COCHRAN

CHALLENGES TO AMERICAN VALUES

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SOCIETY, BUSINESS, AND RELIGION

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Preface

The ideas in this essay essentially form the basis of an effort to use knowledge based on historical development. Coming from a lifetime of study of American history, the values discussed may stimulate readers to further thought and deeper understanding.

The chapters are not narrative history, but rather brief summaries of long periods of value formation or challenge. Agreement with the statements presented is not necessary; my aim is to suggest that historical progress presents new problems and that some deeply rooted American values have not always offered the best basis for meeting or solving such difficulties. Put another way, adequately understanding the origins and ramifications of an apparent dilemma may put one on a path toward its solution. I hope to suggest some new questions, which may evoke new answers.

Radnor, Pa. T. C. C.
August, 1984

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PART I

THE HERITAGE OF VALUES 1607-1850

1

History and Values

A practical man of long and wide experience in American affairs has written of the current "centerless, disaffected, alienated, uncommitted and disappointed society." His alarming view is not based on any single failure but on what he sees as a general breakdown in commonly held values.[1] Though many may judge Mandel's pessimism to be extreme, similar ideas have been widespread among commentators on the latest decades of the twentieth century. Further understanding of the nature of these deep disaffections may be gained by tracing the origins and evolution of the challenges to deeply entrenched American values.

I have selected values as the area of conflict between novelty and tradition because they are regarded by social scientists as a "specially economical set of high level guidance signals."[2] The conflicts have also been little explored from long-run historical evidence.[3] At the highest levels of generalization, which will of necessity dominate this brief discussion, values and norms of social behavior tend to merge. Consequently, the discussion becomes one of challenges to customary American views and behavior.

Many of the challenged values were imported from Europe and are older than the nation. In the first two centuries of settlement, Americans altered the European heritage to fit the new environment and developed a widely held set of social or cultural values. Although there were numerous

differences in local customs, varying from those of a South Carolina planter to those of a Maine fisherman or from those of the Reverend Cotton Mather of Boston to those of the merchant Simon Gratz of Philadelphia, there were also common elements in American ideas and attitudes quickly recognized by visitors from other countries. These distinguished and learned travelers described the similarities somewhat differently, but from the early commentators to Francis Grund and Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s, they agreed on many distinctive American characteristics.

Similarities in values and general culture from North to South were partly the result of common foreign backgrounds as well as of sharing the experience of migration and settlement. Except for black slaves, early settlers came from northwestern Europe; and they all had to adjust to living on the edge of a wilderness where life was originally simple and rigorous. The common cultural values that were generated by these circumstances persisted in spite of later migrations and economic and social changes. Among the attributes that were valued more than, or differently from, those in Europe were individual initiative and responsibility, self-determination, private rights, material success, belief in an immanent God, and impatience with apparently nonutilitarian activities or learning, and white male supremacy. Obviously, this list of traditional values could be made longer without encountering much disagreement. These attitudes bred in the colonies were well suited to the development of the United States up to the mid-nineteenth century, but from that time on the old beliefs have been challenged by physical and psychological changes stemming from technology and new social needs that resulted by 1980 in a society strained by conflicting values and a new environment.

Culture and Society

For theoretical purposes, social scientists divide society into culture, social institutions, and physical environment. Cul-

ture embraces all that people think and do, but it is not necessary to explore all aspects of culture in order to assess the force of its historically important social values.[4] The sharing of a number of values such as those placed on individualism, equality before the law, or the virtue of material success makes for a harmonious society, while challenges to a sufficient number of basic values is deeply disturbing. Social institutions are customary ways of doing things, and culture includes the meanings we attach to such activities. Social structure is made up of institutions, some represented in stone and mortar as in churches, others in patterns of action such as electing government officials.[5] In their actions as members of the society, people who do not outwardly follow the values and support the institutions of their culture are regarded as innovators or deviants.[6]

The admonitions given by parents to their children maintain continuity in culture and values. In early America these included indoctrination with many traditional European values plus instructions on how to get along under the new conditions. Playmates and schooling added to parental influences, but before 1800 formal learning for most young children came at home. Later in life came the additional values, norms, admonitions, or ideas picked up at work, in church, at social gatherings, or by the written word, though presumably there was not much of the latter, for even most of the literate read with some difficulty.

Scholars in many fields have felt increasingly the need for some more precise understanding of how cultural components such as values, beliefs, desires, habits, and norms actually operate. In the course of this quest, analysts have been forced to recognize that actions speak louder than words, that the influence of cultural values in the history of nations such as the United States should be interpreted more on the basis of what was done than on how it was verbally justified. The colonists, for example, rebelled against controls from abroad for local, social, and economic reasons, but a few lawyers or philosophers justified their actions by natural law

and the unwritten English constitution. Or to put it another way, Americans as a people have tended to be nonintellectual; hence efforts to interpret their history on the basis of formally expressed ideas often appear superficial and misleading.

Because values are shaped necessarily from past experiences, the existing culture is a conservative rather than a dynamic social force. Changes usually come first in the social environment in which persons play their roles. Clearly, some cultures, such as that of an entrenched aristocracy, have more ability to resist change than that of a migratory democracy. A type of change that is hard to resist is one stemming from gradual, cumulative processes such as the growth in density of population, slow exhaustion of soil or minerals, or the growth of bureaucracies. Such forces bring gradual adjustments in roles and values that people are unaware of except by careful comparisons with earlier times.

Migration, Geography, and Values

Migration to a new type of environment, whether the country or a city, is a major force for innovation and cultural modification. The size of such continuous movement has made America an exceptional case in recent world history.[7] There had, of course, been massive migrations in an early period in Europe and Asia, and everywhere there had been a certain amount of work-oriented movement by artisans and laborers, but not in recent centuries had there been continuous resettlement of a high percentage of the total population. For most colonists who came to America, the ocean trip was merely a first move. As the population grew, families continually sold old land and moved to new land, or, if they remained artisans, they moved from the ports of debarkation to newer cities or towns. Most people repeated the process more than once in a lifetime, becoming used to entering a cultural environment in which geography and artifacts might be relatively familiar, but their neighbors were strangers.

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Confrontation with the new, whether on a frontier or in a metropolitan area, had certain uniform repercussions. Movers brought relatively few household goods with them and wanted new supplies at a low cost. The average newcomers were not in a position to haggle about artistic designs or fine finishes; utility was their overriding need. In addition, wise families looking forward to further migration continued to stock their homes, farms, or shops on the same basis. "You can't take it with you" was more than a popular religious aphorism. No matter how short the move, adjustment to a new environment stimulated innovations, large or small. Friends had to be made easily and easily given up when one or the other party left. Practically all the values attributed by Turner to the "frontier" were generated by the process of continuing migration, as well as some that Turner would not have celebrated.[8] While a degree of social democracy developed from the migration of nuclear families unsupported by wealthy collateral relatives, often this was not completely the case. In a Wisconsin county studied by Merle E. Curti, the original leaders, businessmen who started the settlement, perpetuated their strong influence in politics for a generation.[9] Yet in all places growing from rapid migration there undoubtedly was an easier going, less formal attitude, a necessary combining of cooperation with individual initiative, and a neighborliness in excess of that in the older East Coast areas of out-migration.

In a broad sense most social sanctions lost some of their force in a migratory population. Yet religious values and beliefs were undoubtedly strengthened in the Colonial period by the belief of many people that this was the biblical promised land, God's New World. Religious values may not have been more widespread in Colonial culture than in Europe, but, among large parts of the population, they appear to have been a stronger force for social action.

The common sets of cultural "policies" and values that gradually grew to meet recurring situations in all parts of America will appear in connection with later challenges and

responses. Migration has continued to be a powerful influence throughout American history. In the decade 1920 to 1930, for example, an old stable East Coast city such as Norristown, Pennsylvania, received 501 new male migrants and lost 382. For the whole period 1910 to 1950, in-migration accounted for 80 percent of the growth in male population.[10]

Geography also led to modifications of the values of European cultures. Abundance of fertile land was not only responsible for internal migration but also for innovations in the practices of farmers, shopkeepers and millers that, in turn, changed the culture. American farming, for example, was carried on in a strikingly different environment in soils, living conditions, and climates from those in Great Britain or continental Europe. Migration and cheap land tended to make all adult males, urban or rural, into real estate operators.

Navigable rivers flowing into the frequent and large bays from Cape Hatteras northward were also a powerful influence toward business activity that inevitably influenced agrarian values. Farmers in New York State nearly two hundred miles inland, if near the Mohawk River, could float goods downstream in the spring flood waters for sale in urban markets. Small sailboats and pole boats made their way up and down shallow rivers during periods of high water with flour, wood, iron, and other inland products that would come first to the seaports and eventually go to Europe or the West Indies. But well before the American Revolution, major customers were the growing American towns and cities. Iron, lying on the surface of the ground in some areas from Virginia to New England, made this staple of modern society readily available in surplus quantities. Wood was so plentiful that most trees were regarded as hindrances rather than assets.

These opportunities of the American geographical environment support the thesis that such forces working on the continuous flow of immigrants with the lower- to middle-class Western European cultural heritage were dominant in

shaping the traditional American values and social practices. The total approach, therefore, may be called "geocultural." The physical environment was exploited by people with the cultural values and knowledge needed for material success, and, in doing so, they generated a common culture and values that for many decades became stronger as well as more distinct from those of Europe.

Values and Later Challenges

American culture has continued to stress strongly such traits as optimism, to value utility highly, and to be preoccupied with physical things and their improvement. The fact that great value was placed on religion by influential groups in the population did not seem to be at odds with an optimistic materialism. If modifications were made, as in the case of Puritanical Calvinism, it was the theology that was modified, chiefly in weakening the anxiety about predestination, rather than in changing the practical attitudes of the believers. In all, the benefits of the American environment seem to have gone well with an optimistic and locally varied belief in God's grace and its manifestation.

Thus Europeans exposed to the influence of America developed enduring and unique cultural values. From the eighteenth century on, new material forces such as the development of power machinery impinged on traditional values, but for more than a century the existing culture was highly congenial to the then current physical changes. The pursuit of personal success, commitment to material progress, placing a high value on activity as such, individual—not social—responsibility, and other norms of the democratic, individualistic, and historic capitalist values were all reenforced rather than undermined in the first generations of an industrializing society.

By the mid-nineteenth century the relative maturity of American industry and the sudden emergence of a nation of

continental size from the Mexican War, one tied together by rail and telegraph, posed new physical problems. For meeting these conditions, the values of the old culture were no longer ideally suited. The social planning forced by big urban centers, the large bureaucracies needed by both business and government in order to operate on a continental scale, the devotion to scientific research required to advance increasingly intricate and theoretical technology, and the recognition of social as well as individual causes for failure and hardship all challenged the old core of cultural values.

2

The Colonial Heritage

Of early nineteenth century America, de Tocqueville wrote: "We shall remain perfectly convinced that not an opinion, not a custom, not a law, I may even say not an event, is upon record which the origin of that people won't explain."[1] Put another way, up to that time the changes in inherited values and norms had tended to reenforce rather than challenge colonial patterns. And since many of the essentials of this early environment continued long after the Colonial Period, a large part of the early cultural adjustments were reenacted on the frontiers of later times.

Uniformities Among Settlers

The early migrants to the Southern coastline expected to become farmers or planters, and, except for the enslaved blacks, they were predominantly British. In the Middle Colonies some of the pioneers were Dutch and Swedish but surrounded by others from the British Isles. Later on, William Penn brought not only English Quakers but also large numbers of German sectarians. French Huguenots, dissenters from the established Catholic Church, also settled in several places in the Middle States. Although the earliest New Englanders were English, latecomers were also Scotch, Irish

and Scotch-Irish, often moving after a few years on to the backcountry of the colonies to the West and South.

All these early immigrants on the Atlantic coast between Georgia and Maine came from the group of nations that already led the world in the building of water mills, metal processing, and mechanical devices ranging from clocks to public works. Almost every eighteenth-century boatload of settlers had artisans among them familiar with some aspect of advanced technology. There was, however, a kind of technological imbalance in all of these nations of continental Europe. Skilled technicians could have improved complex machinery for power, drilling, or shaping, for which Europe offered an inadequate market. Thus, technology had a potential in excess of effective demand. In America, however, there was an urgent need for new practical devices. The artisan who might have made a complicated automaton for fairs or exhibitions in Europe designed a better pump, stove, or wagon in America. As Siegfried Gideon wrote, "Imagination was given scope to shape reality unhindered."[2]

But the flow of skilled artisans, though differing from the settlers going to Portuguese or Spanish colonies, should not be overemphasized. The majority of settlers were farmers, unskilled workers, and prisoners, all seeking escape from an unpleasant life. The indenture system allowing immigrants to gain passage in return for selling their labor for several years was probably the most frequent means of financing white migration to the colonies.

Without regard to the particular characteristics of these European settlers or of the new environment, Americans were necessarily affected by the characteristics of any area growing from migration. The newcomers were continually forced to modify previously conditioned patterns of action to fit different situations; "experience was not a series of familiar events, but an unfolding scene of exploration."[3] Thrown with strangers, the migrant was not sure what their responses would be to his or her customary behavior. Migrants usually

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