


The American as Anarchist
Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism
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OVERVIEW

 American radicalism can be divided into two general camps: indigenous and imitative. The imitators of foreign radicalism, and those who interpret American movements by foreign terms, are the most widely recognized in this culture, but they are in fact the least culturally significant. In terms of the usual categories of mass parties, class consciousness, and popular use of the stereotyped vocabulary of the Left, American dissidents have been a resounding failure; but such concepts are usually irrelevant to American conditions. This study could be entitled "The American Radical" in the same sense that Emerson wrote "The American Scholar" in 1837, calling for the decolonization of our literature and the construction of an authentically American culture built from national experience. My work has the similar purpose of identifying some varieties of radicalism as intellectual imports while showing that others represent enduring traditions.¹ Borrowed, imitative art still has its equivalent in borrowed, imitative radicalism.

Perhaps it is time to recognize, after two hundred years of political independence, that our native radicalism is fundamentally different from that of Europe, Russia, China, or the Third World. By native, I do not mean baptized by the Indians. I imply that it draws upon basic beliefs of the general culture for its meaning. This indigenous radicalism is rooted in centuries of our history and assumes that however much this society may be

changed or transformed, it is unlikely to become something *wholly* dissimilar to what it has been. It is radical, then, in the sense that it is a complete realization of the democratic potential it perceives within our past. My book, following Emerson's advice, is an intellectual declaration of independence from alien modes of interpretation, finding the spirit of our radicalism not in Lenin but in Debs, not in the USSR, but in the IWW, not in Chinese peasants, but in the Populists. It assumes, as Emerson did, the existence of "new lands, new men, new thoughts." De Crèvecoeur realized earlier that the American is *new*, a difference in *kind*, not simply in variety.

What, then, is American about this American radicalism? Unlike Scandinavian social democracy, Fabian bureaucracy, and Soviet communism, our traditional critiques of the existing order have been pervaded by suspicion, if not hostility, toward any centralized discipline. The essence of this heritage—which has been expressed in both individualist and communal forms—could be named "antistatism," "libertarianism," or more provocatively, "anarchism." Like Proudhon, who defined this last term positively in 1840, we have frequently assumed that there is an order inherent in nature, that society is self-sufficient, and that government is likely to interrupt the vital functions of individuals and voluntary associations. Home-grown critics from both the individualist right and the communal left have often counterposed society against the state, or even the individual against the structures of society. Some rebels have always gone beyond implicit resistance to institutional authority to explicit rejections of such authority. Our radicals have concentrated on emancipation, on breaking the prisons of authority, rather than on planning any reconstruction. They are abolitionists, not institution-builders; advocates of women's liberation, gay liberation, liberation theology, black liberation; prophets, not priests; anarchists, not administrators. They generally presume that the freed spirit will require little or no guidance.

This implicit ideology of American radicalism has been expressed in several varieties of criticism: liberalism, right libertarianism, and left libertarianism. Each contains an element of anarchism that distinguishes it from statist (and often foreign) radicalisms. None of these libertarian currents, however, would necessarily eliminate all authority. We must erase the cartoon image of the anarchist as a shaggy-headed Frankenstein's monster, with a crazed glint in its eyes, loaded down with an armful of bombs. Anarchists have usually advocated new forms of order, not chaos. While the statist would rely primarily upon institutions, libertarians prefer other means of social control. Mores can regulate far more powerfully than administrators (Emerson's "government without governors"). Tocqueville noted in the 1830's that a seemingly atomized population, by expecting allegiance to its basic values, could be extremely cohesive and authoritarian.

Similarly, it is quite possible to envision a highly authoritarian culture that is also stateless. *Anarchos* (being leaderless) is not incompatible with *nomos* (law, custom, usage). A society without a state could be repressive in other ways, as even "primitive" societies might instruct us. This realistic possibility will become clearer when the types of anarchist organizations are outlined.²

Each form of libertarian radicalism covers a spectrum that evolves toward the most explicit, from laissez-faire liberalism to Anarcho-Capitalism (organizing society entirely on the basis of the market), or from community control advocates to Anarcho-Communists and syndicalists. Such tendencies have been historically repeated, but often without an understanding of their precedents. As one labor historian has remarked: "The only bona fide American radical tradition is anarchy, and that, in spite of Thoreau, has been *much less a doctrine than a fact.*"³

This study will attempt, for the first time, to discuss this "fact," classifying different libertarian perspectives within a general theory of American radicalism, as others have done for American liberalism or conservatism. It will bring to consciousness, or focus, the historical repetition of certain themes. Such continuities or recurrences will be presented as "pure types," used to capture the characteristic features of forms of criticism—as useful typifications or sketches of generalities, rather than as actual beings. Thoreau gave voice to the actual complexity of our pragmatic anarchism: "I quietly declare war with the State, after my own fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her as I can, as is usual in such cases."⁴ Consistency is not an anarchist virtue.

The first section of my book will survey the social and cultural environment that generated this anarcholibertarian sensibility. The interaction of three factors will be stressed: the Protestantism of most of the colonial founders, the expansive opportunities they encountered, and their business relations. These cultural, geographic, and economic influences were crucially different from other areas of even the New World, such as the Latin, Catholic, and Mediterranean elements that struggled with large-scale Indian civilizations in much of South America. Here, each factor tended to disintegrate traditional definitions of community that favored ideals of organic solidarity, hierarchy, status by birth, and deference to precedent, often rooted in a fundamentally agrarian society following the slow natural rhythms of the seasons. Instead, these influences have promoted relationships based upon changing associations to satisfy particular functions; egalitarianism; status by activity; and constant innovations for the technological control and utilization of nature. Although we live in a community with a common language and unifying symbols, traditional society, as an ideal type, is a "lost world." One of our most stable beliefs is the inevitability of change. Our relation-

ships are generally formed by the shifting needs of the marketplace in an atomistic society where people are often treated like interchangeable parts.⁵

Religion commands the premier rank in this transition because of the universal truth expressed by Mircea Eliade: "the beginnings of culture are rooted in religious experience and beliefs." Radical values, like others in our culture, "cannot be correctly understood if one does not know their original religious matrix, which they tacitly criticized, modified, or rejected in becoming what they are now: secular cultural values."⁶ If this had been a Buddhist culture, obviously our common perceptions of linear progress, active humanity, and personal responsibility might have been dramatically altered.

It was not only Christianity, but one specific tendency of it that was crucial in our history. By the 1770s, one historian has claimed that approximately 85 to 90 percent of the population bore "the stamp of Geneva," of the radical Reformation that had weakened or destroyed Catholic definitions of community.⁷ Although such groups labored to build their own purified institutions, ultra-Protestant ego has sometimes justified the conservative's fear of it as "the dissidence of dissent."⁸ At the very least, this has promoted a sense of self-reliance. In 1820, when de Maistre first used the term "individualism," he christened it political Protestantism. The traditional role of religion in providing holistic or transcendent values became a rationale for every pilgrim's separate progress. In the 1970s, more than 80 percent in one poll agreed that "willpower" was the key determinant in success, and that "whenever I fail, I have no one to blame but myself." Self-sufficiency was admired. In another study, up to 90 percent of blue-collar workers refused to attribute their failures to outside conditions. Despite the power of modern institutions, individual effort and individual solutions have been emphasized.⁹ Protestantism has helped to replace community with privacy—an English concept, absent from other languages, which have terms only for separation or isolation, not for privacy. For radicalism, this has sometimes raised a counterforce to the state's claim to ultimate power by emphasizing a law higher than that of institutions, the law of personal conscience.

Second, American capitalism has also tended to replace community with individualist anarchism, the "I" spirit instead of the "we." Whereas capitalism in other societies has been modified by precapitalist or anti-capitalist institutions and mores (resulting, for example, in the paternalism of Japanese corporations), in the United States capitalism exists in perhaps the purest form in the world. It is one of the assumptions most Americans take for granted in a society that has 5 to 6 percent of the world's population but uses more than half its resources, has a gross national product surpassing a trillion dollars, and has a higher standard of individual consumption than any of the communist countries.

In our culture, community is often identified with the market—a bargaining society, a society of contract. Earlier moral injunctions against the love of mammon have generally been replaced with a narrow self-seeking. Tocqueville, in the 1830s, perceived an almost antisocial society where individuals were concerned with "the petty pleasures of private life," although he also warned that when personal comfort was threatened, people might repudiate social liberty to defend their personal security. History, of course, has confirmed *both* of Tocqueville's themes—anarchy and authority. The common vision of freedom and the general experience of conformity have been a dialectic throughout our culture, although most commentators have understood only one or the other. But the dialectic continues, since our libertarian ideals are neither fully achieved nor annihilated. The hardy persistence of this heritage is the core of my book.

Third, atomism has been encouraged by an environment of great physical space and social opportunity, where optimistic Americans have been unlikely to maintain the sense of sin and limitation that might be so useful to conservatism. Rather, sunny views of human nature and civil or natural society have prevailed. Government, in this pleasant world, may be regarded as useful, but not as a vital barrier to human cruelty or a major umpire that can ration scarcity.¹⁰

Many of the core values nurtured by this history—which forms the basis of much of our past—are radical, liberatory, utopian. The United States has, comparatively, one of the most egalitarian societies in the world, in which there are few philosophical conservatives who praise class orders, suspicion of the common people, veneration of the old, organicism, or the necessity for a strong leader. In Emerson's terms, Americans usually identify with the party of the future, not of the past; of the movement, not the establishment. The mental landscape of Americans is filled not so much with solid institutions of the past and present as with visions of human will, progress, and change. Our literature is "more relentlessly self-critical than any other,"¹¹ the intelligentsia frequently serve as an idealistic conscience against imperfection; our ideas are particularistic and pragmatic (or, as one person labeled the thought of William James: "philosophic Protestantism"); our language is simple and direct; and our social manners are relatively democratic, free of formal titles and officiousness.¹² Of course, this antiorthodoxy and anti-elitism has its own assumptions, often held with dogmatic certainty. In the candid words of Paul Goodman: "I have a democratic faith—it's a religion with me—that everyone is really able to take care of himself, to get on with people, and to make a good society. If it's not so, I don't want to hear about it."¹³ This is a common faith among Americans.

The most moderate expression of this radical belief in democracy is liberalism. Perhaps because this is the oldest liberal democracy in the world we forget how utopian are the commonplaces lauded even in McGuffey's

readers, honoring a "free community" in which there are no "privileged orders" and opportunity is open to ability alone.¹⁴ Although Tocqueville argued that America had been "born free," it would be more accurate to portray a slow and often painful revolution, over several centuries, to liberate blacks, women, and many others to be equal competitors in the capitalist marketplace. This dream, and the constant tension between the ideal and the actual, has been a vital source of radical thought and action in our society.

Throughout our history, it has encouraged the kind of spontaneous antimonopolism often found in the Anti-Federalists, the Jacksonians, the Knights of Labor, and the Populists, with fears that "the people" were losing their liberties and economic chances. The alternative to concentrations of wealth and power have been sometimes individualist, sometimes cooperative, but they have almost invariably been critical of undemocratic power.¹⁵

Themes of liberation have also been applied to groups of people. For blacks, it has been reflected in Garrison's newspaper the *Liberator*; in Frederick Douglass's broad definition of slavery as the lack of control over one's own life (by which he often included women and wage laborers); in John Brown's scorn of "talk—what is needed is action—ACTION" (what the anarchists would call propaganda of the deed); in the phrase from the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "as He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free"; and in modern criticisms that "we have made a mockery of being our brother's keeper by being his jail keeper."¹⁶

Liberation from confining sexual roles was expressed by the first women's rights convention in the world, held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. These daring Americans called for equal rights in the professions, schools, politics, and religion, equal status in marriage, equal wages and equal property rights. "Know your place" has been changed, slowly but steadily, to "woman's place is everywhere." Increasingly, there have been real personal choices in sexual freedom, careers, marriage as a relation of equals ("democracy begins at home"), communal living ("explode the nuclear family"), and abortion ("our right to choose"), as aspects of a critique of social/sexual definitions that limited both men and women, straight and gay (e.g., James Baldwin's reference to "the male prison").¹⁷ By the 1970s, the American women's movement was the largest independent feminist force in the world, far more systematically radical than perhaps any other (the Communists, for example, casually scorn sexual pleasure as "petty bourgeois indulgence" and consider nonconformists "deviants" to be "rehabilitated," or worse).

The ideal of liberation has also been applied to "ageism" (treating children and the elderly as representatives of a category, rather than as individuals); to schools (John Holt has called them "children's prisons"); to

civil rights in the military, including free speech, press, and assembly; to abolishing laws against "crimes without victims" (as in drug use, sexual behavior, pornography, and gambling); or to prison criticism (most radically enunciated by Eugene Debs: "while there is a soul in prison I am not free").¹⁸

While liberalism has generally sought to achieve such radical freedom by moderate means, it also includes a history of direct action, like the sit-downs of the 1930s, pray-ins at segregated churches, sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, wade-ins at segregated beaches, boycotts, and demonstrations. But the impossibility of realizing such utopian ideals by limited means—the unfulfilled promises of liberalism to achieve liberation—has fostered more explicit forms of radicalism. A moderate liberal might fantasize that problems had been solved—like a complacent individual of the 1920s or the 1950s—only to be shocked to reality by the Great Depression or the social upheavals of the 1960s. In the late 1970s, the basis for another period of struggle may be evident in such statistics as the Urban League's claim of 25 percent unemployment for blacks (and up to 50 percent for black youth), one-third of blacks below poverty level and a growing gap between the average white income and average black income, or in the disproportionately large number of women in jobs with the lowest status and pay. Clearly, we continue to live with the legacy of centuries of racism and sexual discrimination, whatever our progress.

Liberalism, beyond these charges of inadequacy, has been burdened with the contradiction that it has often used institutional means to guarantee equality while popular sentiment has been deeply skeptical about "bureaucracy" (even when it has called it into existence to achieve its hopes). Notice Whitman's hatred of "the swarms of cringers, suckers, doughfaces, lice of politics, planners of sly involutions for their own preferment to city officers or state legislators or the judiciary or congress or the presidency."¹⁹ Though all forms of indigenous radicalism have deep roots in the liberal center and its idealism, they are more dramatically libertarian.

The first, which I will define as right libertarianism, trusts in a society organized on the basis of voluntary agencies. Its most moderate expression can be found in various laissez-faire liberals, and its most extreme, in Anarcho-Capitalists who repudiate the state. Since modern intellectuals easily equate radicalism with communitarianism (and hierarchical authority), this tradition is frequently overlooked. Nonetheless, it is a genuine expression of utopian individualism, as represented by Emerson, in "The American Scholar," yearning for an individual "like a sovereign state." While anarchism, in the form of *movements*, has been most pronounced in Europe, expressed as Anarcho-Communism, syndicalism, and other types of communitarianism, American anarchism—even when explicit—has been distinctively separate. A 1907 comparison between European and American

anarchism remains valid: "European anarchists are less introspective than us. They concern themselves more with the mass movement than we do; they fight the capitalist; we fight Comstock. Instead of participating in the trade unions, organizing the unemployed, or indulging in soap-box oratory, we rent comfortable halls and charge ten cents admission. Added to that are, in many cases, ten cents carfare, and Anarchism has become a luxury. Instead of inspiring the workers with revolutionary ideas we teach them speculative theories of liberty."²⁰ Especially in America, anarchist theories have had many ties to middle-class egoism.

However, another variety of antibureaucratic radicalism will also be identified—left libertarianism, which ranges from decentralists who seek to limit state power to syndicalists who want to abolish it. While individualist anarchism is one possible form of capitalism taken to an extreme, left libertarianism represents an alternative tradition. While resistance to institutional authority, praise for local decision-making, and mass participation (if not consensus) are also hallmarks of this criticism, it is directed toward creating a society of communal sharing rather than individual assertion.

The conclusion of part 2 will contrast these forms of indigenous radicalism with the strange gods of what I have termed "statist radicalism." All expressions of this tendency have usually cast off our libertarian history for the neatly ordered usable past of some other society's legends, symbols, shrines, "holy days," patriotic songs, and heroes. As one Communist asserted in the 1930s, the main task of the CPUSA was to "bolshelize" the party rather than to Americanize it.²¹ More recently, a Marxist historian belittled any plea for a "red, white, and blue left" with the condescending claim that "our revolutionary 'heroes' must be understood to be expansionists and the oppressors of workers, slaves, women, and national minorities. . . . We must avoid identification with the bourgeois revolutionary tradition of imperial expansion built into the U.S. from its inception."²²

Radicals in other countries have sometimes noticed this remarkable abandonment of all national symbols, so unlike the USSR looking back to popular champions from its pre-1917 history, the People's Republic of China preserving the memory of peasant insurrections, Cuba speaking of its present revolution as continuing the long struggle for independence, Vietnam invoking a thousand years of conflict to become a separate entity, or other states calling themselves defenders of radical nationalism (Peru, Syria, Egypt). Radicals in most other societies have been passionately engaged in building their programs upon local traditions, demonstrating how they continue or fulfill many of the central aspirations of their cultures.

Americans meeting with representatives of the National Liberation Front were once chastized, however, because "you American friends have not yet found your own identity: you do not identify with your own people or your country and its traditions." On another occasion, a United States delegation

was greeted by the Vietnamese revolutionaries as "the finest sons and daughters of Washington and Jefferson." American radicals are likely to be startled and appalled by such comments. Such reactions are shared by both libertarians and statist, who may be reflecting the moralistic, ahistorical, atheoretical, and eclectic character of this society in their confusion about their own history, rejection of whatever does not immediately "work," contempt for their imperfect predecessors, and affirmations of universal ideals; but the statist radicals have suffered most because their solution to these quandaries has been to retreat to alien models.²³

Each foreign system has its outpost in America, loyally staffed: Soviet Marxism (the Communist Party, USA), Maoism (the U.S. Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist), and "true" Trotskyism (the Workers' League, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Spartacist League). In 1977, for example, the U.S. Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist, was given the sole American franchise to distribute Maoism. A member of the Chinese politboro, at a Peking banquet honoring the obscure leader ("Chairman Klonsky") of the USCP (M-L), grandiloquently announced that "the founding of the Communist Party (M-L) of the United States has reflected the aspirations of the proletariat and other working people of the United States and is a new victory for the Marxist-Leninist movement in the United States."²⁴ Such delusions should require little comment.

To emulate theories developed in preindustrial societies, often struggling for national independence, is to obscure the American present (where any revolution would not be against a czar, a Chiang Kai-shek, or a Batista) and the potentialities of a fully libertarian industrial America. The Old Left has been culturally arid and politically withered because, in an innovative, libertarian culture, it has been seeking to turn back the historical clock. As some left libertarians rebuked the statist: "We fight on the most advanced terrain in history—a terrain that opens the prospect for a post-scarcity society, a libertarian society, not a substitution of one system of hierarchy by another."²⁵ By dismissing several hundred years of American libertarian radicalism as petty bourgeois and ideologically obsolete (when it may be avant-garde), statist radicalism has been reduced to esoteric cults, like American Buddhism (or, in this case, Maoism), that appeal essentially to radical snobs and alienated intellectuals. A major movement capable of having a deep and lasting impression on this society is unlikely to develop without building upon some existing foundations. The conclusion of part 2, then, is a call for a self-conscious, postcolonial radicalism that is authentically American.

Part 3 centers on the contemporary revival of these native traditions and speculates on their prospects. Certainly the failures of conventional socialism reinforce my thesis. The austerity measures often adopted by labor governments, the absence of popular control in nationalized industries, and the

obvious hypocrisies of revolutionary states have done much to validate Proudhon's fear of "the socialism of the barracks" and Bakunin's warning of "workhouse socialism" where the new elite would merely constitute a red bourgeoisie.

Nationalization, for example, has not been synonymous with democratization. Rather, power is often more remote. Workers still have little voice in what happens at their workplace. They are still subject to appointed managers, their unions are usually powerless, and they often cannot strike against "their" state. One British coal miner complained that it was "like working for a ghost" instead of a definite group of capitalists. Michael Polanyi was probably correct when he observed that a worker in a nationalized mine no more felt that he "owned" the mine than he felt that he owned the royal navy.

Nationalization, then, has not solved inequalities of power; it has only substituted officials for owners. Under the direction of this new elite, an enormous and highly centralized bureaucracy reduces the local unit to insignificance. Top-down management, a cretinizing division of labor, production quotas that resemble speedups, praise of stoical efficiency above personal happiness, and limits on popular control are at least as stringent as those in capitalist society.²⁶ This has been bureaucracy, not democracy, and Fabians have been as guilty of it as Leninists, Trotskyists as much as Stalinists. This is the socialism of five-year plans, growth rates, and dams and factories, but it is not everyday democracy.

In fact, socialism has generally meant the restriction, rather than the expansion, of freedoms found in liberal society: discussion, reading, publishing, art, travel, organization of public employees, voting, religious beliefs, conscientious objection to military service, privacy, the right to strike, emigration, assembly, and the rights of nonconformity (for example, the freedom in American schools—legally guaranteed—not to salute the flag).

By contrast, none of the Marxist-Leninist states permits the formation of any open opposition, or the printing of opposition literature, or the holding of opposition meetings. Most Americans are aware of the military suppression of the working class in Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Even in China, the struggle for power after the death of Mao Tse-tung was not openly debated but was the result of cliques, monster rallies, and bombastic denunciations of "the Gang of Four" as wreckers, spies, "agents of the Kuomintang," ultrarightists, and even "capitalist roaders"!

By the end of the 1970s, it was more difficult for American radicals to avoid historical dilemmas by turning to foreign models. Abroad, the Labour Party lacked the enthusiastic support of most British workers, the socialist party of Sweden was voted out of office after decades in power, the German socialists nearly met a similar fate, and much of the idealistic aura of the

Soviet and Chinese revolutions had been diminished by the realities of power politics, such as Chinese support for dictators like Suharto and Marcos, recognition of the Chilean junta, and approval of the Nixon visits. We were living in a time of decaying idols, "after the fall."

At home, Americans were less convinced that mammoth systems would necessarily satisfy their personal needs. Was the modern city more comfortable than neighborhood communities? Was a factory more pleasant than a workshop? Was corporate capitalism ecologically, humanistically, and financially desirable? These were issues of the most fundamental radicalness, for which the seemingly exhausted imagination of the welfare state and the Old Left had few answers that were attractive to the public. The "successes" of Social Democracy and Communism may yet force a reevaluation of the "failed" truths of anarchism.²⁷

Let us turn, then, to the origins of this vision of decentralism, which may now form one of the few historical sources of hope.



Courtesy of Community Press Features

CONSCIENCE AND COMMUNITY

The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.

Any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion.

—Henry David Thoreau, American Protestant saint, "On Civil Disobedience"

I cannot give unconditional loyalties to any institution, man, state, movement or nation. My loyalties are conditioned upon my own convictions and my own values.

—C. Wright Mills, in *Listen, Yankee*



In the American beginning, there was Protestantism. Unlike France and Spain, which officially permitted only orthodox Catholics to emigrate to the New World, the American lands of England were dominated by representatives of the militant Reformation. Although fervent believers in Puritanism, Anabaptism, and Quakerism were a minority, they laid many of the basic foundations for a new society.

Most of them began by rejecting Catholic definitions of community. Catholicism maintained the mythology of apostolic succession, embracing all of society and the centuries within institutions. Although the Church of England had preserved this claim, most Protestant communities tended to be narrower, excluding rather than including. They generally built upon the basis of individual soul, individual minister, and individual congregation. With varying degrees of thoroughness, the Protestants abolished most of the institutional mediators between God and the believer. The unseating of the pope, the demotion of the saints, the disruption of much ritual and tradition and the destruction of the awesome order of the cathedral weakened all authority, since the church and the state were so profoundly interrelated. The weight of eternity fell upon the individual, unaided by a hierarchy of priests, unrelieved by confession, unassisted by the saints, and forbidden to claim that earthly works might contribute to salvation. The individual,

though instructed by ministers and the concerns of a congregation, had to experience conversion individually. The believer was less restrained by obvious barriers against what the Puritan fearfully called "enthusiasms," at the same time that reading the Bible and reflecting upon it contained unavoidably subjective elements.¹ Although "con-scientia" originally meant knowledge of anything shared with another person (in other words, social knowledge), a personal conscience did not always agree with the consensus of the church membership. Then, community could rupture. It became more arduous to balance the historic tensions within Christianity between the gospel and the law, grace and works, internal authority and external authority, spirit and structure, conscience and church. Most Protestants were acutely aware of emotional and doctrinal dangers and labored to forge new forms of discipline that would renew the ancient social ideal of an organic community, bound together by a common faith.²

The earliest settlers consciously sought to build new communities with the Mayflower Compact of 1620, Winthrop's speech on Christian charity before stepping onto American soil in 1630, the founding of Harvard in 1636 for an educated leadership, and the numerous laws regulating social status and economic life. As Winthrop believed, guidance was necessary so that the colonists would not "shipwreck" by following solely their own "pleasures and profits." Drawing upon traditional models and a rational understanding of their needs, Winthrop urged repeatedly in his address that the colonists "be knitt together" as one.

The Plymouth settlers had already illustrated the contradictions that lay like silent fault lines within Protestantism, making it vulnerable to collapse. These colonists simultaneously broke the institutional continuity of the Church of England, claimed to preserve the simple heritage of the early church, and established their own new order. Conservatism and radicalism mingled, if not at times merged, within their organizations. When the Mayflower Compact was approved in 1620, they once again conserved the principle that government was God's law while demonstrating that it might be a conscious creation. Against their pious intentions, they built a working model of what Rousseau would abstractly term "a social contract," or our age would call "an intentional community." Because they deliberately acted to "combine our selves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering and preservation," their institutional life carried the insidious implication that they were a people "subject to no law but that which they consented to impose on themselves."³

Winthrop's model was also provocatively flawed. The Puritan vision of a city on a hill that would be a moral beacon to a sinful world was capable of stimulating outbursts of perfectionism. The very founding of Massachusetts implied that civil government was indeed a voluntary agreement based upon free will, and that government might be an agency for the creation of such a

New Jerusalem. This possible *communitas* was in painful contrast, however, to the reality of a society divided into the elected brother and the separated other (just as only 35 of the 102 passengers on the *Mayflower* were full Pilgrims). The chasm between the real and the ideal was obvious to these purifiers and contributed to what some scholars have called a frustrated utopianism in American life.

These ambiguities were an especially heavy cross for the Puritans. Whereas the Pilgrims had broken free from the established religion and publicly identified themselves as separatists, the Puritans suffered painful doubts about their continued ties to the Church of England. The question of authority was agonizingly complex for them. These stern sectarians had technically remained within the state church, while castigating it for Catholic liturgical remnants, Anglican approval of bishops, and moral and theological "corruption." The violent friction between their urgent pleas for reform and the inertia of institutions flared into fanaticism among themselves and others. Although they were not separatists, some of them left their comfortable homes, traveled several thousand dangerous miles, and gave their lives and fortunes to construct the first major settlements in the Massachusetts Bay area during 1630-40. While pleading loyalty to the church, they added fuel to the English Civil War in the 1640s. Their efforts to recreate religious order, in both England and America, were radically disintegrated by some of their own principles. Thus, Puritan denunciations of existing imperfections, even when based upon "conservative" pleas for the purity of Christ's original church, fostered more extreme purifiers, such as the Quakers. The Puritans were cruelly destined to confront unruly spirits who mocked them with some of their own implications of an irrepressible radicalism.

By 1636 Roger Williams had demonstrated that a saint could also be a subversive. He was cast out of Massachusetts for pleading that church and state be separated. He had become convinced that forced belief was "soul-rape." If Protestantism encouraged even "the simplest man or woman to search the Scriptures," it must now allow them to find their own truths, free from coercion. A state church, then, was a Romish perversion of conscience that sullied faith upon "the Dung heape of this earth." Consider, he argued, the history of the English church since 1529—Catholic, Calvinist, Anglican. People's beliefs had been (in his words) "tost up and down (even like Tennis-balls)." No, each person must have the liberty to "try all things"—knowing that while he or she would suffer no political persecution, the ultimate sanction would be eternal salvation or damnation!⁴

Moderate Puritans strained to protect an official faith, doubtful that civil and religious harmony could be maintained by such radical conscience. While they admired much of Williams's zeal and agreed that fallible human beings, organized as a government, might enforce false doctrines, they

denied that a state church was necessarily "a stench in God's nostrils." "Williams' position, from [their] point of view, looked like anarchy."⁵ The New Jerusalem of the Puritans had to be defended from splintering into a Protestant Babel. Indeed, the later separation of church and state in Rhode Island pulled down a conservative pillar that had persisted since the last days of the Roman Empire. Such government lost the powerful emotional support of a state religion.

Of course, this did not convict Williams of explicit anarchism. He remained convinced that the state was divinely mandated to preserve civil peace, and that churches could be God's instruments (although he joined none, taking the title of "seeker"). In either domain, opinions that might disrupt the public order were prohibited. Yet, just as Williams had bedeviled the leaders of Massachusetts with his jeremiads against the bondage of the church by the Babylon-state, he was in turn set upon by even more ferocious critics of organized power, such as Samuel Gorton and William Harris. Any Catholic might have predicted the growing crowd of protesters claiming the authority of their own consciences. By 1657, the exasperated Williams had condemned some of his adversaries as "common opposers of all authority" and placed a treason indictment against one radical religionist

T H E
BLOODY TENENT
Y E T
More Bloody:
B Y
Mr Cottons endeavour to wash it white in the
BLOOD of the *LAMBE*;
Of whose precious Blood, spilt in the
Blood of his Servants; and
Of the blood of Millions spilt in former and
later Wars for Conscience sake,
T H A T
Most Bloody Tenent of Persecution for cause of
Conscience, upon a second Tryal, is found now more
apparently and more notoriously guilty.
In this Rejoynder to Mr Cotton, are principally
I. *The Nature of Persecution,*
II. *The Power of the Civill Sword* } Examined;
 in Spirituals
III. *The Parliaments permission of* } Justified.
 Dissenting Consciences
Also (as a Testimony to M^r Clark's Narrative) is added
a Letter to Mr. Endicott Governor of the *Massachusetts* in N. E.
By R. WILLIAMS of Providence in New-England.
London, Printed for Giles Calvert, and are to be sold at
the black-spread-Eagle at the West-end of Pauls, 1652.

Roger Williams
on "The Bloody Tenent"
of coerced belief

"for saying that it was against his conscience to yield to any human order amongst men."⁶

Meanwhile, the saints of Massachusetts had persevered in their battle to enforce religious, social, political, and economic authority. But the result was not the "narrow and cold prison" that V. L. Parrington once portrayed—or, if it was, its inmates were a turbulent lot, and even the guards sometimes questioned the justice of their own power. Puritan belief that humanity was sinful and that its rulers could not be trusted with arbitrary power, which was reinforced by their opposition to Stuart absolutism, became a deep cultural inhibition against absolute power. Constitutional social compacts were encouraged as bulwarks against abusive authority.

However, even these forms of governance contained the seeds of their own self-criticism, if not self-destruction, by the admission that God could speak directly to, and through, the individual. Anne Hutchinson demonstrated the destructive possibilities of this during the mid- and late 1630s. A Puritan morality play began quietly when Hutchinson opened her Boston home for meetings to summarize recent sermons. She had no initial thought of challenging the ministerial function of guiding the believers, but only of restating the content of sermons for those who had missed them and for others of the pious. Her gossipy descriptions, however, rapidly became analyses, an easy error for a literate and introspective laity. She then trespassed into territory that was jealously guarded by ministers and, even worse, carried along subversive beliefs. Hutchinson began to insinuate that the clergy and magistrates were usually representatives of the Old Testament who were severely limited to a knowledge of external appearances, such as visible obedience to rules. But the new dispensation of Christ had released believers from these chains. The godly were no longer sanctified by obligations to law or by their works (a delusion of the Jews and papists) but were purified by the covenant of grace, "the indwelling of the spirit." These elect were subject not to corrupt, external laws and imperfect institutions, but to an inner law known only to themselves. When Hutchinson was asked how she knew that it was God who spoke to her, she boldly answered: "by an immediate revelation." The deputy governor was astonished: "How! An immediate revelation?" Hutchinson: "By the voice of his own Spirit to my soul."⁷

This appeal to direct revelation was an ominous threat to all authority, religious and civil. Although Hutchinson was no revolutionary who yearned to put a torch to all existing order, she had unwittingly conjured up the specter of anarchist subjectivism. If someone could act upon the direct command of God, what was the status of churches, ministers, governments, rulers, and even the educated elite? They might all be relegated to some inferior rank before such a direct power. Captain Johnson recalled one of the heretics making such a reasonable conclusion: "I had rather hear such a one

that speaks from the meere motion of the spirit, without any study at all, than any of your learned Scollers, although they may be fuller of Scripture."⁸ Leaders of the colony, such as the Reverend John Wilson, became increasingly resentful and alarmed that Hutchinson and her disciples were reducing God's faithful servants to "Nobodies."

In 1637, she was accused of eighty-two doctrinal errors, many of them covered by the term antinomianism: being "against the law." Although she fervently declared that intuitive knowledge would not counsel license, since it meant direct access to divine law, her opponents ridiculed her as a Jezebel who appealed to emotions. Her beliefs were scorned as libertine, seditious, and "anarchical." Like Williams, she was banished, and—also like Williams—her followers split into factions. Governor John Winthrop was properly horrified at the implications of her ideas: "She walked by such a rule as cannot stand with the peace of any State; for such bottomless revelations . . . if they be allowed in one thing, must be admitted a rule in all things; for they being above reason and Scripture, they are not subject to controll."⁹ Winthrop upheld the powers of the magistrates and the ministers with his severe judgment on the disruptive potential of her principles. But the Puritans were never able to purge themselves of their contradictions by expelling Hutchinson, Williams, and many others. They were frustrated by a basic riddle of Protestantism: Who or what is authority? Although the Puritans had not desired to become ancestors of anarchism, this rebel progeny was among their bastard descendants.

Another form of militant Protestantism, the Society of Friends ("Quakers"), also illustrated the possibilities for radical disintegration of authority. This was dramatically evident in Quaker faith, where each believer followed the vision of his or her own inner light, partially directed by the voluntary discipline of the meeting. This spontaneity flowed naturally from the Protestant emphasis on conscience and "the priesthood of all believers." The inward covenant of grace had full primacy over the old covenant of works. Even the authority of Scripture was subordinate to the direct insight of the spirit, which revealed the "new law written within, on the tables of the heart."¹⁰ Quaker disdain for the frailties of man-made law, emphasis on revelation, refusal to take political oaths, rejection of war taxes, tithes, and military duty, and repudiation of various social conventions (such as removing their hats before magistrates and other rulers) earned them a reputation as subverters of all order. This was an understandable fear. If anarchism could be achieved in spirit, civil authority was likely to be attacked by some of the believers. Religious antinomianism might become secular antinomianism, where self-reliance threatened social institutions.

However, few Quakers uniformly applied their spiritual philosophy and practice to physical society. In 1682 William Penn solemnly prayed that the government of his colony be respected as "a part of religion itself, a thing

sacred in its institution and end."¹¹ Most people should not meddle in politics but should live quiet lives of work and devotion. Yet, even as Penn upheld the power of the magistrates in nonreligious matters, he characterized most earthly laws as "superficial" compared with the immutable and "fundamental laws" that were sensed by conscience. This religious freedom—combined with other circumstances—shattered Penn's admonitions for conventional politics. Even when it was not ignored or flouted, the regime was held in little awe. During most of 1681–96, no taxes were imposed. When one of Penn's governors arrived in 1688, no one greeted him. He later "found the council room deserted and covered with dust and scattered papers. The wheels of government had nearly stopped turning."¹² While authority was always reasserted and Quakerism became embodied in powerful social and political institutions, its foundations were never entirely secure, and it relied more on appeals to norms than on direct coercion.

The revivalist movements that erupted in the 1720s and 1730s, although their social perspectives were often conservative, paradoxically added to this anarchist heritage by their appeals to emotion rather than reason and by their creating, through camp meetings, a sense of community without a church. The "prepared heart" of Puritan theology (with its implied mysticism) finally burst all its structural bonds to become spontaneous belief. Guardians of tradition like the Harvard faculty were dismayed by revival ministers who distracted people from their normal business, undermined the basis of rational theology, and, "*which is worse, and it is a Natural effect of these Things, [caused the people] to despise their own Ministers.*"¹³ Those in power often feared the revivalists as disrupters of the established order.

These suspicions were overstated but not illusory. Religious ferment was a yeast capable of unexpected results. Sometimes it revived old churches, sometimes it unsettled or burst them. A crusading spirit might find its form in repressive laws or, on other occasions, utopian colonies. But in all the manifestations of revivalism, it was the individual who achieved "new light." If God could reveal Himself directly to any person, the power of institutions was diminished. Most evangelicals heartily agreed with Peter Cartwright, a famous circuit rider, that "Christ had no literary college or university, nor theological school or Biblical Institute, nor did he require his first ministers to memorize his sayings or sermons [or] to take a theological course."¹⁴

By the early 1800s, religious contributions to the character of American radicalism were clearly defined: the Protestant emphasis on conscience, moral purity, and natural law could challenge worldly authority. The belief that individual conscience might perceive a higher law than that of civil government, and that disobedience to "unjust law" is a moral duty, has been repeated from the days of the Puritans and the Quakers. Thomas Paine an-

nounced that his own mind was his church, and the revolution against England was justified as an affirmation of God-given inalienable rights that were self-evident to everyone. This revolution was another reformation.

Conscience—for some of the critics—could also become the judge of all. Emerson later rejected the "corpse-cold rationality" of the Unitarian church for spontaneous nature, insight, transcendental ego, and "illimitable freedom": "Judge for yourself . . . reverence yourself. It is the inevitable effect of that doctrine . . . to make each man a state" (or, we might say in the case of Margaret Fuller, each woman).¹⁵ It was comfortably assumed—by Hutchinson, Williams, Penn, Emerson, and others—that conscience was direct understanding of natural law, or immediate communication with God.

In 1850, when the president supported a fugitive slave bill, the Congress approved it, and the Supreme Court upheld it, Emerson was not impressed: "I will not obey it, by God!" Thoreau agreed, saying that institutions were usually wrong. They had been created by past revelations, matured and decayed like people, and became decrepit, senile, and contemptible. Institutions were natural reactionaries, crucifying Christ, excommunicating Copernicus and Luther, and rejecting Jefferson and Washington. But the rebel's sense of universal justice had an immediate validity that would triumph over "the party of the past." Ideally, this spirit of protest would result in a permanent revolution against the dead letter of all organizations, including those of Protestantism. Emerson concurred that "*the Office of America is to liberate.*"¹⁶

Similar voices of defiance against structures of control have continued. Twain describes such a conflict in *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), when Huck must decide whether he should betray his friend, Nigger Jim, by returning him to slavery. This would uphold the conventions of property and the then-teachings of Southern churches but deny his own sense of justice. The God of society is watching him, but Huck turns away from organized religion, saying "All right, then, I'll go to hell." Many of the pacifists of World War I, the members of sit-ins for civil rights, and the antiwar demonstrators of the 1960s were also asserting a perfect moral freedom. Some did so moderately, as when Norman Thomas pleaded that the flag should not be burned, but cleaned, while his opponents followed a more extreme conscience and reenacted the drama of William Lloyd Garrison, who set fire to a copy of the constitution because it was a covenant with hell that sheltered slavery.¹⁷

Such freedom has rendered it difficult, if not impossible, to organize these radicals. Just as their critical spirit has been antitheoretical and antiinstitutional, so has their work. William Ellery Channing was a true American critic when he expressed "a peculiar dread and abhorrence of the passion for power." When such Americans have been unable to avoid

organizing, they have been attracted to voluntary associations, like the autonomous congregations of most American religions.¹⁸ Once formed, these groups have been more active in moralizing than in politics; they have sought generally to transform individuals through moral appeals ('a change of heart') rather than to attain political power. Discipline, whether as an organizational principle or a goal, has often been defeated by such eloquent rebels as Bronson Alcott, who valued the sanctity of his own soul above loyalty to an organization: "Church and State are responsible to *me*; not I to them. They cease to deserve our veneration from the moment they violate our consciences. . . . Why should I employ a church to write my creed or a state to govern me? Why should I not write my own creed? Why not govern myself?"¹⁹ Channing lauded this self-governed individual as the glory of our culture, and he predicted a social evolution toward individualism that might eventually eliminate any necessity for government, where "soul" would finally defeat "force." This was an American version of the withering away of the state.

Such visions of a perfect moral freedom to achieve a perfect moral order have been both repressive and liberating. Explicit radicals and average Americans have a strong predisposition to believe in simple definitions of good and evil and to condemn their opponents as the latter. Conventional politics is hindered by this standard, which implies that all politics is corrupt because power cannot avoid sordid compromises of principle. Ask the typical American what comes to mind first when the word politician is spoken. He or she will probably have few, if any, kind thoughts, since politics in America (in general contrast, let us say, to England or West Germany) is not an honored profession. Even a president can indulge in such stereotypes. Can one imagine a prime minister or a chancellor casually announcing that while being executive was "a fascinating experience," he had "no great liking . . . for the word 'politics' "?²⁰

This pervasive idealism is also expressed in unprecedented aspirations (such as achieving a classless society or abolishing poverty) and frequent harsh criticism of the gap between utopian ideals and the existence of racism, inequality, sex discrimination, and "hypocrites in high places." Thus, many Europeans were somewhat startled by the furor over Watergate, since a less idealistic society might have been more complacent about the realities of power. In many ways, the City of Man continues to be measured by the City of God. Our most revered critics, like Norman Thomas or Martin Luther King, Jr., have spoken from deep moral convictions, preaching to Americans as a congregation. Radical movements that have been relatively popular are equally moralistic, reflected in C. Wright Mills's characterization of the New Left as an ethical upsurge, and by Staughton Lynd and Paul Goodman calling upon young people to "come out of Babylon" and make a "New Reformation."²¹ Less successful have been those who have offended

this need for ethical absolutes, whether typical Marxists, northern civil rights students who disregarded Southern religious feelings, or many Black Panther leaders with their early atheism. These people have generally isolated themselves from the masses.

