and obscure, even though it appears eminently accessible. Those who object to the description of advanced industrial culture as a culture of narcissism do not understand very clearly what the description implies, while those who accept it all too quickly accept it as a journalistic slogan that merely restates moralistic platitudes in the jargon of psychoanalysis. Narcissism is a difficult idea that looks easy—a good recipe for confusion.

Another source of confusion is the persistence of certain preconceptions derived from the controversy that divided critics of "mass culture" in the fifties and sixties from celebrants of cultural democracy and pluralism. Recent attempts to reformulate this debate—to salvage what was useful in the critique of mass culture by detaching it from an ill-conceived defense of cultural modernism—have been misunderstood as attempts to revive earlier positions in their original form. I have suggested elsewhere that the phenomenon of mass culture, too often treated from the point of view of its impact on aesthetic standards, raises questions about technology, not about the level of public taste. Advanced tech-

nologies of communication, which seem merely to facilitate the dissemination of informationon a wider scale than was possible before, prove on closer examination to impede the circulation of ideas and to concentrate control over information in a handful of giant organizations. Modern technology has the same effect on culture that it has on production, where it serves to assert managerial control over the labor force. The study of mass culture thus leads to the same conclusion prompted by a study of the mechanization of the workplace: that much advanced technology embodies by design (in both senses of the word) a one-way system of management and communication. It concentrates economic and political control—and, increasingly, cultural control as well—in a small elite of corporate planners, market analysts, and social engineers. It invites popular "input" or "feedback" only in the form of suggestion boxes, market surveys, and public opinion polls. Technology thus comes to serve as an effective instrument of social control—in the case of mass media, by short-circuiting the electoral process through opinion surveys that help to shape opinion instead of merely recording it, by reserving to the media themselves the right to select political leaders and "spokesmen," and by presenting the choice of leaders and parties as a choice among consumer goods.

This interpretation of mass culture and advanced technology may be wrong, but it is a different argument from the old accusation that mass culture lowers public taste or from the Marxist version of this accusation, according to which mass culture brainwashes the workers and keeps them in a state of "false consciousness." Yet the terms of the earlier debate remain so coercive that new arguments are immediately assimilated to old ones. Criticism of the narcissistic elements in our culture strikes many observers as a lament for the "morally tuned, well-crafted self," in the words of Peter Clecak. It is not my position, however, as Herbert

Gans tries to summarize it, that "if commercial popular culture were eliminated, workers could and would become intellectuals." Why should workers become intellectuals? I find it hard to imagine a less attractive prospect than a society made up of intellectuals. What is important is that working men and women have more control over their work. It is also important for intellectuals and workers alike to see that this question of control is not just a political or an economic question but a cultural question as well.

Mass Production and Mass Consumption Still another source of confusion, in recent controversies about contemporary culture, is the failure to distinguish a moralistic indictment of "consumerism"—typified by Carter's complaint about the obsession with "owning *things*, consuming *things*"—from an analysis that understands mass consumption as part of a larger pattern of dependence, disorientation, and loss of control. Instead of thinking of consumption as the antithesis of labor, as if the two activities called for completely different mental and emotional qualities, we need to see them as two sides of the same process. The social arrangements that support a system of mass production and mass consumption tend to discourage initiative and self-reliance and to promote dependence, passivity, and a spectatorial state of mind both at work and at play. Consumerism is only the other side of the degradation of work—the elimination of playfulness and craftsmanship from the process of production.*

*In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell argues that the culture of consumption encourages an ethic of hedonism and thus undermines industrial discipline. Advanced capitalism is at odds with itself, in his view: it needs consumers who demand immediate gratification and deny themselves nothing, but it also needs self-denying producers willing to throw themselves into their jobs, to work long hours, and to follow instructions to the letter.

The strength of Bell's argument lies in its understanding of the connection between advanced capitalism and consumerism, which so many observers attribute

In the United States, a consumer culture began to emerge in the twenties, but only after the corporate transformation of industry had institutionalized the division of labor that runs all through modern industrial society, the division between brain work and manual labor: between the design and the execution of production. Under the banner of scientific management, capitalists expropriated the technical knowledge formerly exercised by workers, reformulated it as science, and vested its control in a new managerial elite. The managers extended their power not at the expense of the owners of industry, as is so often said, but at the expense of the workers. Nor did the eventual triumph of industrial unionism break this pattern of managerial control. By the 1930s, even the most militant unions had acquiesced in the division of labor between the planning and execution of work. Indeed the very success of the union movement was predicated on a strategic retreat from issues of worker control. Unionization, moreover, helped to stabilize and rationalize the labor market and to discipline the work force. It did not alter the arrangement whereby management controls the technology of production, the rhythm of work, and the location of plants (even when these decisions affect whole communities), leaving the worker with the task merely of carrying out orders.

Having organized mass production on the basis of the new division of labor, most fully realized in the assembly

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merely to permissive educators and parents, moral decay, and the abdication of authorities. Its weakness lies in equating consumerism so closely with hedonism. The state of mind promoted by consumerism is better described as a state of uneasiness and chronic anxiety. The promotion of commodities depends, like modern mass production, on discouraging the individual from reliance on his own resources and judgment: in this case, his judgment of what he needs in order to be healthy and happy. The individual finds himself always under observation, if not by foremen and superintendents, by market researchers and pollsters who tell him what others prefer and what he too must therefore prefer, or by doctors and psychiatrists who examine him for symptoms of disease that might escape an untrained eye.

line, the leaders of American industry turned to the organization of a mass market. The mobilization of consumer demand, together with the recruitment of a labor force, required a far-reaching series of cultural changes. People had to be discouraged from providing for their own wants and resocialized as consumers. Industrialism by its very nature tends to discourage home production and to make people dependent on the market, but a vast effort of reeducation, starting in the 1920s, had to be undertaken before Americans accepted consumption as a way of life. As Emma Rothschild has shown in her study of the automobile industry, Alfred Sloan's innovations in marketing—the annual model change, constant upgrading of the product, efforts to associate it with social status, the deliberate inculcation of a boundless appetite for change—constituted the necessary counterpart of Henry Ford's innovations in production. Modern industry came to rest on the twin pillars of Fordism and Sloanism. Both tended to discourage enterprise and independent thinking and to make the individual distrust his own judgment, even in matters of taste. His own untutored preferences, it appeared, might lag behind current fashion; they too needed to be periodically upgraded.

The Fantastic World of Commodities The psychological effects of consumerism can be grasped only when consumption is understood as another phase of the industrial work routine. The repeated experience of uneasy self-scrutiny, of submission to expert judgment, of distrust of their own capacity to make intelligent decisions, either as producers or as consumers, colors people's perceptions both of themselves and of the world around them. It encourages a new kind of self-consciousness that has little in common with introspection or vanity. Both as a worker and as a consumer, the individual learns not merely to measure himself against others but to see himself through others' eyes.

He learns that the self-image he projects counts for more than accumulated skills and experience. Since he will be judged, both by his colleagues and superiors at work and by the strangers he encounters on the street, according to his possessions, his clothes, and his "personality"—not, as in the nineteenth century, by his "character"—he adopts a theatrical view of his own "performance" on and off the job. Outright incompetence, of course, still weighs heavily against him at work, just as his actions as a friend and neighbor often outweigh his skill in managing impressions. But the conditions of everyday social intercourse, in societies based on mass production and mass consumption, encourage an unprecedented attention to superficial impressions and images, to the point where the self becomes almost indistinguishable from its surface. Selfhood and personal identity become problematic in such societies, as we can easily see from the outpouring of psychiatric and sociological commentary on these subjects. When people complain of feeling inauthentic or rebel against "role-playing," they testify to the prevailing pressure to see themselves with the eyes of strangers and to shape the self as another commodity offered up for consumption on the open market.

Commodity production and consumerism alter perceptions not just of the self but of the world outside the self. They create a world of mirrors, insubstantial images, illusions increasingly indistinguishable from reality. The mirror effect makes the subject an object; at the same time, it makes the world of objects an extension or projection of the self. It is misleading to characterize the culture of consumption as a culture dominated by things. The consumer lives surrounded not so much by things as by fantasies. He lives in a world that has no objective or independent existence and seems to exist only to gratify or thwart his desires.

This insubstantiality of the external world arises out of the very nature of commodity production, not out of some character flaw in individuals, some excess of greed or "materialism." Commodities are produced for immediate consumption. Their value lies not in their usefulness or permanence but in their marketability. They wear out even if they are not used, since they are designed to be superseded by "new and improved" products, changing fashions, and technological innovations. Thus the current "state of the art" in tape recorders, record players, and stereophonic speakers makes earlier models worthless (except as antiques), even if they continue to perform the tasks for which they were designed, just as a change in women's fashions dictates a complete change of wardrobe. Articles produced for use, on the other hand, without regard to their marketability, wear out only when they are literally used up. "It is this durability," Hannah Arendt once observed, "that gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and use them, their 'objectivity' which makes them withstand, 'stand against' and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users. From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that . . . men, their everchanging nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table."

The changing meaning of "identity" illuminates the connection between changing perceptions of the self and changing perceptions of the outside world. As used in common speech, identity still retains its former connotation of sameness and continuity: "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances," in the language of the Oxford English Dictionary, "the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality." In the 1950s, however, the term came to be used by psychiatrists and sociologists to refer to a fluid,

protean, and problematical self, "socially bestowed and socially sustained," in the words of Peter L. Berger, and defined either by the social roles an individual performs, the "reference group" to which he belongs, or, on the other hand, by the deliberate management of impressions or "presentation of self," in Erving Goffman's phrase. The psychosocial meaning of identity, which has itself passed into common usage, weakens or eliminates altogether the association between identity and "continuity of the personality." It also excludes the possibility that identity is defined largely through a person's actions and the public record of those actions. In its new meaning, the term registers the waning of the old sense of a life as a life-history or narrative—a way of understanding identity that depended on the belief in a durable public world, reassuring in its solidity, which outlasts an individual life and passes some sort of judgment on it. Note that the older meaning of identity refers both to persons and to things. Both have lost their solidity in modern society, their definiteness and continuity. Identity has become uncertain and problematical not because people no longer occupy fixed social stations—a commonplace explanation that unthinkingly incorporates the modern equation of identity and social role—but because they no longer inhabit a world that exists independently of themselves.

Now that the public or common world has receded into the shadows, we can see more clearly than before the extent of our need for it. For a long time, this need was forgotten in the initial exhilaration that accompanied the discovery of the fully developed interior life, a life liberated at last from the prying eyes of neighbors, from village prejudices, from the inquisitorial presence of elders, from everything narrow, stifling, petty, and conventional. But now it is possible to see that the collapse of our common life has impoverished private life as well. It has freed the imagination from external constraints but exposed it more directly than before to the

tyranny of inner compulsions and anxieties. Fantasy ceases to be liberating when it frees itself from the checks imposed by practical experience of the world. Instead it gives rise to hallucinations; and the progress of scientific knowledge, which might be expected to discourage the projection of our inner hopes and fears onto the world around us, leaves these hallucinations undisturbed. Science has not fulfilled the hope that it would replace discredited metaphysical traditions with a coherent explanation of the world and of man's place in it. Science cannot tell people, and at its best does not pretend to tell people, how to live or how to organize a good society. Nor does science offer the same check to the otherwise unrestrained imagination that is offered by practical experience of the world. It does not recreate a public world. Indeed it heightens the prevailing sense of unreality by giving men the power to achieve their wildest flights of fantasy. By holding out a vision of limitless technological possibilities—space travel, biological engineering, mass destruction—it removes the last obstacle to wishful thinking. It brings reality into conformity with our dreams, or rather with our nightmares.

A culture organized around mass consumption encourages narcissism—which we can define, for the moment, as a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more particularly as a projection of one's own fears and desires—not because it makes people grasping and self-assertive but because it makes them weak and dependent. It undermines their confidence in their capacity to understand and shape the world and to provide for their own needs. The consumer feels that he lives in a world that defies practical understanding and control, a world of giant bureaucracies, "information overload," and complex, interlocking technological systems vulnerable to sudden breakdown, like the giant power failure that blacked out the Northeast in 1965 or the radiation leak at Three Mile Island in 1979.

The consumer's complete dependence on these intricate, supremely sophisticated life-support systems, and more generally on externally provided goods and services, recreates some of the infantile feelings of helplessness. If nineteenth-century bourgeois culture reinforced anal patterns of behavior—hoarding of money and supplies, control of bodily functions, control of affect—the twentieth-century culture of mass consumption recreates oral patterns rooted in an even earlier stage of emotional development, when the infant was completely dependent on the breast. The consumer experiences his surroundings as a kind of extension of the breast, alternately gratifying and frustrating. He finds it hard to conceive of the world except in connection with his fantasies. Partly because the propaganda surrounding commodities advertises them so seductively as wish-fulfillments, but also because commodity production by its very nature replaces the world of durable objects with disposable products designed for immediate obsolescence, the consumer confronts the world as a reflection of his wishes and fears. He knows the world, moreover, largely through insubstantial images and symbols that seem to refer not so much to a palpable, solid, and durable reality as to his inner psychic life, itself experienced not as an abiding sense of self but as reflections glimpsed in the mirror of his surroundings.

Consumption and Mass Culture The most plausible defense of consumerism and modern mass culture has always been that they make available to everybody an array of personal choices formerly restricted to the rich. "The new society is a mass society," Edward Shils has written, "precisely in the sense that the mass of the population have become incorporated *into* society." For the first time, the masses have emerged from their "immemorially old, clod-like existence" and achieved at least the "possibility of becoming full members of their society, of living a human life

with some exercise of cultural taste." Herbert Gans makes the same point when he criticizes proposals "to do away with mass production and consumption only a generation or so since a large number of working- and middle-class Americans have had the chance to approach the comforts, conveniences, and pleasures heretofore limited to the rich and the *haute bourgeoisie.*" Gans's clinching argument against critics of mass culture is that they themselves, as intellectuals liberated from provincial constraints, have already made the arduous journey from tradition to modernity and now expect everyone else to share their own standards of "creativity and self-expression" and their own ethic of "individualism and individual problem-solving." With more than a little condescension, he maintains that "many working- and even middle-class Americans are still in the process of liberating themselves from traditional parental cultures and learning how to be individuals with their own needs and values." In other words, they are beginning to approach the lofty standards set by the enlightened elite; and the much-despised mass media, according to Gans, play a "progressive" role in breaking down the restrictive, patriarchal, "traditional" culture from which the common people are just beginning to free themselves. Thus the mass media liberate the working-class housewife from parental dictation, enabling her to make her own decisions and to act on her own judgment and taste. "For a housewife who has decided that she wants to decorate her home in her own way, rather than in the way her parents and neighbors have always done," the media "provide not only a legitimation of her own striving toward individual self-expression but an array of solutions from various taste cultures from which she can begin to develop her own." Furthermore, the "spate of women's liberation articles in popular women's magazines helps a woman still deeply immersed in a male-dominated society to find ideas and feelings that allow her to start to struggle for her own freedom."

According to this view of the "modernization" process, it is the very abundance of choices to which people are now exposed that underlies the malaise of modern man. "Where complex alternatives are available in a society," in the words of Fred Weinstein and Gerald Platt, "it becomes necessary for the individual to direct his own existence without traditional supports, i.e., without class, ethnic, or kinship ties." The need to make choices among a growing range of alternatives gives rise to "persistent feelings of discontent."

Here again we find an explanation of the modern "identity crisis" that confuses identity with social roles and concludes, rather complacently, that "persistent feelings of discontent" are the price people pay for freedom. Instead of assigning individuals to a preordained identity or social station, the argument runs, modern social arrangements leave them free to choose a way of life that suits them; and the choice can become disconcerting, even painful. Yet the same commentators who celebrate "modernization" as an ever-increasing abundance of personal choices rob choice of its meaning by denying that its exercise leads to any important consequences. They reduce choice to a matter of style and taste, as their preoccupation with "lifestyles" indicates. Their bland, innocuous conception of pluralism assumes that all preferences, all "lifestyles," all "taste cultures," as Gans calls them, are equally valid. Misapplying the dictum of cultural anthropology that every culture has to be judged on its own terms, they insist that no one has a right to "impose" his own preferences or moral judgments on anyone else. They appear to assume that moral values can no longer be taught or transmitted through example and persuasion but are always "imposed" on unwilling victims. Any attempt to win someone to your own point of view, or even to expose him to a point of view different from his own, becomes an intolerable interference with his freedom of choice.

These assumptions obviously preclude any public discussion of values at all. They make choice the test of moral and political freedom and then reduce it to nonsense. Thus Peter Clecak, whose recent study, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self*, follows in the footsteps of Shils and Gans, celebrates the diversity of American culture while discounting the possibility that it may intensify ethnic and religious conflicts. Most Americans, he claims, do not approach religion in a "sectarian" spirit—a remarkably misguided statement in view of the long history of American sectarianism, but one that fits snugly into a theory of pluralism, derived not merely from Shils and Gans but from Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, and Richard Hofstadter, that emphasizes cultural consensus as opposed to conflict and exalts American practicality and the alleged American indifference to ideology. Adherence to these dogmas enables Clecak to avoid the conclusion that the current revival of evangelical, charismatic, and fundamentalist sects signals a growing split between the culture of Middle America and the enlightened, secular, therapeutic culture of educated elites, a split referred to by some analysts as a "cultural civil war." The hypothesis of cultural conflict has to be rejected, according to Clecak, because "these divisions do not threaten to destroy culture or to unravel the social fabric." (Not many conflicts in history would meet such a rigorous test.) "Traditional" values have persisted side by side with newer values. The mixture leads not to conflict but to "more cultural options than ever: clear old choices, clear new choices, and a fertile range of ambiguous syntheses of old and new." Like other pluralists, Clecak minimizes the persistence of ideological conflict by pretending that the exercise of cultural "options" has no consequences, since one choice never seems to preclude another. For most people, unfortunately, things seldom work out so smoothly. Those who choose, for example, to raise their children as Christians claim that the mass media and the schools subvert their efforts by propagating hedon-

ism and "secular humanism," while modernists believe that demands for the restoration of the death penalty, strict laws against abortion, and the teaching of "creation science" threaten everything they believe in. In real life, as opposed to pluralist fantasy, every moral and cultural choice of any consequence rules out a whole series of other choices. In an age of images and ideology, however, the difference between reality and fantasy becomes increasingly elusive.

The pluralist conception of freedom rests on the same protean sense of the self that finds popular expression in such panaceas as "open marriage" and "nonbinding commitments." Both originate in the culture of consumption. A society of consumers defines choice not as the freedom to choose one course of action over another but as the freedom to choose everything at once. "Freedom of choice" means "keeping your options open." The idea that "you can be anything you want," though it preserves something of the older idea of the career open to talents, has come to mean that identities can be adopted and discarded like a change of costume. Ideally, choices of friends, lovers, and careers should all be subject to immediate cancellation: such is the open-ended, experimental conception of the good life upheld by the propaganda of commodities, which surrounds the consumer with images of unlimited possibility. But if choice no longer implies commitments and consequences—as making love formerly carried important "consequences," for instance, especially for women—the freedom to choose amounts in practice to an abstention from choice. Unless the idea of choice carries with it the possibility of making a difference, of changing the course of events, of setting in motion a chain of events that may prove irreversible, it negates the freedom it claims to uphold. Freedom comes down to the freedom to choose between Brand X and Brand Y, between interchangeable lovers, interchangeable jobs, interchangeable neighborhoods. Pluralist ideology provides

an accurate reflection of the traffic in commodities, where ostensibly competing products become increasingly indistinguishable and have to be promoted, therefore, by means of advertising that seeks to create the illusion of variety and to present these products as revolutionary breakthroughs, breathtaking advances of modern science and engineering, or, in the case of the products of the mind, as intellectual discoveries the consumption of which will bring instantaneous insight, success, or peace of mind.

Industrial Technology, Mass Culture, and Democracy

Conservative critics of popular education and popular culture have always taken the position that "high culture" can be appreciated only by elites and that efforts to extend it to the masses inevitably lead to a debasement of standards. Even leftist critics of mass culture have adopted the view that the "great cultures of the past have all been elite affairs," as Dwight Macdonald wrote in 1960. Having given up the hope that elite cultures would ever find a popular audience, Macdonald and other opponents of mass culture came to argue for a cultural policy that would at least keep the "two cultures" separate (high culture and mass culture) and encourage the emergence of "a number of smaller, more specialized audiences." This is pretty much the position later taken by Herbert Gans, who advances it, however, not as an attack on "masscult" but as an attack on Macdonald's "elitism."

The debate about mass culture—revived in the eighties in the form of a debate about "narcissism," the decline of educational "excellence," and the cultural roots of America's declining position in the world market—remains mired in the old ruts because those who reject the critique of mass culture nevertheless accept its major premise. They too believe that "high culture [has lost] much of its social authority," as Clecak puts it; that "authoritative standards of judg-

ment [are] increasingly difficult to discover"; that democracy brings a certain "cheapening of opinion, a lowering of taste, lapses of civility"; and that the "bourgeois ideal of leisurely, gracious living has neither survived well among the very privileged nor spread throughout society." At the same time, they agree with Herbert Gans that "poor people are as entitled to their own culture as anyone else" and that intellectuals' efforts to "impose" high culture on other people violate their right to a culture that "relates to their own experience."

Since both parties to this debate agree that "modernization" leads to the democratization of society and culture, the difference between them comes down to the issue of whether social and economic progress compensates for the dilution and vulgarization of high culture. Those who see themselves as cultural democrats believe that the past was a better time only "for certain elite groups," in Clecak's words. Most people in the past, they claim, led hard, unhappy lives. Industrialism has brought common people, for the first time, a "vast expansion of possibilities for personal fulfillment." If they exploit these possibilities in ways that offend intellectuals, the important thing is that they have the right to choose. They enjoy a "range of cultural options" formerly available only to aristocrats. They live "longer and healthier lives than people did in the past," according to Paul Wachtel, and they enjoy "greater opportunities for education and for entertainment." The excesses deplored both by conservative intellectuals and by "Tory radicals," as Clecak calls them, are the excesses of immaturity and will give way in time to something better. The "thickening textures of middlebrow culture," together with the "rising political sophistication of a better-educated citizenry," have persuaded Clecak that popular culture has already achieved the beginnings of a new maturity.

As for the new "narcissism" and the "culture of selfish-

ness," they can be dismissed as "excesses," "unavoidable byproducts," "troubling side effects" of social and economic progress—"extreme instances of more salutary trends." Intellectuals who see only the negative side of progress see American society through a framework of nostalgia. According to Wachtel, critics of contemporary narcissism obscure the "valuable features of the search for personal fulfillment" by "tarring them with the same brush used to describe severe psychopathology." "To gauge American character by means of a rising index of selfishness," Clecak argues, "seems to me as unprofitable as assessing progress in cardiac surgery during the sixties and seventies by counting the number of patients who die in operating rooms."

In the form in which it has been conducted now for the last forty years, the debate about what used to be called mass culture and is now called narcissism can never be resolved. The debate has turned on the controlling conception of cultural change as a balance sheet, in which material gains offset cultural losses. It turns on the question of whether material progress exacts too heavy a price in the loss of cultural "excellence." But who is to say whether the gains of social and economic democracy outweigh its cultural "side effects"?

Suppose the question is misconceived. What if we reject the premise behind this whole discussion, that industrialism fosters political and economic progress? What if we reject the equation of industrialism with democracy and start instead from the premise that large-scale industrial production undermines local institutions of self-government, weakens the party system, and discourages popular initiative? In that case, cultural analysis can no longer content itself with balancing the social and political gains allegedly attendant on industrial progress against cultural losses. It will have to decide instead whether the invasion of culture and personal life by the modern industrial system produces the same

effects that it produces in the social and political realm: a loss of autonomy and popular control, a tendency to confuse self-determination with the exercise of consumer choices, a growing ascendance of elites, the replacement of practical skills with organized expertise.

Clecak's passing reference to cardiac surgery indicates what is wrong not just with his own argument but with the entire controversy about mass culture and "narcissism." He equates technological progress with material and social progress, whereas in fact there is no connection between them. Once again, the point is not that material achievements—in this case, the prolongation of life mistakenly attributed to sophisticated surgical techniques—have an undesirable side-effect: a growing population of old people unable to support themselves and confused about the moral meaning of old age. The point is that modern surgery, taken as a whole, has done very little, if anything, to improve the general level of health and physical well-being or even to prolong life.* All medical technology has done is to increase patients' dependence on machines and the medical experts who operate these "life-support systems." The development of modern technology, not only in medicine but in other fields as well, has improved human control over the physical environment only in a very superficial way, by enabling scientists to make short-term modifications of nature, of which the long-term effects are incalculable. Meanwhile it

*Long-term increases in life expectancy, which began in the eighteenth century, derive from improvements in diet and in the general standard of living. As for the recent decline in deaths from cardiovascular diseases, no reliable authorities attribute it to improvements in cardiac surgery, the "progress" of which Clecak and other champions of modernization take for granted. Even those who emphasize medical reasons for the decline of deaths from heart disease, as opposed to healthier eating habits and exercise, attribute the decline to improvements in diagnosis, not to surgery. According to Eileen Crimmins, "There is general agreement that the number of people who have actually had [coronary bypass] surgery is so small that it could not have played a very significant role in the recent mortality decline." The effect of intensive care units for heart patients is also "being debated."

has concentrated this control in a small elite of technicians and administrators.

Modern technology and mass production have been defended, like mass culture, on the grounds that although they may have taken some of the charm out of life, they have added immeasurably to the comforts enjoyed by ordinary men and women. "I have no quarrel with tradition," Gans writes. "I am in favor of washing machines over washboards, and over river banks, however." But it is precisely the democratizing effects of industrial technology that can no longer be taken for granted. If this technology reduces some of the drudgery of housekeeping, it also renders the housekeeper dependent on machinery—not merely the automatic washer and dryer but the elaborate energy system required to run these and innumerable other appliances—the breakdown of which brings housekeeping to a halt. As we have seen, modern technology undermines the self-reliance and autonomy both of workers and consumers. It expands man's collective control over his environment at the expense of individual control; and even this collective control, as ecologists have pointed out again and again, is beginning to prove illusory as human intervention threatens to provoke unexpected responses from nature, including changes in climate, depletion of the ozone layer, and the exhaustion of natural resources. Nor can it be argued that advanced technology expands the range of options. Whatever its power to create new options in theory, in practice industrial technology has developed according to the principle of radical monopoly, as Ivan Illich calls it, whereby new technologies effectively eliminate older technologies even when the old ones remain demonstrably more efficient for many purposes. Thus the automobile did not simply add another form of transportation to existing forms; it achieved its preeminence at the expense of canals, railways, streetcars, and horse-drawn carriages, thereby forcing the population

to depend almost exclusively on automotive transport even for those purposes for which it is obviously unsuited, such as commuting back and forth to work.

Our growing dependence on technologies no one seems to understand or control has given rise to a widespread feeling of powerlessness and victimization. The proliferation of protest groups, seen as an assertion of "personhood" in the arguments advanced by Clecak, Gans, and other pluralists, actually arises out of a feeling that other people are controlling our lives. The dominant imagery associated with political protest in the sixties, seventies, and eighties is not the imagery of "personhood," not even the therapeutic imagery of self-actualization, but the imagery of victimization and paranoia, of being manipulated, invaded, colonized, and inhabited by alien forces. Angry citizens who find themselves living near poisonous chemical dumps or nuclear power plants, neighbors who band together to keep out schools for retarded children or low-income housing or nursing homes, angry taxpayers, opponents of abortion, opponents of busing, and minority groups all see themselves, for different reasons, as victims of policies over which they have no control. They see themselves as victims not only of bureaucracy, big government, and unpredictable technologies but also, in many cases, of high-level plots and conspiracies involving organized crime, intelligence agencies, and politicians at the upper reaches of government. Side by side with the official myth of a beleaguered government threatened by riots, demonstrations, and unmotivated, irrational assassinations of public figures, a popular mythology has taken shape that sees government as a conspiracy against the people themselves.

The Decline of Authority The myth of modernization, which dominates debates about consumerism, technology, mass culture, and mass politics, assumes that "movements toward autonomy," in the words of Weinstein and Platt, have "separat[ed] the individual from authority," brought about a "relaxation of external controls" and a new "flexibility of social mandates," and thus made it possible for a citizen to "choose his personal goals from a wide scope of *legitimate* ends." The declining respect for authority, allegedly a concomitant of the rise of mass parties and universal suffrage, generates the same kind of controversies as the controversies about the decline of craftsmanship and the decline of educational "excellence." Conservatives lament the collapse of authoritative leadership, whereas progressives claim, once again, that the democratization of politics makes up for the raucous quality of modern political culture, the lack of deference shown to opponents or to authorities, and the unthinking contempt for tradition. According to Clecak, it is an "embattled intellectual elite" that mourns the collapse of standards and the "democratization of American culture." Blind to the "vitality and variety" of American life, full of status anxiety and status resentment, mistaking the decline in their own genteel status for a general decline of politics and culture, intellectuals assume a posture of moral superiority and denounce their fellow citizens as self-centered and narcissistic. Their "mood of defeat," their "pessimism," the "haze of nostalgia" through which they see the past bespeak an elitist disdain for democracy, even when they pose as radicals. With a judicial and impartial air, Clecak notes that the "painful tensions between elitist cultural values and the results of democratic participation admit no easy resolution." He quotes Hofstadter, one of the founders of pluralist theory, to support his contention that criticism of modern politics and culture originates in the "unresolvable conflict," as Hofstadter put it, "between the elite character of [the intellectual's] own class and his democratic aspirations." Like other pluralists, Clecak finds this trite formula so appealing that he simply closes his mind to argu-

ments that fail to conform to it—arguments, for example, that criticize modern society on the grounds not that it is too democratic but that the democratization of culture and politics remains an illusion.

The decline of authority is a good example of the kind of change that promotes the appearance of democracy without its substance. It is part of a shift to a manipulative, therapeutic, "pluralistic," and "nonjudgmental" style of social discipline that originated, like so many other developments, with the rise of a professional and managerial class in the early years of the twentieth century and then spread from the industrial corporation, where it was first perfected, into the political realm as a whole. As we have seen, managerial control of the work force created a passive work force, excluded from decisions about the design and execution of production. Passivity, however, created new problems of labor discipline and social control—problems of "morale," of "motivation," of the "human factor," as they were known to the industrial sociologists and industrial psychologists who began to appear in the twenties. According to these professional students of "human relations," modern industry had created a feeling of drift, uncertainty, anomie: the worker lacked a sense of "belonging." Problems of labor discipline and "manpower recruitment" demanded an extension of the cultural reforms already inaugurated by the rise of mass marketing. Indeed the promotion of consumption as a way of life came to be seen as itself a means of easing industrial unrest. But the conversion of the worker into a consumer of commodities was soon followed by his conversion into a consumer of therapies designed to ease his "adjustment" to the realities of industrial life. Experiments carried out at Western Electric by Elton Mayo and his colleagues at the Harvard Business School—the famous Hawthorne studies—showed how complaints about low wages and excessive supervision could be neutralized by

psychiatric counseling and observation. Mayo and his colleagues found, or claimed to find, that changes in the physical conditions of work, wage incentives, and other material considerations had little influence on industrial productivity. The workers under observation increased their output simply because they had become the object of professional attention and for the first time felt as if someone cared about their work. Interviews instituted with the intention of eliciting complaints about the quality of supervision, which might in turn have enabled management to improve supervisory techniques, turned up instead subjective and intensely emotional grievances having little relation to the objective conditions of work. The workers' complaints, according to Mayo, had no "external reference," and the new sense of freedom expressed by the workers under study had to be taken, therefore, not as an objective description of an actual change in the conditions of work but as "prejudiced judgments," as symptoms, as, in short, "simply a type of statement almost inevitably made when a not very articulate group of workers tries to express an indefinable feeling of relief from constraint." As Mayo took pains to point out, "Their opinion is, of course, mistaken: in a sense they are getting closer supervision than ever before, the change is in the quality of the supervision."

It would be hard to find a statement that captures so clearly the shift from an authoritative to a therapeutic mode of social control—a shift that has transformed not only industry but politics, the school, and the family. On the strength of such studies, sophisticated administrators came to regard moral exhortation, or even appeals to enlightened self-interest in the form of wage incentives, as outmoded techniques of industrial management. They envisioned a change in the "quality of supervision," described by Douglas MacGregor of MIT in *The Human Side of Enterprise* (1957)—another study that has had enormous impact on

managerial thought and practice—as a change from an authoritarian style of control, relying on rewards and punishments, to a more "humanistic" style that treated the worker not as a child but as a partner in the enterprise and sought to give him a sense of belonging. Note the irony of this talk of "partnership," as misleading as the talk of "expanding options" that also figures so prominently in the rhetoric of pluralism. The new style of management defines the worker (just as he is defined by the advertising industry) as a creature of impulse: shortsighted, irrational, incapable of understanding the conditions of his work or even of formulating an intelligent defense of his own interests. Drawing not only on their own experiments but also on a vast body of sociological and psychological theory, members of the new administrative elite have replaced the direct supervision of the labor force with a far more subtle system of psychiatric observation. Observation, initially conceived as a means to more effective forms of supervision and control, has become a means of control in its own right.

Politics as Consumption The systematic observation of symptomatic data, even before it became a technique of labor discipline and social control, had already come to serve as the basis of a new system of industrial recruitment, centered on the school. The modern system of public education, remodeled in accordance with the same principles of scientific management first perfected in industry, has replaced apprenticeship as the principal agency of training people for work. The transmission of skills is increasingly incidental to this training. The school habituates children to bureaucratic discipline and to the demands of group living, grades and sorts them by means of standardized tests, and selects some for professional and managerial careers while consigning the rest to manual labor. The subordination of academic instruction to testing and counseling suggests that

agencies of "manpower selection" have become part of a larger apparatus of counseling or resocialization that includes not only the school but also the juvenile court, the psychiatric clinic, and the social-work agency—in short, the whole range of institutions operated by the "helping professions." This tutelary complex, as it has aptly been called, discourages the autonomous transfer of power and authority from one generation to the next, mediates family relationships, and socializes the population to the demands of bureaucracy and industrial life.

All these institutions operate according to the underlying principle that a willingness to cooperate with the proper authorities offers the best evidence of "adjustment" and the best hope of personal success, while a refusal to cooperate signifies the presence of "emotional problems" requiring more sustained therapeutic attention. As an agency of manpower selection, the school system, supplemented by other tutelary agencies, serves as an effective device for rationing class privilege in a society that feels uneasy about privilege and wants to believe that people get ahead on merit alone. As an agency of social discipline, the school, together with other elements in the tutelary complex, both reflects and contributes to the shift from authoritative sanctions to psychological manipulation and surveillance—the redefinition of political authority in therapeutic terms—and to the rise of a professional and managerial class that governs society not by upholding authoritative moral standards but by defining normal behavior and by invoking allegedly nonpunitive, psychiatric sanctions against deviance.

The extension of these techniques into the political realm transforms politics into administration and finally into another article of consumption. The growth of a professional civil service, the rise of regulatory commissions, the proliferation of governmental agencies, and the dominance of executive over legislative functions provide merely the most obvi-

ous examples of the shift from political to administrative control, in which issues allegedly too abstruse and technical for popular understanding fall under the control of professional experts. Governmental regulation of the economy has often been advocated with the explicit objective of insulating business and government against popular ignorance—as when George W. Perkins, one of the founders of Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive party and a leading champion of the regulatory commission, demanded that economic issues like tariffs and trusts be taken "out of politics," deplored the "shockingly incompetent manner in which our great business problems have been handled," and cited the "hullabaloo over the Sherman Law" as an example of the incompetence of politicians and their constituents. But even reforms intended to increase popular participation, such as the presidential primary, have had the opposite effect. Twentieth-century politics has come to consist more and more of the study and control of public opinion. The study of the "American voter" incorporates techniques first perfected in market research, where they served to identify the whims of the "sovereign consumer." In government as in industry, devices originally intended merely to register opinion—polls, samples, and balloting itself—now serve to manipulate opinion as well. They define a statistical norm, deviations from which become automatically suspect. They make it possible to exclude unpopular opinions from political discussion (just as unpopular wares are excluded from the supermarket) without any reference to their merits, simply on the basis of their demonstrated lack of appeal. By confronting the electorate with the narrow range of existing choices, they ratify those choices as the only ones capable of attracting support. Just as the interviews conducted at Hawthorne trivialized the workers' grievances, polls and surveys trivialize politics by reducing political choices to indistinguishable alternatives. In both cases, those in power invite popular

"input" strictly on their own terms, under cover of scientific impartiality. The study of voting "behavior" becomes at the same time an important determinant of that behavior.

In industry, the exclusion of workers from control over the design of work went hand in hand with the rise of a new and profoundly undemocratic institution, the corporation, which has centralized the technical knowledge once administered by craftsmen. In politics, the exclusion of the public from political participation is bound up with the decline of a democratic institution, the political party, and its replacement by institutions less amenable to popular control. The policy-making function of the party has been taken over by the administrative bureaucracy; its educative function by the mass media. Political parties now specialize in marketing politicians for public consumption, and even here party discipline has broken down to a remarkable extent. The electorate is "no longer bound to party through the time-honored links of patronage and the machine," as Walter Dean Burnham points out. As a result, politics has become an "item of luxury consumption, . . . an indoor sport involving a host of discrete players rather than the teams of old."

The New "Personhood" The social changes so far summarized—the substitution of observation and measurement for authoritative, "judgmental" types of social sanctions; the transformation of politics into administration; the replacement of skilled labor by machinery; the redefinition of education as "manpower selection," designed not so much to instill work skills as to classify workers and to assign them either to the small class of administrators, technicians, and managers who make decisions or to the larger class of minimally skilled workers who merely carry out instructions—have gradually transformed a productive system based on handicraft production and regional exchange into a complex, interlocking network of technologies based

on mass production, mass consumption, mass communications, mass culture: on the assimilation of all activities, even those formerly assigned to private life, to the demands of the marketplace.

These developments have created a new kind of selfhood, characterized by some observers as self-seeking, hedonistic, competitive, and "antinomian," by others as cooperative, "self-actualizing," and enlightened. By this time, it should be clear that neither description captures the prevailing sense of self. The first sees consumerism only as an invitation to self-indulgence. It deplores "materialism" and the desire for "things" and misses the more insidious effects of a culture of consumption, which dissolves the world of substantial things (far from reinforcing it), replaces it with a shadowy world of images, and thus obliterates the boundaries between the self and its surroundings. Critics of "hedonism" attribute its increasing appeal to the collapse of educational standards, the democratization of an "adversary culture" that formerly appealed only to the intellectual avant-garde, and the decline of political authority and leadership. They complain that people think too much about rights instead of thinking about duties. They complain about the pervasive sense of "entitlement" and the claim to unearned privileges. All these arguments invite the reply that although a democratic culture may offend "champions of public order and high culture," as Theodore Roszak calls them, it gives ordinary people access to a better life and a wider range of "options."

Neither party to this debate stops to question the reality of choices that have no lasting consequences. Neither side questions the debased conception of democracy that reduces it, in effect, to the exercise of consumer preferences. Neither side questions the equation of selfhood with the ability to play a variety of roles and to assume an endless variety of freely chosen identities.

Since the celebration of "personhood" seeks only to refute critics of selfishness and hedonism, it cannot come to grips with an argument that rejects the prevailing terms of debate. It can only elaborate ingenious variations on the same theme, constructing new typologies that express the same crudely conceived contrast between the old individualism and the "new social ethic," as Daniel Yankelovich calls it. Charles Reich's Consciousness II and Consciousness III, Gregory Bateson's Learning II and Learning III, Alvin Toffler's Second Wave and Third Wave all serve to label stylized cultural configurations and personality traits that have little reference to anything besides their own opposition. Thus the new consciousness, according to Reich, affirms the "wholeness of self" and rejects the "aggressive, disciplined, competitive pursuit of definite goals." The old culture, on the other hand, rests—as Toffler explains it—on an exploitive attitude toward nature, an "atomic model of reality" that sees only the parts and misses the whole, a mechanistic view of causality, and a linear sense of time. Theodore Roszak, like many others, insists that the emerging ethic of personhood should not be confused with narcissism, egocentricity, or self-absorption. Although a "yearning for growth, for authenticity, for largeness of experience" sometimes takes the form of "brashness, vulgarity, and youthful impetuosity," these side-effects, for Roszak as for Peter Clecak, Daniel Yankelovich, and Paul Wachtel, represent a passing phase in the development of a sensibility that will eventually reconcile self and society, humanity and nature. Critics of the new culture, according to Roszak, "misread the new ethos of self-discovery, mistaking it for the old vice of self-aggrandizement." They confuse the "sensitive quest for fulfillment with the riotous hedonism of our high consumption economy." They see another "revolt of the masses" in what is actually a "revolt of people *against* massification in behalf of their embattled personhood."

In Wachtel's version of this argument, the decline of economic man and the rise of psychological man bode well for the future. Those who see this development as a decline, like Rieff, attribute to psychology in general bad effects that ought to be attributed only to psychoanalysis, which defines "grasping selfishness" as the basis of human nature and thus mirrors the capitalist ethic of competitive individualism. The new growth therapies and family therapies, on the other hand, offer a "healthy-minded" alternative to atomistic individualism. Far from encouraging "narcissism," they insist on the cultural determinants of personality and the importance, allegedly ignored by psychoanalysis, of transactions between the individual and his environment. They promote a "psycho-ecological point of view." "It is not psychology that is the problem," Wachtel argues; "it is the *wrong* psychology."

According to Morris Berman, the new "planetary culture" rejects "ego-consciousness" in favor of an "ecological sense of reality." Drawing on the "astonishing synthesis provided by the cultural anthropologist Gregory Bateson" —the "only fully developed articulated holistic science available today"—Berman announces the death of the Cartesian worldview and the emergence of a new sense of "cosmic connectedness." Verbal-rational learning (Learning II, as Bateson calls it) separates the individual from the environment and from his fellows, insists on a split between mind and body and between fact and value, and clings to a linear sense of time. Holistic consciousness (Learning III) reunites fact and value and dissolves the ego, the "independent self so dear to Western thought." The collapse of the mechanistic view of the world, Berman believes, heralds a "holistic society," "dreamier and more sensual than ours," in which the "body will be seen as part of culture," not as a "dangerous libido to be kept in check." The new society will value community more highly than competition. It will rest on extended families, not on the "competitive and isolating nuclear family that is today a seedbed of neurosis." Tolerant, pluralistic, and decentralized, it will concern itself with "fitting into nature rather than attempting to master it." The new consciousness leads to a "reenchantment of the world."

In order to contrast the new "personhood" with acquisitive individualism, its admirers argue that the cultural revolution, far from encouraging narcissism, puts an end to the narcissistic "illusion of self-sufficiency," as Philip Slater calls it. In passages reminiscent of Norman O. Brown, Slater contends that the illusion of "infantile narcissistic omnipotence" underlies competitive individualism, the achievement ethic, and the Promethean urge to dominate nature and "to extend oneself in a linear way into the environment." Now that the "disconnector virtues"—the "most treasured virtues of the past"—have lost their "survival value," a new ecological awareness has begun to take shape, which understands man's embeddedness in a larger system of life. The old culture rests on an "arrogant assumption about the importance of the single individual in society and the importance of humanity in the universe." The new culture, on the other hand, values the "humble virtues" that have taken on "higher survival value" in a world endangered by runaway technology, ecological disaster, and nuclear holocaust. "The conditions that gave competitiveness survival value have long since evaporated."

In Betty Friedan's *Second Stage*, the same slogans take on a feminist coloration. According to Friedan, the feminist movement has combined with a "quiet movement of American men" to produce an androgynous personality type that is already "humanizing" both the family and the corporation. She cites studies carried out by the Stanford Research Institute—the source of much optimistic assessment of the "changing image of man"—that allegedly document the transition from an authoritarian to a pluralistic style of cor-

porate leadership. The Alpha style—another variation on the standard typologies—rests on "analytical, rational, quantitative thinking," in Friedan's words. It wrongly assumes that every choice leaves some people winners and others losers. It may have been an appropriate style for the "authoritarian and homogenous society" of the recent past; but the coming of a new kind of society in which the "main problems of economic and even physical survival have to do with the complex relationships, behavior and values of *people,* not things," requires a new kind of leadership. "Contextual," "relational," flexible, and tolerant, concerned with the "subtleties of human interaction" rather than with the imposition of uniform values, the Beta style is a feminine or androgynous style, the growing importance of which signals the obsolescence of "masculine, win-lose, zero-sum linear thinking." Its emergence, together with the religious revival, the human potential movement, and the general hunger "for larger purposes beyond the self," refutes social critics who make a speciality of "ranting and raving about the 'me generation' and the 'culture of narcissism.' "

In a book that grew out of the Stanford studies, *Voluntary Simplicity,* Duane Elgin summarizes the industrial worldview and the postindustrial worldview in parallel columns: "materialism" as opposed to "spirituality," "cutthroat competition" as opposed to cooperation, conspicuous consumption as opposed to conservation. Industrialism defines the individual as "separate and alone"; the new planetary perspective defines him "as both a unique *and* an inseparable part of the larger universe." According to Elgin, the environmental movement, the antinuclear movement, the counterculture, the human potential movement, the interest in Eastern religions, and the new concern with health add up to a "quiet revolution," an "awakening interest in the inner aspect of life." Marilyn Ferguson makes the same claims in *The Aquarian Conspiracy,* still another book directed against

"social critics [who] speak from their own despair or a kind of cynical chic that belies [*sic*] their own sense of impotence." Criticism of the new consciousness, Ferguson maintains, rests on a "fear of the self" and a "cultural bias against introspection," according to which introspection is "narcissistic or escapist." In fact, the new culture repudiates "selfishness," in her view. It knows that "the separate self is an illusion." It reunites self and society, mind and body, science and mysticism. It rejects the materialistic conception of reality long upheld by Western rationalism. Reality is another rationalistic mirage, according to Ferguson. "If the nature of reality is . . . holographic, and the brain operates holographically, then the world is indeed, as the Eastern religions have said, *maya:* a magic show. Its concreteness is an illusion."

"Selfishness" or Survivalism? In its liberal use of labels, its addiction to slogans, its reduction of cultural change to simplified sets of opposite characteristics, and its conviction that reality is an illusion, this simpleminded case for "cultural revolution" betrays its affinity with the consumerism it claims to repudiate. The most glaring weakness of this argument, however—and of the whole debate in which it is immersed—is the equation of narcissism with "selfishness of an extreme form," in the words of Daniel Yankelovich. The terms have little in common. Narcissism signifies a loss of selfhood, not self-assertion. It refers to a self threatened with disintegration and by a sense of inner emptiness. To avoid confusion, what I have called the culture of narcissism might better be characterized, at least for the moment, as a culture of survivalism. Everyday life has begun to pattern itself on the survival strategies forced on those exposed to extreme adversity. Selective apathy, emotional disengagement from others, renunciation of the past and the future, a determination to live one day at a time—these

techniques of emotional self-management, necessarily carried to extremes under extreme conditions, in more moderate form have come to shape the lives of ordinary people under the ordinary conditions of a bureaucratic society widely perceived as a far-flung system of total control.

Confronted with an apparently implacable and unmanageable environment, people have turned to self-management. With the help of an elaborate network of therapeutic professions, which themselves have largely abandoned approaches stressing introspective insight in favor of "coping" and behavior modification, men and women today are trying to piece together a technology of the self, the only apparent alternative to personal collapse. Among many people, the fear that man will be enslaved by his machines has given way to a hope that man will become something like a machine in his own right and thereby achieve a state of mind "beyond freedom and dignity," in the words of B. F. Skinner. Behind the injunction to "get in touch with your feelings"—a remnant of an earlier "depth" psychology —lies the now-familiar insistence that there is no depth, no desire even, and that the human personality is merely a collection of needs programmed either by biology or by culture.

We are not likely to get any closer to an understanding of contemporary culture as long as we define the poles of debate as selfishness and self-absorption, on the one hand, and self-fulfillment or introspection on the other. According to Peter Clecak, selfishness is the "deficit side" of cultural liberation—an "unavoidable byproduct of the quest for fulfillment." It is a part of contemporary culture that must not be confused with the whole. "Though they are plausible to a degree, characterizations of America as a selfish culture typically confuse excesses with norms, by-products with central and on the whole salutary outcomes of the quest" for self-fulfillment. But the question is not whether the salutary effects of "personhood" outweigh hedonism and self-seeking. The question is whether any of these terms capture either the prevailing patterns of psychological relations or the prevailing definition of selfhood.

The dominant conception of personality sees the self as a helpless victim of external circumstances. This is the view encouraged both by our twentieth-century experience of domination and by the many varieties of twentieth-century social thought that reach their climax in behaviorism. It is not a view likely to encourage either a revival of old-fashioned acquisitive individualism (which presupposed far more confidence about the future than most people have today) or the kind of search for self-fulfillment celebrated by Clecak, Yankelovich, and other optimists. A genuine affirmation of the self, after all, insists on a core of selfhood not subject to environmental determination, even under extreme conditions. Self-affirmation remains a possibility precisely to the degree that an older conception of personality, rooted in Judaeo-Christian traditions, has persisted alongside a behavioral or therapeutic conception. But this kind of self-affirmation, which remains a potential source of democratic renewal, has nothing in common with the current search for psychic survival—the varieties of which we must now examine in some detail.