
Progress, Growth, and Pessimism in America

WILLIAM E. CONNOLLY

To be human is to live in the shadow of the future, to have one's thoughts, moods, and actions touched by one's understanding of prospects and possibilities. To be a people, sharing or contesting a way of life, is to invest current practices and standards with a sense of the collective future they foster.

The bearing of the future on the present is clear enough in the life of the individual. Insurance payments serve as a hedge against future losses; a student's academic program is informed by career prospects; anxiety is triggered by contemplation of one's unavoidable death. But the relation between perceptions of the future prospects of an entire civilization and the shape of current social practices may appear less immediate or powerful. Can one not, for instance, shield oneself from collective hardships or disasters looming on the horizon? One can try at least. And the collective impact of a series of such defensive strategies helps to determine the tenor of life in the present.

Even in an individualist culture the current life of the self is intimately bound up with its perception of the future fate of the collectivity, and the fate of the collectivity is joined to participant perception of its probable future. Consider one dimension of this relationship. To face the inevitability of one's death is to discern that one's transactions in family, work, education, and politics touch others and the future as much as they do oneself now. One leaves monuments to the living upon one's death, bestowing the legacy of one's efforts as a parent, worker, teacher, and citizen.

This connection between the life of the self and the fate of the collectivity, mediated by our morality, enters silently into the performances of those who appreciate the common future they are building. But when the future becomes devalued or depreciated by the present—perhaps because its highest prospects now ring hollow or because the future of current or past achievements appears dim—the common life in the present changes too. When mortals doubt the value of the legacy they can bestow upon the future the job performance, investment strategies, tax payment practices, gender relations, child-rearing, and political orientations of the living tend to deteriorate. The claims of immediacy and self assume priority over those of the future and the common life. And when such a shift occurs the common

life is modified profoundly even while its formal institutional structure may remain intact.

America has been built around the promise of extending freedom, justice, and rights to the entire populace, where freedom is defined as independence from external domination, especially at the hands of the state; rights are viewed as trump cards to be played whenever public or private authorities fail to respect the dignity of the person; and justice means the provision of equal opportunity to achieve a good livelihood and to live a prosperous life. These ideals in turn are tied first, to the idea of a constitutional democracy that renders the government accountable to its citizenry, and second, to a privately incorporated economy that realizes these hopes progressively through the generation of economic growth and the insulation of economic relations from undue state intrusion. The expectation of economic growth is now so closely linked to the established understandings of freedom, dignity, and justice that the threat of persistent economic stagnation poses a threat to every other end of the civilization. If the future means progress then it must also mean a steady rate of economic expansion. That is the assumption of the American creed and the presupposition of its political economy.

But if growth has been the hinge upon which the American future turns, the future now appears gloomy. Does anyone believe that we can maintain during the next fifty years anything like the growth rate secured during the last fifty? Whichever way we turn it appears that obstacles to future growth will be overwhelming or that its realization will be at the expense of ends that have traditionally justified it. A more rational policy of investment? Then (it is said) we must insulate the political process from irrational public pressures, and we must curtail consumption to expand investment. A more productive work force? We must subject workers to new disciplines, preferably through a "new social contract," but by other means if necessary. A shift from "sunset" to "sunrise" industries? We must press workers in the frostbelt to pull up stakes again (many emigrated from the South just a couple of generations ago), and move away from the family and community ties that now give a degree of protection from the vicissitudes of the economy. Too many people who are inessential to or disruptive of the growth process? They must be neutralized. An increase in corruption and crime on the job? Increase the scope and size of private security forces. Welfare costs that drain the economy? We must militarize welfare by shifting the unruly elements out of the civilian sector and we must improve the monitoring capacity of civilian agencies that deal with the remaining clients.

At every turn barriers to growth become occasions to tighten social control, to build new hedges around citizen rights, to insulate bureaucracies from popular pressures while opening them to corporate influence, to rationalize work processes, to impose austerity on vulnerable constituencies, to delay programs for environ-

mental safety, to legitimize military adventures abroad. Growth, previously seen as the means to realization of the good life, has become a system imperative to which elements of the good life are sacrificed. We thus lose both if growth is realized and if it is not. The very link between the American idea of progress and the imperative of economic growth today fosters a profound and pervasive mood of pessimism in American life.

This pessimism can be detected in many currents of American culture, in reactions that simultaneously express disaffection from system imperatives, disrupt efforts to meet those imperatives, and foster public and private strategies to bring the disaffected back into line. The burgeoning underground economy manifests, among other things, the view that the existing tax system is unfair and the current shape of public expenditures is ill-designed to serve those stuck in the lower reaches of the economy. The erosion of family life, the rising divorce rate, and gender struggles contain the perception that traditional modes of sacrifice are unlikely to generate a secure future for the next generation. The rise of the litigious personality signifies a growing strain of belligerence in asserting the claims of self against those of the common life. The rise of creationism and hedonism, functioning as cultural adversaries, reflects a common anxiety about the future we are preparing and our powerlessness to reshape it. The creationist attack on science contains a rebellion against technological and bureaucratic modes of control within which many people feel caught; it expresses a vague sense that the future will not be better even if everybody does acquire computer literacy. Creationism is an attempt to locate private sources of meaning and power in an era when the secular imperatives of public life seem immune to democratic control. Hedonism expresses a retreat from the common life to those private pleasures that seem more susceptible to self control. The hedonists and the creationists, placing faith in pleasure and God respectively, have lost faith in the future available to our civilization. They represent extreme manifestations of a glacial shift in our public life and private sensibilities.

Why are these symptoms, with the exception of elements in the antinuclear, ecology, and feminist movements, not more overtly expressed in our current political discourse? What does the strain of pessimism that pervades public discourse reveal about it and our condition?

One theme cuts across the disparate positions formulated by those who seek to comprehend and improve America during the last fifth of the twentieth century. Commentators on the right, left, and center generally concur in giving primacy to economic growth. With enthusiasm or reluctance, through affirmation or evasion, they sanction a variety of actions that sacrifice some ingredients in the American ideal of democracy to the current imperative of growth.

On the right George Gilder, eulogizing the creativity of capitalist growth, calls

for a respiritualization of America to reinvigorate the economy. This economization of spirituality rests upon the view that "faith in man, faith in the future, faith in the rising return of giving, faith in the mutual benefits of trade, faith in the providence of God are all essential to successful capitalism."¹ Gilder discerns the inner relation between the health of an order and its members' confidence in the future it prepares, but the stridency of his recipe for respiritualization reveals how thoroughly it flies in the face of our lived relation to the future. Such spiritual reinvigoration would today have to be imposed; the Protestant ethic cannot rekindle itself, partly because the future it once dreamed is too much at odds with the one we now discern.

Sensing this, Gilder offers a variety of proposals to induce changes in behavior wherever his evangelical message fails to spawn spirituality. His text consists of a series of state strategies to release corporations from state control while subjecting the working poor, welfare recipients, workers in sunset industries, public employees, frostbelt communities, minorities, and women to a variety of new controls and economic austerity.

Samuel Huntington, in his recent book, *The Promise of Disharmony*, sponsors a more subdued and secular version of the Gilder thesis.² The "American Creed," as he thoughtfully formulates its character and history, celebrates constitutionalism, freedom, equality, and decentralization. But institutional imperatives, lodged in the very structure of modernity, require inequality, bureaucratization, economic growth, a centralized state, and a strong military presence in the world. Recurrent periods of "creedal passion," periods when dissident forces crystallize around the demand to bring institutions into line with ideals, are thus dangerously ambiguous phenomena. They embody much that is admirable and distinctive about America, but their success would undermine the institutional conditions for expression of the creed. There is a dilemma here that we must learn to live with.

There are admirable points in Huntington's elucidation of our condition, but the frame in which it is enunciated guarantees which side must give way whenever the latent dilemma becomes overt. The artificial separation of institutions and ideals bestows reality and solidity on the former and dependence and plasticity on the latter. One exists in the world; the other in our heads. So when institutional demands and democratic ideals conflict sharply the latter must always adjust to the former. The promise of disharmony is the promise of maintaining tension between the two as long as it is clear which side receives hegemony. As Huntington puts it, "an increasingly sophisticated economy and active involvement in world affairs seems likely to create stronger needs for hierarchy, bureaucracy, centralization of power, expertise, big government. . . . In some way or another, society will respond to these needs while still attempting to realize the values of the American creed to

1 *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

2 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

which they are so contradictory." The distribution of emphasis places "needs" on one side and "values" on the other; the institutions "create" needs; we "attempt" to preserve ideals.

Huntington, unlike Gilder, recognizes that the imperative of growth entails new burdens and sacrifices to creedal values, and though he is ready to tolerate what it takes to face up to this reality, he is rather pessimistic about the prospects for doing so. The American creed, once standing in a relation of creative tension with institutional demands, has now become more of an obstacle to their realization. The sixties and seventies fostered the erosion of authority by exposing its misuses. "The American political system, which is so superbly designed to prevent and to rectify abuses of authority," Huntington says, "is very poorly equipped to reverse the erosion of authority." The sixties left America with severe "foreign and domestic challenges that required the exercise of power yet still unwilling to legitimize power." Imperatives lodged in our institutions, and ideals lodged in our heads, make Huntington pessimistic about the future while preparing him to endorse whatever it takes to adjust to those imperatives.

Things become more complex when we turn to the drift of contemporary liberalism. Here a bifurcation has emerged with one side devoting itself to technical agendas to foster growth and discipline and the other retreating to the abstract celebration of liberal ideals. The bifurcation of liberals into technocrats and beautiful souls reflects the inability of liberalism today to sponsor a coherent doctrine that ties the ideals of freedom, justice, and rights to a specific institutional context capable of securing them for the future.

Thus Lester Thurow, perhaps the leading candidate for chief economic adviser in the next Democratic administration, calls for significant changes in our economic and political institutions.³ Each of these changes is designed to remove impediments to, or create incentives for, new growth spirals: "Current productivity growth rates are deeply embedded in the structure of our economy and major changes would be necessary before we see major improvement." Thurow blames the porous character of the political process for failure to adopt rational growth policies. America's success in "the modern growth race" depends on its ability to convert the political process into a system for managing the economy and distributing the costs of change rationally. Thurow's text consists mostly of technical solutions to the problem of growth; and his treatment of education, gender, and other social relations testifies how far the economization of politics has proceeded in technocratic liberalism. But Thurow is nonetheless pessimistic about the political prospects for reform, and his pessimism has its source in an understanding of the American creed that resembles that of Huntington. Our politics is unsusceptible to

³ *The Zero-Sum Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

economic rationality. This realization eventually authorizes a somber mood at odds with the optimistic glow emanating from his technical recipes for growth.

Will we fail as a society to address the fundamental problem and let it drag us down with it? Perhaps. In the record of history, we certainly would not be the first society that failed to come to grips with its fundamental internal problems.

While technocrats shuffle liberal ideals into the background to concentrate on growth scenarios another constellation of liberals gives primacy to the ideals by detaching discussion of them from the institutional imperatives of the order. The attraction of liberalism has been its promise to join liberal principles to practical courses of action capable of gaining assent in the short term. But the beautiful souls of contemporary liberalism recall their Hegelian ancestors by enunciating ideals in detail, by holding public authority responsible for fulfilling them, and by refusing to confront structural characteristics of the political economy that threaten them. The beautiful soul "lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action . . . in order to preserve the purity of its heart . . . it flees from contact with the actual world and persists in its self-willed impotence to give itself a substantial existence or to translate its thought into being."⁴

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* exemplifies this mode nicely.⁵ The text adumbrates a set of standards against which existing economic and political arrangements are to be assessed, but it draws a veil of ignorance across the institutional arrangements to which the standards apply. The text is abstract not only in its formulation of standards but in its characterization of the institutional world in which those standards are to be realized. It opposes the utilitarianism of technocratic liberals but does not comprehend how the political economy it endorses generates the utilitarian mode. It retains a liberal guise by ignoring major institutional reforms necessary to withstand the operative hegemony of utilitarianism. Its quest for purity encourages it to float above the world it judges and hence its frustratingly abstract and vague mode of presentation vitiates the power of its moral message. It puts "judging . . . above the deeds it discredits, wanting its words without deeds to be taken for a superior kind of reality."⁶ Rawls's abstract style is thus not an

4 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 399-400. I choose these critical terms to characterize this stance partly because I feel drawn to it despite its defects. There are circumstances, indeed, where it is the most rational and moral stance to adopt. Where the world is thoroughly at odds with authentic principles such a stance can keep the idea alive. But the beautiful soul protects the appearance of purity by cultivating innocence about the historical course of the world. Its quest for purity overwhelms its ability to confront the actual way of the world.

5 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

6 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 405.

incidental flaw in an otherwise solid theory; it is today the necessary medium for the purity he seeks to preserve.

A more recent and ambiguous instance is Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*.⁷ This text persuasively challenges the abstract universalism of Rawls; it sensitively draws out the complex standards of justice built into the American way of life, showing why we demarcate different spheres of justice in the areas of welfare, office holding, work assignment, leisure, and education. Because it is more specific and persuasive than the Rawlsian position it opposes, it teaches us much about the complex inner rationale of norms implicitly endorsed in our practices.

But at another level Walzer's text recapitulates the Rawlsian stance. Walzer convinces us, for example, that "a decent state . . . will act to maintain the integrity of its various institutional settings: to make sure that its prisons are places for criminal internment and not for preventive detention or scientific experiment; that its schools are not like prisons; that its asylums house (and care for) the mentally ill and not the politically deviant." But these and other standards are stated as if the moral will to protect them in the current setting suffices to guarantee their protection. Walzer's opposition to technocratic controls is sustained by putting distance between his standards and practices repugnant to them, not by showing how the latter are avoidable within the economic priorities he endorses.

Why is this tendency so strongly developed in liberalism today? Because, I suggest, the tension between the imperatives of the contemporary welfare state and the ideals of liberalism are becoming too intense to defend both in detail within the confines of one text. There *is* something honorable in a stance that innocently affirms these ideals in difficult circumstances. It keeps appreciation of the ideals alive and sets limits of tolerance to technocratic intrusions. But there is a corollary danger in this defensive strategy as well: it precludes creative reconsideration of the future prospects generated by current practices and exploration of ways to reconstitute the practices so that those prospects look better.

Liberal technocrats shuffle liberal principles into a corner in pursuit of practicality and liberal idealists express their ideals beautifully by avoiding practicality. When the two sides of bifurcated liberalism are considered together they can be seen to be alternative evasions of the same condition: since the growth imperative of the political economy of private productivity is increasingly at odds with liberal principles that legitimize the end of growth, the soulful liberal retreats to the abstract "ought" to evade complicity in harsh scenarios of growth while the soulless liberal constructs growth scenarios that would stifle liberal ideals.

The contemporary left tends to recapitulate a radical variant of liberal bifurcation. Marxists, usually trained as economists, try to convince us that a well-ordered socialist society will foster growth, community, and justice together.

⁷ New York: Basic Books, 1983.

But defections from this version of radicalism are legion; many radicals have shifted to an emphasis on localism and participatory modes spiced with a touch of anarchism. This latter stance is exemplified in the work of Michel Foucault, whose thought has now become part of the currency of the American left.

Foucault's theory of "disciplinary society" is illuminating because it examines microstructures of power lodged within existing forms of sexuality, delinquency, architectural design, insanity, and medicine in ways that challenge the established understandings of radicals and liberals. Foucault treats contemporary ideals of socialism, for instance, as idealistic intensifications of disciplinary society. Radical socialists must give up the rhetorical style of "inverted commas," whereby they protect the true ideal of socialism by differentiating it thoroughly from every existing order that now calls itself socialist. The "only socialism which deserves these scornful scare quotes is the one which leads the dreamy life of ideality in our heads."⁸

Foucault, by releasing us from the obligation to endorse any existing or ideal order, unleashes critical impulses previously constrained by the obligation to endorse one or another set of constraints in modernity. In distancing us from all forms of established discipline we are better able to discern or experience forms of subjugation built into the microstructures of social life; we are thereby encouraged to treat every *limit* as an *imposition*. Foucault thus can commend tactics that move below the level of the state. Eschewing electoral politics and national movements aimed at changing state priorities, he calls for the proliferation of "local, specific, struggles" at those numerous junctures where bureaucratic power impinges upon client populations. "The role for theory today seems to me to be just this: not to formulate the global systematic theory which holds everything in place, but to analyze the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions, to build little by little a strategic knowledge." These local, dispersed tactics of resistance avoid drawing participants into the orbit of state control or into the sticky web of counterideals.

Foucault symbolizes a variety of tendencies on the contemporary left. Even though the theory illuminates some dark corners of modernity,⁹ the general attraction to its strategic orientation is a symptom of retreat and despair on the left. We have here the beautiful soul in radical disguise.

8 Michel Foucault, *Power and Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

9 I have explored theoretical dimensions of Foucault's thought in three essays: "The Mirror of America," *Raritan* (forthcoming); "Politics, Discipline and Ambiguity," *Political Theory* (forthcoming); and "The Politics of Discourse," epilogue to a new edition of *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

There is a dilemma of radical change that grips the modern state and helps to explain both the bifurcation of contemporary liberalism and the magnetic power of Foucauldian politics for the contemporary left. The parameters of this dilemma were exposed dramatically during the May 1968 revolt in France and have surfaced several times since, most recently and modestly during the Tylenol episode of 1982 in the United States. Such events reveal a duality inscribed in modern institutional life. First, authority and effective power are fragile; they are vulnerable to periodic disruptions and disturbances because of the intricate institutional interdependencies that mark modernity. The smooth operation of the order can be disrupted or stymied at certain moments by a determined, militant faction or movement. As the Tylenol episode illustrated in microcosm, the entire distribution network that moves essential goods and services from points of production to point of consumption is highly vulnerable to disruption. The network of interdependencies creates multiple possibilities for disturbance and subversion; it is the existence of such levers that gives the aura of credibility to Foucauldian tactics.

But, second, each occasion of localized disruption tends eventually to strengthen the mechanisms of order, surveillance, and intimidation at the previous locus of attack. Airline hijacking, cyanide poisoning of consumer products, attacks on the military presence in university life, and the popular revolt in Poland constitute superb examples of this phenomenon. Why is this? Some analysts postulate a craving for authority that haunts even those who engage in disruption. But it seems to me that the very phenomenon that creates opportunities for disruption also generates the reactive pressures for militant restoration. The web of interdependencies into which we are drawn makes it difficult or impossible for people to prove self-sufficient when existing institutions are disrupted severely. The network of interdependencies thereby spawns political support for normalization after a period of disruption. The nostalgia for self-reliance in contemporary America is thus not merely an excuse by the right to ignore the needs of dependent constituencies; it also involves a more pervasive yearning for a world in which it is possible to express contempt for existing rules and institutions by retreating to an enclave of self-subsistence. This yearning for independence finds expression in the individualism of the right and the enclave communalism of the left.

This combination of fragile power and self-regenerating power is built into the institutional matrix of modern life, and when the combination itself is acknowledged, defects in regional strategies of resistance become transparent. It becomes clear that localism and radical resistance cannot suffice in a world where the state is intertwined in the details of life and the focal point of imperatives facing the political economy as a whole. The duality also exposes the moment of truth in conservative capitulation to those imperatives. The imperatives must either be accepted or subjected to attack at the level of the state. They cannot be ignored or defined out of existence.

Liberals and radicals today must seek to enhance the space for democratic

politics through generation of state action that relaxes or tames the imperative of economic growth. Such a strategy requires, first, a thorough reassessment of the historical connections between the American idea of progress and the goal of constant economic expansion and, second, the identification of those institutional forces that simultaneously generate the growth imperative and political support for it.¹⁰ For when the present lives at the expense of the future it also lives at the expense of the present.

10 I have not tried in this essay to locate strategic points at which the growth imperative could be tamed in ways that are just or to identify constituencies that might be attracted to such a moment. This essay is, then, an instance of the phenomenon it diagnoses. I have, though, offered preliminary ideas about these two questions in two earlier *democracy* essays (July 1981 and July 1982), and it does seem to me that the most important point now is to convince others that this is indeed the general direction in which to proceed. In the previous essays it was suggested that appropriate reforms in the structure of consumption could make the existing forms of consumption more inclusive and relieve some of the political pressures for the primacy of growth. Harry Brooks, "The Technology of Zero-Growth," in *The No-Growth Society*, ed. Mancur Olson and Hans Landsberg (New York: Norton, 1973), adopts a similar position. Without endorsing the terminology of "no-growth," the understanding in the following statement seems generally right to me: "one of the main purposes of zero-growth is to achieve a better balance among population, resources, and environmental stress. However it seems fairly clear that the best way to attack problems of resources and environment is directly through the allocation of investments and the manipulation of consumption patterns rather than through any overall controls on growth." If one replaces, "the manipulation of consumption" with the idea of a democratically based politics striving to reconstitute the forms of consumption through revisions in the state supported infrastructure of consumption, the above statement offers a promising avenue to pursue.