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Falling everywhere: postmodern politics and American cultural mythologies

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Falling Everywhere

Postmodern Politics and American Cultural Mythologies

History repeats itself, endlessly and sometimes tiresomely. Numerous writers and scholars have worried about the divisions — social, political and cultural — which began permeating American society in the 1960s. The unravelling of America, the coming apart of America, became familiar refrains. During the 'sixties itself, Daniel Boorstin's new left barbarians were at the gate threatening the very genius of American politics which Boorstin had postulated in the previous decade.[1] This genius, itself a cousin of American exceptionalism, revolved around the erosion of ideological division, and the lack of vigorous *difference* within the American polity. Rather than this producing a bland one dimensionality, it guaranteed the preservation of liberty, of individual freedom. Individuality and commonality, far from being somewhat contradictory forces, fed off each other, securing a happy consensus. This was pure mythology, of

1. D. Boorstin, 'The New Barbarians: The Decline of Radicalism', in his *The Decline of Radicalism: Reflections of America Today*, New York, Random House, 1969, pp. 121-34; *The Genius of American Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953.

course, which is not to suggest there were no elements of truth in it, but rather that Boorstin's analysis was ideologically self-serving and more than a little immodest. The genius of 'the genius of American politics' was that it masked profound divisions, dislocations and disorders by inventing an ideal political community unmediated by class, race, gender or ideology; a dream world which functioned as the intellectual version of a mass culture myth propagated in many forms (one for instance, being the televised ideal family, untroubled by external disorder or real internal division). And it is mass culture, more than commentaries like Boorstin's, which has cemented certain necessary national myths but these myths have resonance within intellectual life and serve to obscure the flipside of capitalist success.

For American liberals, capitalism has nourished the individual and valued individual freedom. Yet for the eloquent German sociologist Werner Sombart, the lesson of American exceptionalism was different. Writing in the first decade of this century he observed that in America 'one's financial property and income [forms] the basis of how one is evaluated. Feeling for the unmeasurable uniqueness of personality and for the essence of the individual disappears'.[2] The cash nexus, commodity fetishism and consequent reification (not Sombart's words but his implications) underpinned social life in America. Yet Sombart also acknowledged the relatively privileged position of the (white) worker in the American public domain — the trappings of class had all but disappeared, so too had class consciousness, as high standards of living and educational opportunity narrowed (or so it seemed) social distances. A degree of social homogeneity unthinkable in Europe prevailed in the States and this provided the foundations for civic cohesion. National consensus, civic cohesion and social homogeneity all informed Daniel Bell's much later 'end of ideology' thesis, penned just before the revival of bitter ideological conflict in America.[3] More recently, however, Bell joined a growing chorus wondering about the direction of America. In particular, he referred to 'the sense of exhaustion [marking] intellectual life' and 'the unravelling of the middle class'. 'The economic foundation for culture', he concluded, 'is beginning to show cracks and that presents a crisis of confidence in the very future of society'.[4] The withering away of old certainties, the challenge of those new to positions of power, the cultural dissolution and political

2. W. Sombart, *Why is There No Socialism in the United States?*, New York, M.E.Sharpe Inc., 1976 [1906], p. 11.
3. D. Bell, *The End of Ideology*, New York, The Free Press, 1960.
4. D. Bell, 'The Culture Wars', *Quadrant*, July-August, 1992, p. 26; see also I. Kristol, 'America's Mysterious Malaise', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 May 1992, p. 5.

disillusionment, all combined to signal a warning — the centre does not hold, perhaps there no longer is a centre, political correctness rules the campuses, multiculturalism has transformed educational priorities in dangerous ways and an overwhelming sense of things falling apart prevails. All this depends upon a necessary national myth, the myth that there used to be a common culture, common ideals, a cohesive citizenship, a coherent polity and it is all now coming apart at the seams. To be sure, something is happening Mr Jones. A shift to the postmodern does rupture elements of tradition. It is, however, easy to exaggerate the supposedly solid core of American public life.

Arthur Schlesinger Jnr. celebrates the national identity fostered by the United States, 'a brand-new national identity, carried forward by individuals who, in forsaking old loyalties and joining to make new life, melted away ethnic differences'.[5] Americanization was a triumph of American exceptionalism, removing group allegiances, tribal loyalties and making the many into the one. Now, however, identity is up for grabs and *American* identity is just one among many. Schlesinger worries that 'the cult of ethnicity' has as its 'underlying philosophy' the idea 'that America is not a nation of individuals at all but a nation of groups'.[6] In reality, it was the cult of liberal historiography which, being blind to collective identities, reproduced the myth of individualism and individuality. To think that black sharecroppers in Alabama were 'a bunch of individuals', just like the 'bunch of individuals' who were longshoremen in San Francisco, or the 'bunch of individuals' who sat in executive rooms on Fifth Avenue. This is the intellectual variation on a theme developed by mass culture. American television depended upon and helped reproduce the myth that, to use the words of Todd Gitlin, 'we're all folks', underneath everything we're all the same[7] — this folksiness protects itself from the world of difference (even if it acknowledges difference — token blacks, token workers) by standardizing and homogenizing, by creating a one dimensional world where 'the essence of the individual disappears' but the myth of the individual remains. So too, Schlesinger's individuals should have one dominant collective identity — the American identity — and that is why what is put in the educational curriculum is so important: 'The debate about the curriculum is a debate about what it means to be an

5. A. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1992, p. 13.
6. Schlesinger, p. 16.
7. T. Gitlin, interviewed on *The Truth About Lies: The Tube is Reality*, a Panopticon Production for Channel Four (England), 1991.

American'.[8] Yet, as Michael Walzer has argued, that meaning was and is far from absolute.[9] Indeed, Walzer suggests that rather than a 'coherent Americanism', there has always been a 'decentered' nation, an 'incoherence'. He further argues that 'a radical program of Americanization would *really* be un-American'.[10] There is a note of irony in Walzer's use of the term 'un-American' but it still reflects a peculiarly American way of viewing things (as Boorstin, amongst others, has recognized).[11] Moreover, he seems to underestimate the significance of Americanization. Like so many scholars he is reluctant to demonize mass culture and thus leaves it floating as a benign popular culture which enshrines a certain sort of Americanness.[12] Nevertheless, informed by Walzer's perspective, the liberal and conservative arguments concerning the educational curriculum and how much it should embody racial and ethnic diversity, take on a different meaning — they deny historical reality and rely upon the invention of a mythical oneness.

For Schlesinger, as for Bell and many others the national mood has changed. 'Waning American optimism' reflects a national psyche in crisis, propelling people to look back rather than forward. Instead of cheering on this revival of historical memory, the liberal historian bemoans its tendency to detract from the American futures market.[13] 'The rising cult of ethnicity is a symptom of decreasing confidence' in America ... and 'today it threatens to become a counter-revolution against the original theory of America as "one people", a common culture, a single nation.'[14] The myth of commonality runs alongside the liberal faith in progress. It was in the 1960s that this liberal teleology was questioned vigorously and it is, of course, to the 1960s that scholars like Schlesinger trace the roots of today's tribalism and political correctness. American identity, so the story now goes, is being fractured by ethnic groups claiming the world as their own and inventing history in their own image. Identity politics certainly did have its origins in the 1960s, but its central role in radicalism is a post-1960s phenomenon. Indeed, there is a sense in which the rise of identity politics signalled the withering away of the new left's search for community.

8. Schlesinger, p. 17.
9. M. Walzer, 'What Does it Mean to Be an "American"?', *Social Research*, vol. 57, no. 3, Fall 1990, p. 591-614.
10. Walzer, p. 614.
11. Boorstin, p. 14.
12. Walzer, p. 606-7.
13. Schlesinger, p. 41.
14. Schlesinger, pp. 41, 43.

Like Schlesinger, Robert Hughes trots out a few tired old falsehoods about the 'sixties and he also relies upon the same sort of national myth (there once was a solid coherent whole, but it's now falling apart or, to use his term 'fraying').[15] With the recent end of the Cold War, Hughes argues, a plethora of issues constructs the political and a 'sense of common citizenship dissolved'.[16] We could be forgiven for thinking this is all for the good if common citizenship is the same as mindless patriotism, but Hughes is referring to a process of depoliticization. He fails to recognize that the process began much earlier than the 1970s and 1980s and is very much bound up with the nature of contemporary liberal capitalism.[17] These days depoliticization is fuelled by the constant claims that Marxism is dead. So it comes as no surprise when Hughes asserts 'Marxism is dead; that part of history is over'.[18] Waxing lyrical about depoliticization, he gives it another nudge along.

Hughes deplores the attempt to create artificial nationality out of cultural, racial or sexual difference ('Queer nation, indeed')[19] but he fails to find something peculiarly American in all of this. The postmodern national myths emerging from identity politics share much in common with the myth of America. The occasionally overblown claims generated by a politics of identity can, in part, be seen as a product of a mass mediated age in which the need for myth is ever more apparent. As the America of Boorstin and Schlesinger, itself a myth, appears to disintegrate, why not replace one national myth with another when politics in America today involves the reproduction of simulacrum? This to be sure, is an exaggeration, but the demands for separatism and claims of nationhood are desperate pleas which rely upon mythologies which hardly negate the dominant culture. Indeed, mythologies of identity and difference actually mirror the mythologies of unity and sameness. And identity politics can and does, as Robert Hughes argues, fuel a culture of victims.

Joel Schumacher's film *Falling Down* provides a cogent commentary on both victim-culture and the argument that there was once a coherent whole, a real America which is now falling apart (hence the title, to my mind deliberately ironic). A man, clearly suffering from stress and mental anguish, leaves his car during a traffic jam on a Los Angeles freeway and walks away determinedly.

15. R. Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993.
16. Hughes, p. 36.
17. See A. Wolfe, *The Limits of Legitimacy: Political Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism*, New York, The Free Press, 1977, p. 288-321.
18. Hughes, p. 73.
19. Hughes, p. 75.

'Where do you think you're going', yells one angry driver. 'I'm going home' replies the man. Home here functions as a metaphor for America, the idealized America of Hollywood, of billboard advertisements, a united America undisturbed by class, race, ethnicity and gender. The man, played by Michael Douglas, is trying to get home to that America, but also trying to get to his real home. But there no longer is a 'real' home because his wife, with child in tow, left him due to his supposed violent propensities. We learn that the Douglas character (known mainly as D-Fens, after his car's numberplate), has lost his job in the defence industry, a job in the belly of the beast. He is another victim, only this time he personifies the white, male, middle class 'victim' of the 1980s.

Surrounded by independent women and fanatical minorities, besieged by both social processes of urban decay and mounting violence, and by economic processes of restructuring and internationalization, the world of the white, middle class male is coming apart. He is the real victim today, a victim, in part, of all those who claim victim status. Or at least that is how many audiences and critics viewed the filmmaker's intentions. Schumacher, however, does not endorse or legitimize the Douglas character. Rather, he develops a critique of current American society and a critique of the mythologies which have sustained America in the past but are finally unravelling. Unlike Schlesinger and Hughes, Schumacher knows that it is American mythologies as well as American society which are 'falling down'. Apparently audiences in America cheered when D-Fens assaulted a Korean store owner, trashed his store and then confronted and literally blew away Latino gang members. Schumacher's film, however, is a black comedy and a disturbing one. It allows you at one level to identify with D-Fens. Yet the actions of D-Fens are not defended or glamorized. At times standard Hollywood action scenes are satirized ruthlessly but it is possible to miss the satire. In a superb sequence, D-Fens arises as a sovereign consumer and exercises his 'rights' in a Whammy Burger shop. The culture of sanitized mass food production, policed by youthful soulless automatons, has never been captured more effectively. We may feel a sneaking admiration for the way in which D-Fens challenges the ethos of Whammy Burgers but part of the pain of the film is that you can identify and laugh with a guy who is plainly crackers (because the rest of the world isn't far off it anyway). This is not just another Hollywood story, a 'Coming Home' type of sentimentalism in search of the real America. It resonates with the dilemmas of the time and provides a blistering commentary upon

American mythologies in general and Hollywood mythologies in particular.

Paradoxically, a further element of the thesis that America is falling apart is provided by those who believe that Hollywood itself is betraying real American values. Michael Medved, for instance, sees good old-time small-town American values and virtues being eroded by a film industry which puts sexual promiscuity, violence, cynicism about religion and patriotism, and anti-Americanism in general on a pedestal.[20] The argument that Hollywood films or television shows have been, in the main, anti-American over the last decade or so (the influence of a generation reared on 'sixties radicalism, of course) is hard to sustain. The violence and everything else that disturbs Medved is as American as cherry pie. He is thus depending upon, or trying to resuscitate, the notion that the real America is being eroded by values somehow external to it. This type of thinking is cold war ideology in a different guise and its America is the land of the Walsh family from *90210* or, going back (can you go further back than the Walsh family?) of Ozzie and Harriet. It is the America of Sears Roebuck catalogues and wondrous department stores. It is the America of frontiers without inhabitants and limitless possibilities for those drawn from other lands. It is the America untrammeled by ideological politics, which is content to pursue pragmatism and in which thrift, industry and loyalty always pay off. Such myths lie at the core of American mass culture and much contemporary cultural criticism. The sentiment that real American political, cultural and social values are withering away under pressure from diverse groups claiming their own identities, and at the expense of an American identity, is just another version of that cultural mythology.

'I'm going home,' says D-Fens. Yet there no longer is a home. More tellingly, there never was.

20. M. Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992.