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POLITICS AND CULTURE

BY CHRISTOPHER LASCH

The Fragility of Liberalism

The collapse of communism as a serious competitor to liberal capitalism has generated a state of euphoria among liberals of the right and center, qualified only by the reflection that the “end of history,” in Francis Fukuyama’s celebrated phrase, will be a “very sad time” for those who value “daring, courage, imagination, and political idealism.” The “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism,” as Fukuyama sees it, means the universal rule of law, the globalization of the “classless society” that has already been achieved in the United States, the “receding of the class issue,” a steady expansion of the supply of consumer goods, a “universal homogeneous state,” and a “post-historical consciousness” in which “ideological struggle . . . will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.”

Fukuyama’s article recalls earlier predictions of the end of ideology by liberals; but it is curiously reminiscent, as well, of Marcuse’s one-dimensional man and the Frankfurt School’s horrifying vision of a totally administered society without contradictions and therefore completely resistant to change. Since Fukuyama, like Marcuse and his friends, takes his inspiration from Hegel, it is not surprising that their different versions of the end of history have so much in common. For that matter, the convergence of technical optimism with cultural despair, the worship of progress with nostalgia, has been a persistent current in modern thought

ever since the Enlightenment. The triumph of reason looks like the promised land of harmony and freedom until we remind ourselves that men have learned to value freedom only in the course of competition and conflict. At that point, Max Weber's "iron cage" of rationality looks like a more accurate description of the future. Fukuyama, after dwelling at length on the beauties of liberalism and the feebleness of the forces now opposed to it, unexpectedly leaves us with the prospect of "centuries of boredom." The new order, he says, calls up the "most ambivalent feelings"—on the one hand, the satisfaction of knowing that liberalism no longer faces an ideological challenge of any importance; on the other hand, a "powerful nostalgia for a time when history existed."

But the liberal order is far from secure in fact. In the hour of its seeming triumph, its fragility is exposed more clearly than ever before, nowhere more clearly than in the United States. Having defeated its totalitarian adversaries, liberalism is crumbling from within. The absence of an external threat makes it more difficult than before to ignore this decay. The Gulf War provided a momentary distraction, but it ended all too quickly; and although we can look forward to further distractions of this kind, it will be impossible, in the long run, to avoid the day of reckoning. Already the signs of impending breakdown are unmistakable. Drugs, crime, and gang wars are making our cities uninhabitable. Our school system is in a state of collapse. Our parties are unable to enlist the masses of potential voters into the political process. The global circulation of commodities, information, and populations, far from making everyone affluent (as theorists of modernization used to predict so confidently), has widened the gap between rich and poor nations and generated a huge migration to the West and to the United States in particular, where the newcomers swell the vast army of the homeless, unemployed, illiterate, drug-ridden, derelict, and effectively disenfranchised. Their presence strains existing resources to the breaking point. Medical and educational facilities, law-enforcement agencies, and the available supply of goods—not to mention the supply of racial good will, never abundant to begin with—all appear inadequate to the enormous task of assimilating what is essentially a surplus population.

But even the children of privilege are no longer assimilated into the culture of liberalism. One survey after another shows that college

students no longer command even a rudimentary knowledge of Western history, literature, or philosophy. A kind of deculturation has clearly been going on for some time, a process of unlearning without historical precedent (which explains why we don't have a better word to describe it). What E.D.Hirsch calls illiteracy is probably a more serious danger than the most obviously ideological attacks on liberal culture. The right repudiates "secular humanism," while the left denounces any attempt to uphold a core of common values as cultural imperialism and demands equal time for minorities. The "modernization" of the world, as it was conceived when liberals were running the show, implied the creation not only of a global market but of a global culture in which liberal values—individual freedom, open inquiry, religious tolerance, human dignity—would be universally respected. We have a global culture all right, but it is the culture of Hollywood, rock and roll, and Madison Avenue—not a liberal culture but a culture of hedonism, cruelty, contempt, and cynicism.

So much for the symptoms of liberal decline—which should elicit just as much ambivalence, incidentally, as its supposed ascendancy and the resulting "end of history." I turn now to the causes of this decline. It is pointless to speculate about what is to be done—whether we should seek to rescue liberalism, to replace it with something else, or resign ourselves to the decline not just of liberalism but of our national experiment as a whole—until we get a better understanding of exactly what is happening to our political traditions and why. If liberalism retains the capacity for growth and development along new lines, it would be foolish to desert our dominant tradition. If, on the other hand, it has reached the outer limits of its growth, we should probably turn to submerged traditions in American life, which have been overshadowed but never altogether extinguished by the reigning political creed.

To speak of any kind of limits at all is another way of speaking about the plight of liberalism, a political tradition predicated on unlimited economic expansion. In its most persuasive form, liberalism rests on a chastened belief in progress, one that does not presuppose any naive illusions about the perfectibility of human nature but assumes merely that a steady growth of consumer demand—a revolution of rising expectations—will sustain economic expansion indefinitely. Liberalism has identified itself with policies designed to assure full employment and thus to expand

the capacity to consume. The promise of universal abundance has contained egalitarian implications without which it would have carried very little moral authority. Those implications, to be sure, were open to conflicting interpretations. Some people argued that it was enough to increase the general pool of goods and services, in the expectation that everyone's standard of living would rise as a result. Others demanded more radical measures designed not merely to increase the total wealth but to distribute it more equitably. But no one who believed in progress conceived of a limit on productive capacity as a whole. No one envisioned a return to a more frugal existence; such views fell outside the progressive consensus.

The belated discovery that the earth's ecology will no longer sustain an indefinite expansion of productive forces deals the final blow to the belief in progress. A more equitable distribution of wealth, it is now clear, requires at the same time a reduction in the standard of living enjoyed by the rich nations and the privileged classes. The attempt to extend Western standards of living to the rest of the world, on the other hand, would lead very quickly to the exhaustion of nonrenewable resources, the irreversible pollution of the earth's atmosphere, drastic changes in its climate, and the destruction of the ecological system, in short, on which human life depends. "Let us imagine," Rudolf Bahro writes, "what it would mean if the raw material and energy consumption of our society were extended to the 4.5 billion people living today, or to the 10-15 billion there will probably be tomorrow. It is readily apparent that the planet can only support such volumes of production . . . for a short time to come." Let us imagine further an India in which every family owned a pair of cars and every house came with air-conditioning, stereo sets, VCRs, and a kitchen fully equipped with the latest appliances.

The growing importance of environmental issues provides the most dramatic but by no means the only indication that we have entered a new age of limits—limits not only to economic development but more generally to human control over nature and society. It is a commonplace observation that technological innovations have unforeseeable consequences that often render them self-defeating, compounding the very problems they were meant to solve. The widespread use of antibiotics leads to the proliferation of bacteria resistant to antibiotics. Medical

technologies that prolong life create still another class of dependent, superfluous persons whose numbers overwhelm the facilities for taking care of them. Automobiles, supposedly a fast, cheap, and efficient means of transportation, merely disguise the cost of getting from one place to another. By taking account of the time required to maintain and pay for these machines, to drive and park them, and to earn the money to buy gas, insurance, and repairs, Ivan Illich once calculated that the average driver achieved an average speed of only 4.7 miles an hour—not much faster than he could walk. David Ehrenfeld, after citing many other examples of self-defeating technologies in his *Arrogance of Humanism*, argues that it is no longer possible to avoid the conclusion that our inability to make long-range predictions with any accuracy, to control the innumerable complexities that enter into such calculation, or to allow for unanticipated effects caused by our own procedures of diagnosis and measurement impose severe limits on our capacity for control. In a recent article, not yet published, Ehrenfeld continues his analysis of our “misplaced faith in control” by showing how over-management, in the private as well as the public sector, makes society increasingly unmanageable. The sheer volume of paperwork absorbs energies that might be used more constructively. Obsessive record-keeping makes it more and more difficult to distinguish useful from useless information or to locate appropriate information when it is needed. Obsessive supervision undermines the judgment and competence and self-confidence of those under supervision and creates a need for still more supervision. The cost of maintaining elaborate structures of management drains resources away from more productive investments. The administered society, it appears, is inherently unstable. There are limits beyond which it cannot operate without collapsing under its own weight—limits we are rapidly approaching.

In its classic version, liberalism reduced the functions of government to a bare minimum. Diplomacy, war, police, and education pretty much exhausted the responsibilities of the state, as it was conceived by liberals in the 18th and 19th centuries. This drastic simplification of government was an important source of liberalism’s appeal, together with its promotion of religious tolerance and free speech. Yet the liberal state has now evolved into a leviathan, and even the misnamed private sector is dominated by huge bureaucracies exercising quasi-governmental powers

and closely linked to the bureaucracy, notwithstanding their impatience with regulation. What explains this curious line of historical development, as a result of which liberalism has come to be associated with a special order that would have seemed completely repellant to the founders of liberalism? Is it simply that liberals have betrayed their own heritage, as right-wing critics argue when they try to recall liberalism to its free-market origins? Or is there something in the very nature of liberalism—some inner contradiction, as we used to say—that gives rise to the need for elaborate structures of management, supervision, and control?

Through all the permutations and transformations of liberal ideology, two of its central features have persisted over the years—its commitment to progress and its belief that a liberal state could dispense with civic virtue. The commitment to progress alone generated many of the difficulties that now threaten to bury the liberal state, since progress meant large-scale production and the centralization of economic and political power. The belief in progress also contributed to the illusion that a society blessed with material abundance could dispense with the active participation of ordinary citizens in government—which brings us to the second point, the heart of the matter. In the aftermath of the American revolution, liberals began to argue, in opposition to the older view that “public virtue is the only foundation of republics,” in the words of John Adams, that a proper system of constitutional checks and balances would “make it advantageous even for bad men to act for the public good,” as James Wilson put it. According to John Taylor, “an avaricious society can form a government able to defend itself against the avarice of its members” by enlisting “the interest of vice . . . on the side of virtue.” Virtue lay in “the principles of government,” Taylor argues, not in the “evanescent qualities of individuals.” The institutions and “principles of a society may be virtuous, though the individuals composing it are vicious.”

The trouble with this agreeable paradox of a virtuous society based on vicious individuals is that liberals didn’t really mean it. They took for granted a good deal more in the way of private virtue than they were willing to acknowledge. Even today, liberals who adhere to this minimal view of citizenship smuggle a certain amount of citizenship between the cracks of their free-market ideology. Milton Friedman himself admits that a liberal society requires a “minimum degree of

literacy and knowledge,” along with a “widespread acceptance of some common set of values.” It is not clear that our society can meet even these minimal conditions, as things stand today; but it has always been clear, in any case, that a liberal society needs more virtue than Friedman allows for. A system that relies so heavily on the concept of rights presupposes individuals who respect the rights of others, if only because they expect others to respect their own rights in return. The market itself, the central institution of a liberal society, presupposes, at the very least, sharp-eyed, calculating, and clear-headed individuals—paragons of rational choice. It presupposes not just self-interest but enlightened self-interest. It was for this reason that 19th-century liberals attached so much importance to the family. The obligation to support a wife and children, in their view, would discipline possessive individualism and transform the potential gambler, speculator, dandy, or confidence man into a conscientious provider. Having abandoned the old republican ideal of citizenship along with the republican indictment of luxury, liberals lacked any grounds on which to appeal to individuals to subordinate private interest to the public good. But at least they could appeal to the higher selfishness of marriage and parenthood. They could ask, if not for the suspension of self-interest, for its elevation and refinement. Rising expectations would lead men and women to invest their ambitions in their offspring. The one appeal that could not be greeted with cynicism or indifference was the appeal summarized in the slogan of our own times: “our children: the future”—a slogan that makes its appearance only when its effectiveness can no longer be taken for granted. Without this appeal to the immediate future, the belief in progress could never have served as a unifying social myth, one that kept alive a lingering sense of social obligation and gave self-improvement, carefully distinguished from self-indulgence, the force of a moral imperative.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a prominent educator and humanitarian (a pioneer in education for the deaf, among other things) expressed a view widely shared by liberals when he wrote, in 1837, that the “good order and welfare of society” had to rest on “that indescribable parental attachment to offspring which secures to the child every particular, constant, and fond attention which its peculiar condition demands.” Neither “legislative enactments” nor prisons nor a large police force could

guarantee social order. Even the school, on which liberals characteristically put so much of the burden of social control and improvement, could not succeed unless it saw itself as “co-operating with the [family and] . . . greatly aiding its operations.” Now that the family’s educational role has been so greatly diminished, with the result that the schools expend most of their efforts in teaching things that should have been learned at home, we can appreciate the wisdom of these 19th-century platitudes about the dependence of the school on the family. Educators in the 20th century have tried to assure us that well-managed schools can replace the family, in effect. John Dewey’s version of this new consensus was more modest than most. Since modern industry had “practically eliminated household and neighborhood occupations,” he argued, the school would have to “supply that factor of training formerly taken care of in the home”—training, that is, in the “physical realities of life.” Abraham Flexner and Frank Bachman went much farther. “Social, political and industrial changes,” they wrote in 1918, “have forced upon the school responsibilities formerly laid upon the home. Once the school had mainly to teach the elements of knowledge, now it is charged with the physical, mental, and social training of the child as well.” In our own day, it is charged, in addition to all that, with the still more sweeping task of instilling a sense of racial and ethnic pride in disfranchised minorities, at the expense of the basic education that is really needed. Yet it is more and more widely acknowledged, even by educators, that the schools can’t teach anything at all unless the importance of learning is upheld in the home. Without a substructure of strong families to build on, the school system will continue to deteriorate.

The history of education provides an especially striking illustration of a general principle, namely that the replacement of informal types of association by formal systems of socialization and control weakens social trust, undermines the willingness both to assume responsibility for oneself and to hold others accountable for their actions, destroys respect for authority, and thus turns out to be self-defeating. The informal associations that have been allowed to wither away (except when they have been deliberately and systematically destroyed by ill-conceived adventures in social engineering) include not only the family but the neighborhood, which serves, much more effectively than the school, as an intermediary between the family and the larger world. Jane Jacobs speaks of the

“normal, casual manpower for child rearing” that is wasted when city planners and other well-meaning reformers seek to get children off the streets into parks, playgrounds, and schools where they can be professionally supervised. The whole thrust of liberal policy, ever since the first crusades against child labor, has been to transfer the care of children from informal settings to institutions designed specifically for that purpose. Today this trend continues in the movement for day care, often justified on the grounds not merely that working mothers need it but that day care centers can take advantage of the latest innovations in pedagogy and child psychology. This policy of segregating children in age-graded institutions under professional supervision has been a massive failure, for reasons suggested by Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—an attack on city planning that applies to social engineering in general, right across the board. “The myth that playgrounds and grass and hired guards or supervisors are innately wholesome for children and that city streets, filled with ordinary people, are innately evil for children, boils down to a deep contempt for ordinary people.” In their contempt, planners lose sight of the way in which city streets, if they are working the way they should, teach children a lesson that cannot be taught by educators or professional caretakers—that “people must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other.” When the corner grocer or the locksmith scolds a child for running into the street, the child learns something that can’t be learned simply by telling him about it. What the child learns is that adults unrelated to each other except by the accident of propinquity uphold certain standards and assume responsibility for the neighborhood. With good reason, Jacobs calls this the “first fundamental of successful city life”—one that “people hired to look after children cannot teach because the essence of this responsibility is that you do it without being hired.”

Neighborhoods encourage “casual public trust,” according to Jacobs. In its absence, the city has to rely on formal agencies of law-enforcement. In Los Angeles, a city that has turned its back on the street, we see this pattern in its most highly developed form—the “militarization of city life,” as Mike Davis calls it in his *City of Quartz*. A vastly expanded police force, equipped with the technology and increasingly with the mentality of a police state, still finds itself unable to assure safety and order

and has to be supplemented by an army of private policemen. According to Davis, the private sector specializes in labor-intensive law-enforcement, the public sector in aerial surveillance, paramilitary operations, wiretapping, and the maintenance of its elaborate criminal files. "Fortress L.A.," as Davis calls it, is becoming a city of "enclosed communities," heavily guarded compounds prepared to repel intruders at the slightest hint of trouble.

Los Angeles, the triumph of counter-urbanization, embodies the triumph of liberalism, together with its collapse. It is literally the end of the road, simultaneously the last refuge of the liberal dream and the nightmare that was always implicit in the dream. Liberalism promised progress, abundance, and above all privacy. The freedom to live as you please, think and worship as you please—this privatization of the good life was liberalism's greatest appeal. Having set definite limits to the powers of the state, at the same time relieving individuals of most of their civic obligations, liberals assumed that they had cleared away the outstanding obstacles to the pursuit of happiness. What they allowed themselves to forget was that public order is not just a function of the state, which can safely be entrusted with the responsibility for education and law-enforcement while citizens go about their private affairs. A society in working order has to be largely self-policing and to a considerable extent self-schooling as well. City streets, as Jacobs reminds us, keep the peace and instruct the young in the principles of civic life. Neighborhoods recreate many features of the village life that is celebrated in American folklore, even as Americans reject the promiscuous sociability of the village in favor of "life-style enclaves," as Robert Bellah calls them, in which they associate exclusively with those who share their own tastes and outlook. Neighborhoods provide the informal substructure of social order, in the absence of which the everyday maintenance of life has to be turned over to professional bureaucrats. In Los Angeles, a city deliberately designed to maximize privacy, we see how this hyperextension of the organizational sector is the necessary consequence of the retreat from the neighborhood. But Los Angeles is exceptional only in its single-minded dedication to a deeply anti-social version of the American dream and in the scale of the social problems that result. The same pattern can be seen in every other American city, where the police, the educational bureaucracy,

and the health and welfare bureaucracies fight a losing battle against crime, disease, and ignorance.

I want to explore one more illustration of the principle that the atrophy of informal controls leads irresistibly to the expansion of bureaucratic controls. I refer to the growing demand for the censorship of pornography, obscenity, and other forms of unacceptable speech, not to mention the outcry against flag-burning. Here is another instance where liberalism seems to be reaching its limits—in this case, the limits of more or less unconditional guarantees of free speech. It is suggestive that the strongest case for censorship today does not come from professional patriots and right-wing advocates of ideological conformity—that is, from the kind of people who never grasped the importance of free speech in the first place. It comes instead from the kind of people who formerly upheld the First Amendment against its critics—from people on the left, especially from feminists who take the position that pornography exploits women and ought to be subject to some kind of public regulation. It is not necessary to accept their contention that pornography represents an invasion of women's civil rights (a contention that stretches the concept of civil rights out of all resemblance to its original meaning) in order to see the justice of their opposition to pornography. But pornography is not just a women's issue, and the best argument against it is not simply that it demeans women, corrupts children, or injures some other class of victims, but that it "offers us an unacceptable mirror of ourselves as a people," in the words of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. Like obscene speech, it corrupts our public culture. The pervasiveness of obscene images and speech, not just in the media but in everyday conversation, reminds us that morality is a public matter, not just a matter of private taste (except when someone can claim to be injured) and that what makes it public is the need for common standards, not just the possibility that pornography or obscenity will impinge on the rights of women or demean them in some other way. As Fox-Genovese observes, "A society unwilling or unable to trust to its own instinct in laying down a standard of decency does not deserve to survive and probably will not survive."

Every culture has to narrow the range of choices in some way, however arbitrary such limitations may seem. To be sure, it also has to see to it that its controls do not reach too far into people's private lives. Still,

if it allows every impulse a public expression—if it boldly declares that “it is forbidden to forbid,” in the revolutionary slogan of 1968—then it not only invites anarchy but abolishes the distinctions on which even the category of truth finally depends. When every expression is equally permissible, nothing is true. The heart of any culture, as Philip Rieff rightly insists, lies in its “interdictions.” Culture is a set of moral demands, of “deeply graven interdicts, etched in superior and trustworthy characters.” This is why Rieff can describe the United States today as a “cultureless society.” It is a society in which nothing is sacred and nothing, therefore, can be effectively forbidden. An anthropologist might say that a cultureless society is a contradiction in terms, but Rieff objects to the way in which liberal social scientists have reduced the concept of a culture to a “way of life.” In his view, culture is a way of life backed up by the will to condemn and punish those who defy its commandments. A “way of life” is not enough. A people’s way of life has to be embedded in “sacred order”—that is, in a conception of the universe, ultimately a religious conception, that tells us “what is not to be done.”

If Rieff and Fox-Genovese are correct in their belief that culture rests on a willingness to uphold public standards and to enforce them, then the “remissive” culture of liberalism cannot be expected to survive indefinitely. In the past, liberals could afford a broad definition of free speech only because they could take for granted the existence of informal sanctions against its misuse. The First Amendment was not designed to protect obscene or pornographic speech, which eighteenth-century conventions relegated to strictly private circulation. Here as elsewhere, liberalism presupposed a morality inherited from the pre-enlightened past. The persistence of that morality, supported by the family, the church, and a code of common decency so widely accepted that it hardly needed to be articulated, concealed contradictions in liberalism that are beginning to surface now that a certain reticence and propriety can no longer be taken for granted. The danger is that a belated recognition of the importance of common standards will lead to a demand for organized repression that will endanger hard-won rights of free speech. We see this not only in the movements for censorship of pornography or (at the opposite end of the political spectrum) in the officially sanctioned pressure for an amendment against flag-burning but in the ill-advised measures adopted by universities

against “verbal harassment” and more generally in the attempt to enforce a stifling standard of politically correct speech.

The search for organized controls where informal controls no longer seem to operate promises to extinguish the very privacy liberals have always set such store by. It also loads the organizational sector, as we have seen, with burdens it cannot support. The crisis of public funding is only one indication, although it is also the clearest indication, of the intrinsic weakness of organizations that can no longer count on informal, everyday mechanisms of social trust and control. The taxpayers’ revolt, although itself informed by an ideology of privatism resistant to any kind of civic appeals, also grows out of a well-founded suspicion that tax money merely sustains bureaucratic self-aggrandizement. The state is obviously overburdened, and nobody has much confidence in its ability to solve the problems that need to be solved. Of course a disenchantment with the welfare state does not in itself imply a commitment to some other kind of solutions. It may well signify nothing more than indifference, cynicism, or resignation. Although almost everybody now believes that something has gone radically wrong with our country no one has any clear ideas about how to fix it. The increasingly harsh, intemperate quality of public debate no doubt reflects this shortage of ideas and the frustration to which it gives rise.

As formal organizations break down, people will have to improvise ways of meeting their immediate needs: patrolling their own neighborhoods, withdrawing their children from public schools in order to educate them at home. The default of the state will thus contribute in its own right to the restoration of informal mechanisms of self-help. But it is hard to see how the foundations of civic life can be restored unless this work becomes an overriding goal of public policy. We have heard a good deal of talk about the repair of our material infrastructure, but our cultural infrastructure, as we might call it, needs attention too, and more than just the rhetorical attention of politicians who praise “family values” while pursuing economic policies that undermine them. It is either naive or cynical to lead the public to think that dismantling the welfare state is enough to insure a revival of informal cooperation—“a thousand points of light.” People who have lost the habit of self-help, who live in cities and suburbs where shopping malls have replaced neighborhoods, and who prefer the company of close

friends (or simply the company of television) to the informal sociability of the street, the coffee shop, and the tavern are not likely to reinvent communities just because the state has proved such an unsatisfactory substitute. They still need help from the state, in the form of policies designed to strengthen the family, say, and to enable families to exert more control over professionals when they have to depend on them or at least to give them more freedom in the choice of professionals. A voucher system for schools is the type of reform that answers this need, and the same principle might be applied to other professional services as well.

Such reforms will not, in themselves, be enough to restore the structures of informal self-government in an over-organized society. But even these modest beginnings require far more energy and vision than our leaders have shown in recent years. The belief that liberal societies have achieved a state of almost perfect equilibrium—that “liberal outcomes are stable once reached,” in the words of one of Fukuyama’s admirers, Stephen Sestanovich—adds one more reason to the list of reasons that appear to justify a policy of drift. The “end of history” contributes to the disinclination to undertake fundamental changes. The stability of liberal states is an illusion, however, and the sooner we recognize it as such, the sooner we can hope to summon up the “daring, courage, imagination, and idealism”—qualities prematurely consigned by Fukuyama to the dustbin of history—that will enable us to address the unsolved problems that will otherwise overwhelm us.