

Anxiety and Despair in American History

Author(s): Page Smith

Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Jul., 1969, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Jul., 1969), pp. 416-424

Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1918577>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The William and Mary Quarterly*

JSTOR

Notes and Documents

Anxiety and Despair in American History

Page Smith*

OUR times have been called the "Age of Anxiety" and though the point hardly needs special emphasis, I cannot resist belaboring it a little. In the *Medical Newsmagazine*, Volume 10, which I take to be a typical issue, there are 365 handsome pages with articles on fossils, archaic art, the story of the Nile, the life and work of Arnold Toynbee, the life and loves of Madame de Staël plus a great many advertisements for the principal ills that beset the average American. These advertisements give a very curious and, I suspect, not wholly inaccurate profile of the state of our collective psyche. The picture is not a particularly cheering one. Almost 60 per cent of the remedies offered are for nervous tension, 10 per cent for the overweight, another 10 per cent are for what has come to be known, rather starkly, as THE PILL. As we open the magazine we encounter Milpath, offered as "peace for the troubled gut: when your patients complain of belching, gnawing, burning, bloating, churning, tightening, quivering, rushing, loosening, rumbling, knotting, growling, gripping, gurgling, swelling, cramping especially in disorders accompanied by anxiety and tension." On the opposite page beside a very graphic picture of ringwormed toes, we have a column headed "The Adventure of Art." We then turn to Etrafon "when emotionally based complaints fit the symptom profile of depression . . . and insomnia predominates." On to Vistaril "in breadwinner's anxiety. . . . He is forty, but probably feels older. His income is average, but he thinks it inadequate." To Fiorinal "for tension headaches"; to Eutron for "moderate to severe hypertension"; to Deprol for the "Anxiety, depression, insomnia, tension complex . . ."; to Librium "to free the patient from anxiety. . . ." Nervous strain, tension and anxiety, not to mention depression and despair, are apparently the most ubiquitous minor ills of our society. They are widely taken to characterize "the American way of life." If we were to conclude that such is the case, we would

* Mr. Smith is Provost of Cowell College, University of California, Santa Cruz. He was a Fellow of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1951-1953.

still be left with the equally absorbing problem of why this should be so. But the thesis here is rather to the contrary. Anxiety and despair, as much as confidence and optimism, have characterized our history from the beginning. The anxiety quotient has always been abnormally high in American history. Indeed this higher level of anxiety and larger admixture of despair may well distinguish Americans from all other people in history.

Americans planted themselves in a wilderness, a primeval forest unlike any forest that civilized man had undertaken to subdue for a thousand years. They had to deal with primitives who were hostile and unpredictable and they were separated from everything familiar by three thousand miles of ocean. These are, of course, hazards and dangers so well known and so piously reiterated that their full meaning has long since been lost to us. We can recover some sense of these classic and essentially physical hardships through novels like LeGrand Cannon's *Look to the Mountains* or Conrad Richter's *The Trees*. But the psychological pressures are harder to measure. Most prominent among them would be a sense of cosmic loneliness. The settlers at Jamestown died of this loneliness, as we say today, of alienation. Historians have long been at a loss to explain why hundreds should have died in the first ten or fifteen years of the Virginia settlement. The Korean War gave us, in my opinion, the answer. There a higher percentage of American prisoners died than in any war in our history. They died of what came to be called "giveupitis." They lay down on their cots, pulled a blanket around themselves, and died. Similarly, in Jamestown morale gave way completely. Settlers were unable to perform the simplest tasks. They reacted very much, I suspect, as a group of Americans would today if, as children of an advanced technological society, they were plumped down on some remote and inhospitable island. The first experience of English settlers in America was one of crippling despair.

The New Englanders had another problem. They were armored against despair by their theology and their utopian expectation. But they had, after all, undertaken to establish a novel Christian commonwealth in order to reform the whole of Christendom and that was a rather sobering assignment, one that produced considerable anxiety. John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity*, written on the Arabella on the passage to Massachusetts Bay, was the prospectus for a Bible commonwealth, a company of devout and God-fearing men and women who would raise up a covenanted community to the glory of God. It was, quite literally, an effort to live by the "Law of the Gospel." The Puritans felt that they had entered into a compact with God, that he had given them a special commission:

for the work we have in hand, it is by a mutual consent through a special overruling providence, and a more than ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical. . . . Thus stands the cause between God, and us. We are entered into a covenant with him for this work, we have taken out a commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw up our articles. We have professed to enterprize these actions upon these and these ends. . . . If we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and dissembling without God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant . . . for we must consider that we shall be as a City Upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.

This was the seed of all hope, all aspiration, all tension. In the *Model* we find the archetype of American society, the belief that a better, more godly order of society, a genuinely Christian society like that of the early church could be created. When one has such a commission, it is apt to generate a good deal of anxiety; at the same time, of course, it gives one's whole life a significance and meaning that it could not otherwise have.

The Puritans experienced this alternation from hope to despair that is so characteristically American. We find it first in what Perry Miller has called the jeremiads, the fiery, imprecatory sermons of Puritan divines to their flocks when they observed a general relaxation of standards among them. Puritans are sometimes thought of as a smug and hypocritical tribe, sure of their own sanctity, censorious of the "strangers," those outside the covenant. To the contrary, they lived, most of them, in an agony of doubt about their state of grace. Were they predestined for salvation or for damnation? Had they received an authentic sign or a temptation of the Evil One? They kept elaborate diaries or ledgers recording their sins and errors, their fears and doubts. Here, then, was the primal anxiety.

But, it may be argued, anxiety is the common lot of man. It is in the face of that anxiety that we muster the courage to be and that is the essence of our humanity. But men have devised innumerable ingenious ways to relieve themselves of that anxiety or at least to

diminish it. Religion, which in its primitive forms is so manifestly an effort to relieve anxieties by explaining the inexplicable and by propitiating the forces of nature; caste, ritual, the symbolic representation of life and death, what Mircea Eliade calls "the myth of the eternal return," all of these have been a profound consolation for the people of many cultures.

In Western history the Roman Catholic Church has been, among other things, an extraordinarily rich system of consolation, I suppose unquestionably the greatest created by the human imagination. Much of the civil polity of Western man worked to the same end. The majesty of kingship, the style of classes, the marvelous pageantry of office added to the festivals of the church and gave infinite consolation to men on their journey through life. Custom, ritual, symbol, and the sanctification which time gives—all these things sustained and comforted Western man, diminished his anxieties, softened his despair.

In America all these things were lacking. The reformed church denied its members the comforts of liturgy and ritual. There was no art, no magic representations of life, no great visions given substance by the artist's imagination, and even, for quite a time, no music; no festivals, no great outpourings of emotion, of dionysiac release from austerity, no great celebrations in which man's triumphs and agonies were symbolically represented. Indeed, our common life continues to be impoverished by the lack of such wholesome occasions.

What was there in the place of all these things? What system of consolation? What means for relieving the immemorial anxieties of men? For lifting up those who despaired? The answer is, of course, virtually nothing. The family, the community, and the Will; the naked and fearful Will which said we shall inhabit this inhospitable earth; we shall make it flower and bear fruit. We shall make it a plain and simple celebration of the Lord, direct and immediate, shorn of all systems and forms of consolation, naked to the eye of the Lord.

This country was thus conceived and born in anxieties of a particularly excruciating kind. But that was, after all, long ago. The Puritans prospered; the Virginia settler was transformed into the landed squire, the very picture of gentlemanly leisure and pleasant living.

But the anxiety remained and in some ways perhaps it grew worse. It grew worse because the direct involvement of the individual with God began to break down. And the anxiety that followed was undoubtedly more destructive in many ways than the God-produced anxiety. The breakdown was, in itself, of course, a source of great anxiety, a generalized and thus particularly devastating form of anxiety.

These are, in essence, a series of hypotheses. They rest, however, on

some substantial facts. From the time the Puritans landed in Massachusetts Bay, drunkenness was one of the most conspicuous and persistent American failings. It bedeviled the saints of Boston and Salem quite as much as it does modern Americans. We understand that unmanageable anxieties lie at the roots of most alcoholism—of drunkenness, madness, and what used to be called nervous breakdown. A much less serious but by no means insignificant index of American anxieties was the nervous stomach. Colonial letters and medical handbooks abound in remedies for nervous colic. Chalk, water, and peppermint was one of the most common, not too different in taste perhaps from the various remedies available today. America has been represented as the greatest success story in history, but in fact its story is full of anguish and desperation.

At the time of the American Revolution another anxiety-producing factor had been added to the American scene: competition. A young man in the period between 1760 and 1800 who wished to be something other than a farmer or a minister had, generally speaking, one option—to be a lawyer. There were, of course, some merchants and some businessmen as well as shopkeepers and tradesmen. But the merchant was the only one of these who could challenge the lawyer in terms of prestige and to be a successful merchant usually required considerable capital as well as vast shrewdness and unremitting industry. Even then it was a precarious life in an economic sense, and did not carry the dignity and status of the ministry and the law which were learned *professions*. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century, or perhaps the later years, that the businessman could compete with the professional in status. (Modern polls show that even today the most desired and envied status is that of the professional man.)

Since medicine had not yet risen to challenge law and since law itself was in the first glorious flush of its eminence, every ambitious young American wished to be a lawyer. The consequence was that law was egregiously overcrowded and the competition was fierce. It took John Quincy Adams, one of the most brilliant Americans in our history, years of painful austerity before he finally made the most modest living. The correspondence between John Quincy Adams and his father is filled with the son's despair of ever establishing himself and with the father's efforts to keep up the young man's spirits in the face of discouragingly little progress. Thomas Boylston Adams, another of John Adams's sons, was never able to establish himself as a lawyer and lived off parental handouts and minor offices. Charles tried and gave up and drank himself to death. These were the sons of a president of the United States, connected by marriage to many of the most prosperous and

influential families in New England. When John Adams traveled through New England riding circuit with the royal judges before the Revolution, he noted time and again some Harvard classmate or graduate who had fallen on evil days, who had become an alcoholic or a hopeless misfit.

In other societies in the nineteenth century, competition was muted or virtually non-existent. A man was born to a certain class or caste, to a certain trade and station in life, and that was where, by and large, all but the most able stayed.

But the mobility and the classlessness which characterized American life were productive of the cruelest anxieties. Douglass Adair found the story of Lewis and Clark an instructive one in this respect. William Clark and Meriwether Lewis appear as classic American heroes. Lewis was the son of an aristocratic Virginia family, for two years secretary to his patron, Jefferson, a brilliant young man and a superb leader who with his friend Clark made one of the great explorations in history, a model of courage, resourcefulness, careful observation, and physical hardihood, an odyssey which belongs with that of Odysseus, of De Soto, or Marco Polo; yet Lewis was subject to fits of profound depression. The moment when the expedition reached the Great Divide and its goal was within its grasp, was also Lewis's thirtieth birthday. On Sunday, August 18, 1805, having led his party where white men had never been before he wrote:

I reflected that I had as yet done but little, very little, indeed, to further the happiness of the human race or to advance the information of the succeeding generation. I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence, and now sorely feel the want of that information which those hours would have given me had they been judiciously expended, but since they are past and cannot be recalled, I dash from me the gloomy thought, and resolved in the future, to redouble my exertions and at least endeavour to promote those two primary objects of human existence, by giving them the aid of that portion of talents which nature and fortune have bestowed on me; or in the future, to live for *mankind*, as I have heretofore lived for *myself*.

Jefferson made Lewis governor of the Louisiana Territory in 1807. Two years later on his way to Washington to prepare the records of the trip for publication, Lewis died in a seedy tavern. Jefferson who knew him best believed that he had committed suicide and this was generally understood until later historians tried to make a case that he had been murdered, apparently because they could not accept the notion that this classic American hero had taken his own life.

Many of the figures about whom we knew most in American history

had deep streaks of morbidity. Anxiety and self-doubt are certainly part of the process of growing up, at least in modern Western society, but I would be surprised if what might be quite properly called nervous breakdown was as often to be found in figures of comparable importance in other countries. John Adams seems to have had something very much like a breakdown a few years after his marriage. James Madison suffered a similar period of profound depression. Lincoln of course was known for a morbid melancholia. We can find some of the same symptoms in John Quincy Adams. I suspect that if we were to look more systematically at the upper classes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, we would discover a high incidence of breakdown and suicide.

The section of the country most free of corrosive anxieties, one might think, was the South with its leisurely plantation life patterned after the existence of the English country squire. But the white Southerner of course lived with the most acute anxiety about servile insurrection. William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* is an excellent reminder that few slaveholders had untroubled slumbers. The brutal punishments meted out to insubordinate slaves are perhaps the best index to the depths of those anxieties. The greater the fear, the greater the repression. Mary Chesnut noted in her remarkable diary that her cousin, Betsey Witherspoon, had been murdered in her bed:

I broke down; horror and amazement were too much for me. Poor cousin Betsey Witherspoon was murdered! She did not die peacefully in her bed, as we supposed, but was murdered by her own people, her Negroes. . . . Horrible beyond words! . . . Hitherto I have never thought of being afraid of Negroes. I had never injured any of them; why should they want to hurt me? Two-thirds of my religion consists of trying to be good to Negroes, because they are in our power, and it would be so easy to be the other thing. Somehow today I feel that the ground is cut away from under my feet. Why should they treat me any better than they have done cousin Betsey Witherspoon? . . . Mrs. Witherspoon's death has clearly driven us all wild.

The repressed anxieties of Southerners over the loyalty of their slaves had their match in the anxieties of the rest of the country about slavery itself. The abolitionists had the thankless task of dragging these anxieties out into the light of day and forcing their fellow-citizens to look squarely at them. It is not surprising that they were not thanked for their efforts.

What about the quality of life in the nineteenth century? Was it of a nature to increase or diminish anxieties? The fact that competition and the attendant struggle for success was almost unbearable can again

be measured by the extraordinary number of utopian communities that were founded, most of them communist in principle and designed specifically to do away with competition. Charles Fourier and the phalanxes, Albert Brisbane, Robert Dale Owen, the Rappites, the Perfectionists, they arose by the dozens, almost as ephemeral as the visions in which they were conceived, eloquent testimony to a general malaise in American society. Beneath the strident optimism, the boastings, the frantic expansion, were endless defeats and disappointments, pinched and marginal lives, desperate and perpetually defeated dreams. There were a variety of, on the whole, rather grim expedients to suppress the anxieties—temperance, abolition, peace movements, women's rights, new religions and new sects by the dozen, and the frontier revival meeting.

The great wave of central European immigrants in the late nineteenth century were themselves anxious and uprooted people. But their anxieties weighed very little in the balance as against the anxieties they aroused in the WASPS who talked darkly of the "destroyers" and very seriously proposed denying them the vote and making sterilization mandatory. The sociological and scientific journals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are full of the most patently racist material imaginable. Ellsworth Huntington wrote:

The choicest flowers are those who make the country happier, more contented, purer, truer, wiser, or better in any other way. Such people are called Builders in this book. True Builders are primarily men and women whose brains are well balanced, well directed and active; people of fine temperament, fine intelligence and fine health. Such Builders have subdued the wilderness, created out institutions, developed our social system, and improved human health. It is essential that the world contain the largest possible percentage of people who bear the biological inheritance of the true Builder, and not of the Destroyer. The only way to accomplish this is to alter the birth rate.

The immigrants' anxieties were classic ones and many of them had to do with what seemed to them a moral coldness and austerity which, quite apart from simple racism, corroded the spirit of those who encountered it. I suppose I need hardly dwell on the peculiarly sharp anxieties that Catholic immigrants, who made up a very considerable number of the later arrivals, aroused. I believe that anxieties about the Catholic vote delayed women's suffrage for almost a generation. Anti-suffrage literature is full of frightening pictures of priests herding passive Catholic women to the polls to vote as directed by the Pope.

If we use the rough but fairly reliable measure that repression varies inversely as the anxiety, again I think it safe to say that males

in the nineteenth century were filled with anxieties over the efforts of women to claim a full place in American life. The masculine response to the women's rights movement is, for the most part, a thoroughly discreditable story of vulgar harassment and ridicule.

In enumerating some of the classic sources of anxiety in American history, we have not mentioned the underlying one: the transformation of a rural society into an urbanized, industrial society. This was, I suppose, the great trauma, the basic fracture of the modern psyche. It made necessary all the other repressions, sexual repression among them. Otherwise it was a burden too great to be borne. In our own time we are witnessing, I believe, emergence of the repressed anxieties of the nineteenth century. We suffer from what used to be called an "efflorescence," from a wild excess of feelings and appetites, and from a simple-minded enlightenment faith in the "natural man."

The Puritans, as we have seen, had a full complement of anxieties. It was they, after all, who undertook the novel experiment of living by Will rather than by custom, tradition, and all the accumulated and intricate forms of consolation that man has devised to lessen the anguish of existence. But they looked their anxieties squarely in the face, so to speak. For all the extraordinary things that Americans have accomplished they have paid and continue to pay a heavy but hopefully bearable price. The anxiety, despair, the loneliness, failure, and frustration, indeed, the real terror, which are an inescapable part of that story must all be faced as the precondition for creating a humane and universal order.