

THE PUBLIC LIVES OF A PRIVATE PEOPLE: LIFE, LIBERTY, YET THE PURSUIT OF UNHAPPINESS

“The world, – this shadow of the soul, or other me, – lies wide around. [...] I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next [to] me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work [...] I pierce its order; I dissipate its fear; I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life. [...] I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1837

“The movies, the White Ways, and the Coney Islands, which almost every American city boasts in some form or other, are means of giving jaded and throttled people the sensations of living without the direct experience of life – a sort of spiritual masturbation.”

– Lewis Mumford, c. 1925

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Introduction

Citizens of “the land of the free and the home of the brave” are often reminded of what that phrase entails. A free citizen is allowed and expected to take his share of public responsibility even when inconvenient. A brave citizen stands for truth and justice even when the odds favor falsity and iniquity. Our national mythology includes a roll call of free and brave ancestors: George Washington reviewing his troops in the snows of Valley Forge, John Quincy Adams refusing to be gagged on the House floor, suffragettes chaining themselves to the White House fence, Rosa Parks refusing to sit in the back of a Montgomery bus.

But reality is rarely as inspiring as myth, and so it is with American self-government and public life. Americans have chosen throughout the last century to live private lives, engaging themselves in the messy business of public affairs only when those private lives are in danger. They have rarely protested any injustice that does not affect them or threaten to affect them. They have tried to stay within themselves and extensions of themselves (such as their families and their ethnic, religious or identity groups) rather than reaching out into the wider, cosmopolitan public world available to them. The United States has been neither a “melting pot” nor a “gorgeous mosaic” – it has been a collection of magnets, each repelling the others and coming together only as a result of tremendous pressure.

The reasons for this gap between myth and reality in American public life can be illustrated by examining the writings of two major American philosophers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James. The effects of the gap can be seen in the historical record of the 20th century. As for the future of the gap. . .who can say what the 21st century holds?

Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James: Myth and Reality

Their philosophies have had different effects, but the philosopher of Concord and the philosopher of Harvard were themselves similar: Both well-educated, both New Englanders (though James was a New York native), both religious free-thinkers, both passionately interested in how philosophy and nature interact. They disagreed, however, on the relationship that individuals have with the truth, and it is James' view that has prevailed in the actions of Americans.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of the transcendental possibilities of America: that a new people in a new land could engage life in a way that could not happen in the Old World, burdened as it was by the weight of custom and history. In "The American Scholar,"* Emerson bemoaned how these possibilities were ignored, how "men in the world of to-day, are bugs, are spawn, and are called 'the mass' and 'the herd'" (99). Emerson wanted people to see that they were not tribesmen required to blindly follow the lead of their clan, but autonomous individuals capable of illuminating the "one soul which animates all men" (100).

In Emerson's view, the proper role of each person is to serve as a conduit for that one soul, that one truth. Someone who seeks "the pure efflux of the Deity" creates, and through creation "sees absolute truth and utters truth" (89). Such a seeker requires both a private life – "periods of solitude, inquest, and self-recovery" – and a public life – "so much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion" – in order to find truth (89, 92).

The public life, because it is essential to the active soul, is essential in Emerson's philosophy. Transcendentalist Americans cannot refrain from a public life in favor of a comfortable private torpor; we must "run eagerly into this resounding tumult" and

* All references to "The American Scholar" are taken from: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Essays*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.

experience the world in all its variety and surprise, for that is the only way to find truth (92).

The pragmatism of William James, as expressed in “What Pragmatism Means,” carries no such clarion call to public action. To James, there is no absolute truth that requires us to go out into the world, seeking and suffering; there are only instrumental truths, which are means to our ends rather than ends in themselves. Unlike transcendentalists, pragmatists need not vanquish the wilderness and extend their being; they need only pursue their private goals as intelligently as possible.

Pragmatists can question their ends and experience the world (James himself would certainly have recommended it), but they are not compelled to. In fact, the “attitude of orientation” of pragmatism is to look “away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities” in favor of “last things, fruits, consequences, facts” (146). But in the absence of principles, how can one evaluate ends? By what standard are “last things” and “fruits” good or bad, adequate or inadequate? What is “the good life”?

The only standards available to a pragmatist who is so well “oriented” that he ignores external referents such as first things and principles are personal feelings and goals. If those become the standard of judgment, then the most pragmatic way for a person to get what he wants is to remove the obstacles that separate him from gratifying those feelings and attaining those goals. One obvious obstacle is people who have unfamiliar customs, beliefs, and ethics – they have unfamiliar behaviors that are difficult to adjust to and uncomfortable questions that are difficult to answer. It is pragmatic to associate with one’s own kind and to hire people like oneself.

And here we have the America we know: a nation of hermits, living in the homogeneity of middle-class suburbs, ethnic urban neighborhoods, and rural villages; a nation of people who do not vanquish the wilderness, who do not extend their being, who do not challenge themselves, and who wonder why a life tailored to their private wants

and goals seems so unsatisfying. They want the transcendental, but will not transcend themselves; they want the “public square,” but will not leave their private lives to gain it. Even after a century and more of futility, they refuse to learn.

The philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James do not have to conflict in practice. People who combine Emerson’s search for experience and engagement in public life with James’ insistence on practical, empirically sound methods to reach private goals can be remarkably effective. Though much of this century was barren of such passionate practicality – that search for the highest truth both in means and in ends – we begin it with someone who could combine the two.

This American Century: The Pursuit of Unhappiness

Our century begins in 1889, with a woman who was integrating the philosophies of Emerson and James into a remarkably effective whole called Hull House. Jane Addams opened the Chicago center with the hope of helping both the upper classes – who lacked an outlet for their education – and the lower classes – who lacked teachers to educate them. She sought to assist her residents in filling a “primordial” need – perhaps “a great desire to share the race life” – by providing a space in which they could teach and learn from the poor immigrants of the neighborhood, and from which they could study the conditions around them and propose remedies (92, 97, 101). The activities of Hull House demonstrated the joy which could result from a public life of new experiences and expanded acquaintances (115, 217).

Addams founded Hull House in the midst of upper-class concern over the condition of the working classes. In 1886, a bomb thrown at a labor rally in Chicago killed seven policemen and wounded 67 others. After the resulting public revulsion against labor died down, Chicago civic leaders held unprecedented public meetings to discuss the conditions that led to labor radicalism and unrest. Looking back on those

times from the tranquil days of 1910, Addams wrote that “one cannot imagine such meetings being held in Chicago today, nor that [an anarchist or socialist] should be encouraged to raise his voice in a public assembly presided over by a leading banker. It is hard to tell just what change has come over our philosophy” (134).

The change was that the upper classes were no longer as frightened of the threat of revolution from below that they were willing to take a greater public role in order to stop it. By 1910, the country was reasonably prosperous, and the labor movement had been taken over by the now relatively moderate AFL, so the well-to-do saw no need to interrupt their private activities to consider the ideas and lives of the working class.

In *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis gave a satirical account of how the privileged lived in a small town during this prosperity of the 1900s and 1910s. Though Gopher Prairie did not lack for private wealth, its public sector – the library, the courthouse, the school – was starved for funds. Their “public” life was nothing more than private life writ large, with gossip the main form of civic discourse. Every ethnic group had its neighborhood or place, and the groups mixed not as equals but as masters and servants (88, 113, 225). The town professionals angrily attacked any attempt by the rural and/or ethnic poor to raise issues of economic fairness (53, 60).

This repression of the socialist poor intensified during World War I. Eugene Debs, perennial Socialist Party candidate for President, was thrown in jail for three years, and socialist-leaning unions (such as the IWW) and organizers were charged with sedition, publicly attacked, then either lynched or jailed. Lewis’ Carol Kennicott wryly observed the situation: “Why can’t you Tories declare war honestly? You don’t oppose this organizer because you think he’s seditious but because you’re afraid that the farmers he is organizing will deprive you townsmen of the money you make out of mortgages and wheat and shops” (403). The public rights of free speech and free assembly were not allowed to stand in the way of private business.

After the anti-socialist hysteria peaked with the Red Scare of 1919, many Americans desired nothing more than the “return to normalcy” that Presidential candidate Warren Harding promised in 1920. If we define American “normalcy” as an undisturbed private life, then the 1920s were a time (Prohibition notwithstanding) in which Harding’s promise was kept with a vengeance.

Three inventions which came into wide use during the 1920s allowed Americans to reach new heights of normalcy. The radio allowed Americans to entertain themselves and learn about the world without ever leaving their homes. Whenever they did leave home, they could do so in an automobile, which shielded them from passersby with its higher speed and enclosed carriage. And if they wanted visual entertainment while in town, they could head to the movie theaters and, under cover of darkness, enjoy the latest Hollywood picture. Technological advances had enabled Americans to have a more varied private life than ever before, and they took advantage of it.

But this new private life soon fell apart, as the private wealth it was built on vanished with the stock market crash of 1929 and the resulting economic depression. Radios and automobiles were often sold or repossessed (though people still escaped to the movie theaters on a regular basis). As the years passed and the depression deepened, Americans – even middle-class Americans – were faced with the choice of living together or starving separately. Reluctantly, they chose to live together.

Sherwood Anderson chronicled this change from a private to a public focus in *Puzzled America*. Anderson (whose sympathies were with the socialists) wrote about how Americans were now turning to the government to help them with their problems (34-36, 91). There was a growing sense among Americans that the common good was of paramount importance, and that this good was best met by State ownership and planning rather than private capitalism (79, 163). People joined labor unions and found a communal exuberance they had not known before: “Men and women, for the time at least, walked with new joy in their bodies. The men became more dignified, more manly in their

bearing, the women more beautiful” (152). Anderson crisply summed up the new mood: “We do not want cynicism. We want belief” (xv).

The Roosevelt administration responded. Work relief programs such as the CCC and the WPA employed millions of Americans, who built public works projects for the common good: schools, roads, sidewalks, parks, airports. Writers such as Anderson, John Dos Passos, Walker Evans, and the Southern Agrarians reinforced the sense encouraged by depression and impending war: that Americans were in this together.

This sense of community, fostered by deprivation and danger, faded somewhat during the post-war era. The feeling that the government should help the poor and unemployed remained, but the idea that individuals had a responsibility to each other was lost. The rights of unpopular minorities to speak and assemble freely were trampled on, just as they were after World War I, in the interest of assuaging the private fears of the majority. In the booming post-war prosperity, Americans became private individuals again, living in their homogeneous enclaves (suburbs and ghettos), and even more isolated than Americans in the 1920s had been.

This increased isolation was made possible by a new invention and a new idea. Television replaced movies as the favored visual sedative of Americans – millions of sets were sold in the 1950s to suburban families, whose new houses usually had a room set aside for the TV. These new houses were built in automobile suburbs, which replaced the old pre-war trolley suburbs as the enclaves of the white middle class and well-to-do. Widespread ownership of automobiles and vast public spending on roads made Levittown and its successors accessible and desirable. The net result of television and the new suburbs was an even more impoverished public life than the 1920s had seen.

This private isolation was especially intense for suburban women, who were expected to stay in the home, do housework, and raise children. They were living what they were told was the epitome of the American dream, yet still they were deeply unhappy. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan told the stories of these women, who

tried desperately to find meaning outside themselves: in their husbands, in their children, in housework, in consumption, in sex (extra-marital if necessary), in anything except what would have truly fulfilled them: the use of their full faculties to explore life in all its variety and joy and danger. Emerson in 1837 understood what the Freudians of the 1950s did not: that the private life was not enough.

Friedan understood what Emerson understood. She attacked the “privatism” of modern suburban life and the societal trends and assumptions that gave rise to it:

It's easy for the professional social critic to blame the younger generation for cynical preoccupation with private pleasure and material security – or for the empty negativism of beatnikery. But if their parents, teachers, preachers, have abdicated purposes larger than personal emotional adjustment, material success, security, what larger purpose can the young learn? The five babies, the movement to suburbia, do-it-yourself and even beatnikery filled homely needs; they also took the place of those larger needs and purposes with which the most spirited in this nation were once concerned. (188)

The hard-headed economic pragmatism of 1950s American society – the mentality of growth at all costs – was a success on its own terms. Private wealth increased to levels never before seen, ownership of things (automobiles, houses, televisions) soared, the mainstream consensus on domestic and foreign policy held, and America became the richest nation the world had ever known.

And then it all fell apart. At the height of the success of the American dream of a self-contained, private life, many Americans realized that such a life was miserable and inhuman. The good life required not just material wealth, but a sense of common purpose; a sense of connection with each other and the cosmos. During the decade between 1962 and 1972, many Americans sought that connection.

In its 1962 “Port Huron Statement,” the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) found the connection in “participatory democracy.” The SDS asserted that problems of “loneliness, estrangement, isolation” in American society could not be solved by the now-

traditional methods of “better personnel management” or “improved gadgets,” but only when “a love of man overcomes the idolatrous worship of things by man” (6). By “shar[ing] in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life,” and by engaging in substantive politics and creative work, each American could express that love and integrate his public and private lives into a meaningful whole (7).

In his 1963 “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King called for two more kinds of integration: between Christian creed and Christian practice, and between blacks and whites. He hoped for a day when Christians would again be willing to “suffer for what they believed” and when the church would be more than “a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion” (332). He also prayed for “the dark clouds of racial prejudice” to dissipate, allowing whites and blacks to meet as equals, not as enemies (334).

By the late 1960s, the “silent majority” of Americans who did not like having their core beliefs challenged by “long-haired college kids” and “uppity Negroes” began to fight back against the movement toward these various kinds of integration. In the face of urban riots, white flight to the suburbs reached a fever pitch. Ronald Reagan won the 1966 California gubernatorial race in part by attacking Berkeley student activism. Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential election with a “Southern Strategy,” designed to reassure white voters that he would uphold keep down the blacks. The assassination of Martin Luther King in May 1968 ended the flickering hopes for peaceful integration.

As Todd Gitlin recounts in *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, these outside attacks were aided by disintegration within the Left. Its common causes – Vietnam War demonstrations, civil rights, open government – were increasingly hindered by the growth of identity groups. Leftists split up into groups of blacks, feminists, Chicanos, gays, lesbians, etc., each with its own separatist agenda. “Difference,” Gitlin wrote, “was now felt [...] more acutely than commonality” (99-100).

And there the matter has rested for 25 years. As Gitlin points out, there is no longer a strong, credible force in American politics working toward bringing us together for a meaningful common purpose (234-37). Instead, the strong driving force in politics today is the libertarian wing of the Republican Party, who have sought to further impoverish an already weak public life. Welfare, public schools, state colleges, and Social Security are all under attack as being useless infringements on the personal pocketbook, and these attacks are increasingly successful.

Technological advances are providing for a third time an impetus for private “cocooning.” Cable television brings an ever-wider variety of programming into the home. The VCR allows people to watch any movie, any time in the privacy of their den. The Internet has made it possible to “meet” people across the world without ever leaving a computer terminal. Each of these three innovations has the additional effect of allowing Americans greater freedom to tailor their private viewing to their current interests; they now need never expand their horizons beyond what they already know they want.

O brave new world, that has such people in it!

Conclusion: The Next Century

With few exceptions, Americans have withdrawn into their private shells once again, allowing their privacy to be disturbed only when something dear to them is threatened (a school board controlled by fundamentalist Christians is a surefire cocoon-breaker). Otherwise, they choose to live in a private world of themselves and people like themselves rather than a public world of diversity, challenge, and potential for growth. Americans flee rather than face; repel rather than attract.

Attempting to make specific predictions about the future is silly, but if the past is a guide to the future, then this general prediction seems safe: That Americans will continue to prefer to be a private, clannish people. The identities of those clans will

change – as Gitlin points out, American society is becoming increasingly interethnic and interracial (107-17) – but the preference to seek an easy identity in such a clan – be it based on ethnicity, identity, occupation, or hobby – will remain. Only in times of massive economic dislocation or in times when the wished-for private isolation becomes too lonely to bear will Americans come together as a people with a common purpose.

This American future would disappoint both Emerson and James. Whatever the different effects of their philosophies, the two wholeheartedly agreed that they were, as James put it, “interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together” (154). A people with narrowed minds and attenuated experiences will not reach profound conclusions; they will be enslaved to ignorance in the land of the free, and afraid of one another in the home of the brave.