The Cult of Individualism

A History of an Enduring American Myth

Aaron Barlow

PRAEGER

AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

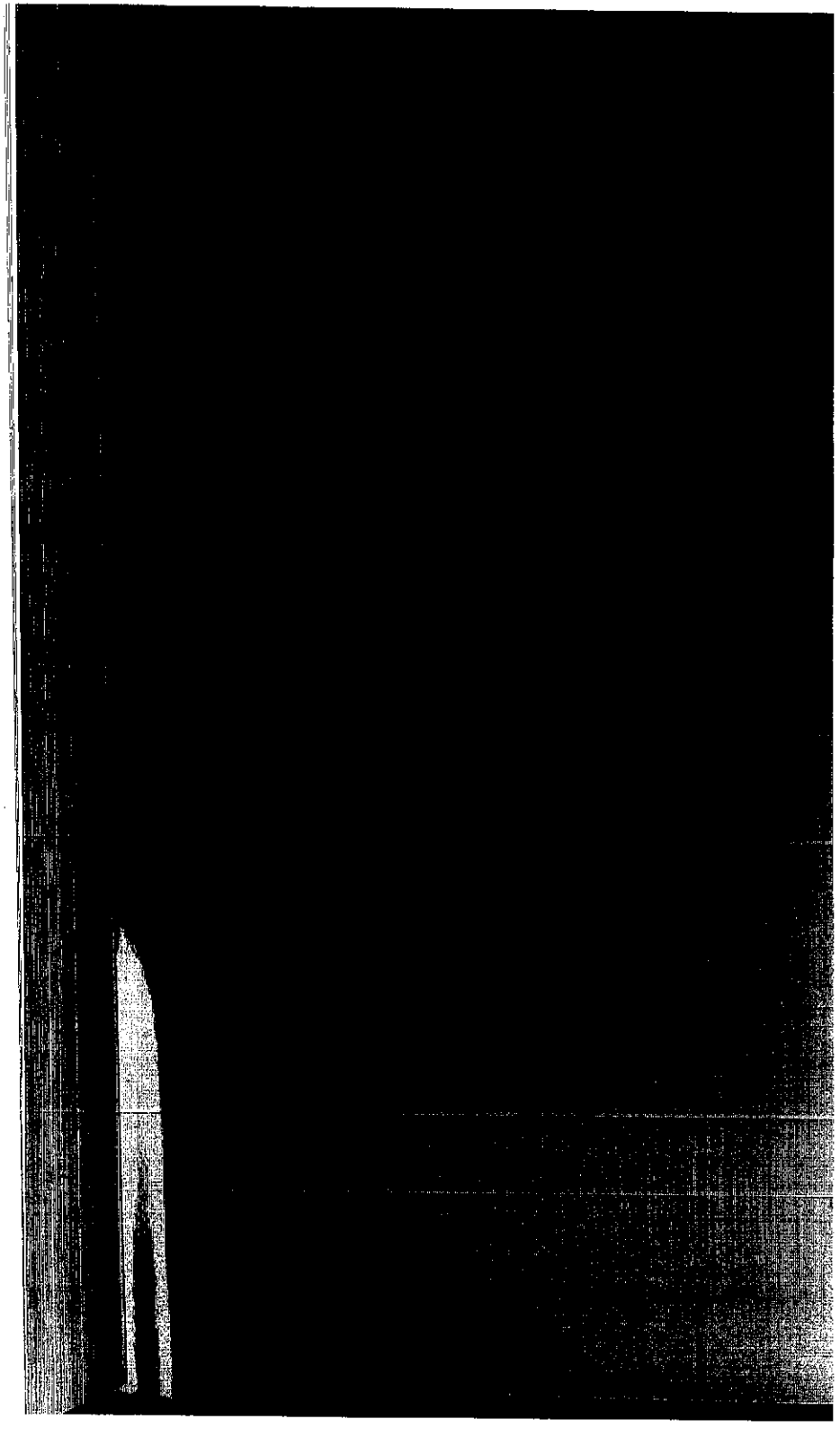
Contents

CHAPTER 1

Myths, Cults . . . and Cultures

"Myth is a four-letter word to most social critics," writes Appalachian Studies specialist Rodger Cunningham. True, but we should never forget that, as he goes on to say, "myth-patterns can be forced into the mold of power structures, to which these myth-patterns give strength."[1] Ignoring myth means ignoring the roots of power, and that would be irresponsible. The result of this forcing of patterns, often, is not simply the rise of a "cult" but also the development of a unifying belief, a myth, often one becoming distinct from those of the broader society from whence it comes. And *that* can change the course of history.

"Myth" and "cult" are intertwined, the former a necessary creation for the development of the latter. Referring to the word "myth" in Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, Leo Marx writes, "As he uses the term, myth is a mode of belief."[2] If this is so, discussion of myth cannot be avoided in examination of society, for society is based on belief. This study centers on backgrounds to the pattern and process through which myth is forced into politics, among other things, and has, in one particular American case (that of individualism), resulted in what can best be described as a "cult" (though one lacking a single charismatic leader), but a cult that is manifest today in the so-called Tea Party and the right wing of the Republican Party. It is also necessarily about the myth of individualism itself, not just about how it becomes a foundation for power and power's cult. This process of incorporation has been going on, in one form or another, throughout the history of the United States and even before, culminating in a situation, in this particular case, where the myth, driven by the power of the cult, has trumped truth as the deciding factor in



almost every political debate. It has had the effect of changing the terms of American political discussion from what they were just 40 years ago when a "conservative" Richard Nixon could put forward policies that, today, would be seen as decidedly "liberal."

The cultural imperatives behind myths, cults, and their power—even when these are apparently emasculated within the public sphere—drive a great deal more of our public discussions than most of us ever imagine. Myth *can* drive debate, and its power controls whether we can learn from each other—making a real and whole American culture finally possible. But, so far in American history, myth has generally done the opposite, competing myths keeping us apart.

The country needs to change that, to stop relying so much on myth and the power of the cult, to develop means of understanding, one group to another, back and forth. As Peter Marin claims, "Reciprocity is identical to culture: a collective creation and habitation of value sustained by what we carelessly call the 'individual' self."[3] We can certainly believe in the individual, even in distinct ways, but if we cannot compromise our myths or step outside of them to the point where they are discernible to the "other," we will never achieve a whole American culture that includes a debate that is based on fundamental understanding, one individual to another, one group to another.

Myths and cults, as I said, have a great deal to do with each other. It is internal cultural myths, myths that individuals have made their own, that are played on for the creation of cults, even cults like the cult of individualism without charismatic leaders and purposeful genesis. Even the most private myth arises from factors external to the individual; nothing is truly personal. On the other hand, as Michael Rogin tells us, "Disembodied cultural myths do not act; individual men living out myths do."[4] So, any focus on the myths of a culture must also include the individual. Products of their social upbringing, no matter what sort that might have been, individuals are the ones who make myths real. They are the ones, also and dangerously, who combine to create cults.

History—and especially cultural history—always is personal to some degree. After all, we use our personal judgment when we write. As liberal political commentator E. J. Dionne tells us, reflecting the understanding of historians for generations now, "In their interpretations, in the stories they tell, and in the evidence they select, America's historians are powerfully influenced by the political culture in which they work."[5] Just so. And the influence, again, is personal, individual. Perhaps it does not reach the level of a cult, but it is crucial to keep this in mind nonetheless.

Dionne subtitles the chapter containing the above quote "Why the Past Can Never Escape the Present." It cannot, as we are always remaking it in

the image of our myths and even for the use of our cults (all of us partake in cults of some sort). The contemporary and the personal, then, are the best starting points for exploration and rethinking of the past and of some of the myths and cults that shaped it and that shape the present.

*****

In a review of Charles Murray's *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, Nicholas Confessore writes that "a popular conservative narrative of modern America has gone something like this: Our center-right nation, devout and industrious, is ruled by a politically liberal elite that disdains family, despises religion and celebrates indolence with government handouts."[6] This, both sides of this, are myths, too—but, like all myths, both sides also contain a certain amount of truth. That truth, or an attempt to find it, is the heart of any exploration of the cultural or ethnic identities accompanying and opposing such myths and their cults. There is even truth in Murray's conservative vision, though perhaps not quite what he imagines it to be.

There are two major cultures in white America, both with cultlike aspects, and two visions or myths of individualism. One of the cultures is that "liberal elite" with its ideal of an individual as a creature of the web of community given equal chance with all and fair, universal treatment. I call this the "secular-liberal" culture. The other is that of the supporters of the "Reagan Revolution," the people who believe that one should rely only on oneself, one's family, and one's friends. This, basing the name on the Scots-Irish ethnic roots of that culture, I call the "Borderer" culture. Though these two cultures may sound like they *could* be compatible, they often are not—as we see through the rancorous political squabbling of the major American political parties, each associated with one of these cultures—the Republicans with the Borderers and the Democrats with the secular-liberals. Instead, the cultures are each growing more and more unable to reach out and connect to the other, not understanding what the other means even when using the same words (including that apparently simple word "individualism").

How did this happen? And why is it that America, which has always been assumed to have one dominant white culture, actually has two? What makes these two so different? And, again, why?

*****

To find the answers, one must go back to the 18th century. In an online essay published during the Bush administration, novelist Jane Smiley provided a hint to where this comes from. Taking her cue from David Hackett

Fischer's *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* with its four Colonial-American folkways (Puritan, Cavalier, Quaker, and Borderer), she wrote that, over the past 20 years or so, we had experienced the ascendancy of

> the Borderers/Appalachian culture of hot-blooded and violent populism that is xenophobic, religiously aggressive, fundamentalist, and sectarian, that is suspicious of learning, antagonistic towards "elites," and antipathetic to women's autonomy. It defines itself by masculinity and arms-bearing, is belligerent by nature and quick to take offense. Its natural (and historic) enemy is the outgrowth of Quaker culture, liberalism.[7]

If such language were not incendiary enough on its own, Smiley continues on in the same vein, drawing a line between her own secular-liberal culture and that of the Borderers: "For Borderers and their descendants, patriotism is about passionate loyalty to the group, alert self-defense, and domination in every sphere."[8] This, to her, is despicable.

On some level, Smiley herself must have been a little uncomfortable with what she was writing (which verges on indulging in attitudes not far different from racism), for she does ultimately try to move from the stereotypes she has thrown about to questions of allegiance and choice:

> If Al Gore had been elected, would we have gone to war in Iraq? Al Gore and George W. Bush, according to Fischer, present an interesting contrast. The Bush family is a Yankee family and the Gore family is Appalachian. But Gore grew up in Washington and went to Harvard, where he enthusiastically took up and was changed by a New England sort of education. Bush grew up in Texas, did not care for a New England sort of education, and had a typical Borderers alcohol addiction/religious conversion. He reacted to 9-11 belligerently. Gore did not, and, by his own testimony, would not have triggered the war machine as Bush has done. Who they seem to be as men reflects their affinities and allegiances rather than their inheritances.[9]

What of this was true? Part of the answer can be found in the work of Appalachian Studies scholars, including Cunningham, who first might seem to agree with Smiley, writing (referring to a much earlier situation but one similar to our current political divide) that "the basic identities and conflicts of the situation are not 'ethnic'—at least not in any vulgar generic sense—but *regional*."[10] However, he carefully goes on to claim that

> "identification" is not the same as identity ... ; the very nature of the Scotch-Irish identity had been formed by repeated forced abandonments of identification. Now, however, within this "nonexistent" zone of the mountains, a new identity was being fostered. ... Here, in this area ignored by the rhetoric and mentality of American expansion, having no "real" place in the American sense of identity, this new identity began to take shape. Though rooted largely in the collective experience of the Scotch-Irish, it was no more to remain confined to those of Scotch-Irish descent than the "general American" mentality has remained confined to Anglo-Americans.[11]

There was much more going on in this American past than most American history classes, Smiley, regionalism, or even simple ethnic identity would lead us to believe. Choice has something to do with it, but little. History and culture have much more.

The traditional and received historical progression of American culture shows, speaking loosely, a progression jumping from William Bradford and John Winthrop to Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and so forth. But this is not the whole of it. There was always much more going on in America than a focus on the touchstone luminaries and thinkers of its past can show. One of the questions that the traditional emphasis cannot answer is this: Why do these Borderers, these children of the backwoods (who are a far greater percentage of Americans than most of us have ever imagined), *seem* as they do? And why do others react so negatively to them?

This is a particularly important question even in the broader American culture, for, as Smiley points out, the Borderers appeared, before 2012, to have won out as the premier culture in the country, their myths dominating the greater political discourse even when elections are won by the other side. This is true, paradoxically, even as their power seems to wane with the rise in influence of other ethnic groups. It is true even as the domination by the "white males" associated with Borderer culture (though the "liberal elite" is dominated by white males, too) begins to collapse.

*****

Most postmortems of the Obama/Romney presidential race assumed that "white" voters belong together as a voting bloc. This is a mistake. Even beyond the Borderer/secular-liberal split, there are other splits, other groups within that bloc. More than a few of these, perhaps uncomfortable with being lumped together, have distanced themselves from Borderer culture. Though they often

share political affinities, they have opted to stress, for example, European ethnicities that, though they may have been their parents', are theirs today only by ancestry and not by lifestyle. Still, in a sense, these people are merely reverting to—or simply exposing—their own separate ethnicities, ones that had been overcome by a "symbolic Americanism" adopted in order to blend in with the broader American culture and allowing for the mistaken assumption of white solidarity. Part of the electoral success of the Borderers over the past generations came from what looked like a coalition with these urban white ethnic groups—even though those groups appear culturally far removed from the rural-based Borderers. Part of their failure today may be a loosening of this coalition. Cultural and ethnic blendings, we see, are as complex as they are real.

The two largest nonwhite minorities in America are, of course, Latinos and African Americans. Unlike the white ethnics, some of whom identify with Borderer mind-sets and some of whom have become secular-liberals, these have not split their allegiances between the two European-descended American cultures. Also, each retains identity in ways far beyond the symbolic ethnicity of many white ethnics (though they both do indulge in that, too). For various reasons, a majority of Latino voters have now allied themselves with the secular-liberals, as have the African Americans (who fled the Republican Party in the Great Depression and who closed the door on it as it welcomed the Borderers who were themselves abandoning the Democrats in the wake of 1960s civil rights legislation). These have formed a new tripart political coalition centered on the Democratic Party that portends future demographic muscle that the Republicans will not be able to match—unless things change and Republicans find a way to reach out beyond their "base." Still, the power of the Borderer-dominated right has been unmatched for 40 years, and its influence is not going to ebb quickly.

How did these changes in alliance and dominance happen, and what, besides demographics, lies behind them? Certainly, it is not the Borderers alone who make up the "red state" political population. In fact, neither the "red states" nor the "blue states" are exclusively red or blue. The divide in each is fairly close: Rare are the states where the majority consistently commands anywhere near 60 percent of the vote.

*****

In any discussion that touches on ethnic distinctions or, indeed, on ethnic unities, it is worth remembering what Max Weber wrote just about a century ago:

> The belief in group affinity, regardless of whether it has any objective foundation, can have important consequences especially for the formation

CHAPTER 2

The Individual in Two American Cultures

As philosophy professor Stephen Asma reminds us, "If you want to know what is *good* for human beings, Aristotle thought, you don't study *The Good* (as Plato tried). Instead, you study *human beings*."[1] Just so, if you want to know what makes a good *individual* human being, you do not study abstractions; rather, you study people and the societies they form. Yet "individualism," as understood in America, stems both from an unrealistic abstraction taken away from ideals of community and born of rejection and from "we, the people," a concept embracing the importance of the person to the group. The two primary white cultures of the country, roughly the "red state" and the "blue state" ones, can be differentiated by the relative origins and emphasis of their own conceptions of the word.

The irony of individualism arises from the fact that the concept exists only within cultural contexts. An absolutist individualist would have no need of language or of distinction—and could not exist, not as a human being, at least, for all of us humans are dependent on others. Individualism arises only as an aspect of community, as an aspect of a society's vision of its individual parts.

In political and cultural terms, both "individualism" and its sometimes synonym "selfishness" are filled with problems—and with nuance that is often missed. Though they are much the same, generally speaking, the most obvious difference between these two words is that the former frequently carries a sense of pride and accomplishment, while the latter makes us think first of the miser. "Individualism," in the minds of many of her citizens, is what made America great, while a certain sort of "selfishness" (often attributed to

political enemies) is what tears it apart. The one is good, the other bad. Both of the major white American cultures accuse the other of a miserly sort of selfishness while lauding its own grand individualism.

It is not so simple, of course, for either Borderer or secular liberal.

To begin to see the complexity and to understand the difficulty of establishing a clear distinction between the competing senses of the words, we need do no more than look at the start of chapter 2 of volume 2, part 2, of *Democracy in America*, where Alexis de Tocqueville makes one of the earliest uses of the word "individualism" ("individualisme" in the original French):

> ***Individualism*** is a recent expression arising from a new idea. Our fathers knew only selfishness.
>
> Selfishness is a passionate and exaggerated love of self that brings man to relate everything to himself alone and to prefer himself to everything.
>
> Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself.
>
> Selfishness is born of a blind instinct; individualism proceeds from an erroneous judgment rather than a depraved sentiment. It has its source in the defects of the mind as much as in the vices of the heart.
>
> Selfishness withers the seed of all the virtues; individualism at first dries up only the source of public virtues; but in the long term it attacks and destroys all the others and will finally be absorbed in selfishness. Selfishness is a vice as old as the world. It scarcely belongs more to one form of society than to another.
>
> Individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to develop as conditions become equal.[2]

Though there is a conflict between the two terms, de Tocqueville says that "selfishness" ("egoïsme") is ultimately the victor, consuming the weaker "individualism." And, indeed, this does seem to be the case in the United States today, taken most cynically. Certainly it can seem to be so—in how we view ourselves and in how we imagine our own self-sufficiency, whichever side of the cultural divide we fall on.

*****

The impact of the myth of individual effort as the primary basis for individual success in America has grown only stronger over the years. So strong (and so

evolved into selfishness) has this become that, over at least the past 30 years, many of us on one side of the divide, the "red state" side, the Borderer side, are no longer even willing to recognize the very real help that others (particularly government) give us. We each did it *all*—alone!

This is an impossibility, as I have said and as we all know when we stop and think about it. But, according to Suzanne Mettler, this startling unwillingness to recognize the support we have received over our lives has had the surprising result of actually driving a good deal of the communitarian efforts of the federal government of the United States—and more—underground: "In the lives of most Americans other than seniors, the impact of visible governance has diminished while that of the submerged state has grown."[3] Our sense of self-creation has grown so important to many of us that we deliberately fool ourselves as a group in order to maintain it.

So cultlike has the belief in individualism become that few people associated with the contemporary Borderer culture seem to be able to admit that, indeed, they have succeeded in their lives because of the support of others, particularly if these others include government. In fact, one can go further: On *either* side of the cultural divide, we want to believe that we did it all by ourselves. As de Tocqueville knew would happen, many of us go further still, using the cloak of "individualism" to cover a much more coarse vision of "selfishness." Here again, though, we do not want to admit to a desire to take whatever we can get, no matter the source—so much so that we have institutionalized the disguising and subverting of government's role in our lives. Indeed, as Mettler says, we go so far as

> making the real actors appear to be those in the market or private sector —whether individuals, households, organizations, or businesses. The mechanisms or tools through which such activities occur have proliferated to include a great variety, such as loans subsidized and guaranteed by government but offered through private banks and government-sponsored enterprises; social benefits in the form of tax incentives and tax breaks for those engaging in activities that government wishes to reward; and benefits and services provided by nonprofits and private third-party organizations that are subsidized or "contracted out" by government.[4]

Government has become, in many minds on the "red state" side of the cultural divide, the opposite of individualism, the representative of attempts to take away a person's freedom of action in favor of an amorphous "common good" promoted by "blue state" adherents. The government, in this view, suppresses family and favoritism, basic building blocks of society and culture,

in favor of a mythological and impossible equality. Asma explains the conundrum as arising from the fact that, for generations now, Americans have been "taught, from an early age, that no one is intrinsically 'higher' or 'lower' than anyone else, that everyone is equally valuable. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum says, 'Our nation is built on the idea that all citizens as citizens are of equal worth and dignity.' So how do we reconcile our favoritism with our conflicting sense of equality for all?"[5] The "red state" people, spiritual descendants of the Scots-Irish Borderers, have been asking this question for centuries. In a sense, we all have. Not only are the conflicts between individualism and community within each of us, but we have never even acknowledged the existence of two major American white cultures, one with family and community at its center and the other based on values stemming from the Enlightenment, of dignity and equality for all—each with its own vision of the role and possibilities of the individual, each with its own competing myth of individualism.

The split between these cultures has led to differing interpretations of "individualism" and to constant misunderstanding between the two sides. Over the past several generations, views on the novelist and self-proclaimed "philosopher" Ayn Rand have come to be one of the tests of which side any person may fall—though, of course, the divide extends far beyond her, both in time and in ideas. Today, many of her followers take the split to extremes, taking it beyond culture and *embracing* "selfishness" in even its most negative connotations, pushing away any distinction with "individualism" or, rather, making the latter just one part of a whole. Rand proclaimed the "virtue of selfishness," after all, extolling it as the foundation of American—indeed, human—success.

Rand writes that "selfishness," in her vision, is often misunderstood:

> It is not a mere semantic issue nor a matter of arbitrary choice. The meaning ascribed in popular usage to the word "selfishness" is not merely wrong: it represents a devastating intellectual "package-deal," which is responsible, more than any other single factor, for the arrested moral development of mankind.
>
> In popular usage, the word "selfishness" is a synonym of evil; the image it conjures is of a murderous brute who tramples over piles of corpses to achieve his own ends, who cares for no living being and pursues nothing but the gratification of the mindless whims of any immediate moment.
>
> Yet the exact meaning and dictionary definition of the word "selfishness" is: *concern with one's own interests.*[6]

Rand was not simply being provocative by proclaiming "selfishness" a virtue. She believed it and wished to sweep away any timid reliance on a tepid or constrained "individualism." Rather than being a way to hide "selfishness" before being subsumed by it, "individualism" becomes, for her, simply an aspect of selfishness or a weak synonym.

"Individualism" is, in the words of Rand's erstwhile follower, colleague, and lover Nathaniel Branden,

> at once an ethical-political concept and an ethical-psychological one. As an ethical-political concept, individualism upholds the supremacy of individual rights, the principle that man is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others. As an ethical-psychological concept, individualism holds that man should think and judge independently, valuing nothing higher than the sovereignty of his intellect.[7]

He continues, "An individualist is a man who lives for his own sake and by his own mind; he neither sacrifices himself to others nor sacrifices others to himself; he deals with men as a trader—not as a looter; as a Producer—not as an Attila."[8]

Writing a decade later than Branden, in the mid-1970s, social commentator and activist Peter Marin described what he saw as a new narcissism in America in which "the individual will is all powerful and totally determines one's fate."[9] Of course, this was not a new idea even with Rand; it was common in 19th-century America and even earlier. No matter how much many Americans want to believe it, however, this is simply so much window dressing in most of their lives—no matter which side of the cultural divide they fall on. Believers in it see themselves standing tall as traders while really they are also looters—of, among other things, the submerged government they strive to ignore.

*****

The impact of government programs is certainly often unseen, as Mettler argues, or at least unacknowledged, with the intended result that people can easily and without any feeling of discomfort ignore their own reliance on them. In many respects, Rand notwithstanding, the individualism we are seeing today has no high sensibility behind it but is simply the playing out of what de Tocqueville described nearly two centuries ago. If anything, for many of her contemporary American followers, Rand becomes an excuse after the fact rather than a light to a new path. There is more to the cult of individualism than that—as we shall see—but Rand is often the starting point and the excuse for a contemporary defense of what is, actually, a much older

and deeper cultural attitude of individualism held by a large percentage of Americans.

As we certainly see in America and as Steven Lukes illustrates in his study of individualism, the meaning of the word differs in different cultures and settings. In "France, it usually carried, and indeed still carries, a pejorative connotation, a strong suggestion that to concentrate on the individual is to harm the superior interests of society."[10] This, of course, is quite different from many American conceptions of the word—and different from de Tocqueville's description. Lukes discusses a number of somewhat distinct European and American views and their changes over time before turning to a presentation of the "basic ideas" of individualism. He sees these as five:

1. The Dignity of Man: This, he takes back to the Bible, showing its decline in the Middle Ages and its subsequent resurgence, culminating in Immanuel Kant's *The Moral Law* and maintained today.
2. Autonomy: The idea that one's thoughts and actions are the responsibility of the self, it "is a value central to the morality of modern Western civilization, and it is absent or understressed in others (such as many tribal moralities or that of orthodox communism . . .)."[11]
3. Privacy: A modern aspect of individualism, it "refers to a sphere that is not of proper concern to others. It implies a negative relation between the individual and some wider 'public,' including the state—a relation of non-interference with, or non-intrusion into, some range of this thoughts and/or action."[12]
4. Self-Development: Lukes traces this to the Italian Renaissance, moving forward through the Romantics and even into Marxism. He concludes that the "notion of self-development thus specifies an ideal for the lives of individuals—an ideal whose content varies with different ideas of the *self* on a continuum from pure egoism to strong communitarianism."[13]
5. The Abstract Individual: "According to this conception, individuals are pictured abstractly as given, with given interests, wants, purposes, needs, etc.; while society and the state are pictured as sets of actual or possible social arrangements."[14]

He further divides individualism into the political, the economic, the religious, the ethical, the epistemological, and the methodological. Relating to American individualism in particular, he writes that it "had, by the end of the Civil War, acquired an important place in the vocabulary of American ideology. Indeed, even those who criticized American society, from New England Transcendentalists to the Single Taxers and the Populists, often did so in the name of individualism."[15] This, of course, remains true today.

CHAPTER 3

From the Borderlands to Ulster to the Western Colonies to Be American

Where did the almost obsessive focus on individualism in America come from? It certainly has been around for a long time. Still, it is not a question easily answered, at least not from examination only of histories of 17th- and 18th-century immigration from the British Isles, from the Netherlands, from France, or from any other European sources of early American settlers. Many of those immigrants came as parts of idealistic religious movements like that of the Pilgrims or, later, the Quakers. Others came to get rich through the largesse of kings to whom they and their descendants remained loyal for a century or more. None of these seem to represent the cultural breeding ground one would expect for the type of in-your-face individualism that would soon arise in parts of the British colonies and the new nation that followed.

Still other immigrants, however, and in huge numbers, came as slaves and indentured servants. Many of the latter group came from among those fleeing Ulster Plantation in what is now Northern Ireland, where they had hoped to make a go of things but instead had found strife there as dramatic as that they had left behind back home on the border between Scotland and England. In a better situation than the African slaves, the indentured servants were still at the lowest level of white colonial society—their "free" fellow Scots-Irish Borderer countrymen, also immigrating in droves, only slightly better off. Together, they were considered the dregs of colonial society. Where others had come to America from Europe *for* something, be it fortune or freedom from religious persecution, many of these people had agreed to articles of indenture only out of desperation or had managed to scrape

together money for passage but little else. Treated poorly by just about every other European in the colonies, they turned their own anger on those even lower on the ladder than they were (the African slaves), on those whose place "above" them they had learned to resent, and even on the Native Americans with whom, once they had finished their servitude or had decided they could not settle among the established communities, many competed for domination on the frontier.

Unlike most of the other European colonists in America, the Scots-Irish, or Borderers, were predominantly uneducated, even by the English standards of the time. Some could read enough to slowly make out their Bibles, but that was about it. As a result, few of them left a record of their experiences. This left their story almost completely unknown. Over a century after the Revolution, in 1890, at the first of a short-lived series of Scotch-Irish "congresses," the lack of knowledge of the process of immigration from Ulster Plantation to the American colonies was described and attempts were made to explain it:

> A good deal of surprise was expressed at the Congress that a history of the Scotch-Irish had never been attempted; but we do not have to seek far for the reason. There is ample material from which to speak in a general way of their origin and of their existence in Ireland, but when we come to their emigration to America, excepting the causes which led to it, it is meager in the extreme. Coming from one part of Great Britain to another, no record has been preserved of their arrivals as would have been the case had they been of alien origin; and all we know is that while a large majority came to Pennsylvania, others settled in Virginia and the Carolinas. The country along the Atlantic coast was then comparatively thickly settled, and the Scotch-Irish took up their abodes on the outskirts of civilization. This was not because the Quakers sent them there, as has been asserted, to protect their own settlements from the Indians, or because the Scotch-Irish did not wish to live near the Quakers, who were continually finding fault with them, but for the same reason that now takes the emigrants to the West,—*i.e.*, because there good land is cheap and large families can be supporter at a small expense.[1]

This was not the whole of it, nor is it particularly accurate. As we will see in the next chapter, the good and cheap land was not so easily available as the myths of the West, established even before 1900, supposed. But it is true that the Scots-Irish were pretty well ignored in the histories. They should not have been. Just by their numbers, they should not have been.

*****

In *A Population History of the United States*, Herbert Klein presents a graph of the mean centers of population for the United States, 1790–2000.[2] It shows that the 1790 center was not far from Baltimore, Maryland. By 1810, the center had moved west, to the northernmost part of what is now Virginia (remembering that the Virginia of the time included all of West Virginia). By 1860, a steady due-west progression had taken it across into Ohio, not far from the Ohio River. In a steady movement across the southern portions of Indiana and Illinois, the center finally had crossed the Mississippi River into Missouri by 1980. All of these areas save the first had had a strong Scots-Irish Borderer presence from initial settlement on and still do. The argument that the Borderers are at the heart of the "real" America does, as can be seen from this progression, have a certain validity. But it did not make the Borderers famous.

Still, with this movement began a shift of political power away from the East Coast, a shift culminating in the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 as the first Borderer president. The change, as we know, was dramatic: "By the census of 1860, the original thirteen seaboard states of 1790, which initially contained 97% of the national population, now held only just over half of the total."[3] Though political power was falling into Borderer hands, American intellectual and financial strength remained in the Northeast, an area with, for the most part, cultural identities and beliefs quite removed from those of the Borderers settling behind and even beyond the expanding frontier.

From the crucible of the Scottish Lowlands, tempered in Ulster, the Borderers came to the colonies already hardened and set in their ways. Seeing antagonism, real or imagined, on the faces of just about everyone they came across, they only wanted to be left alone—something that rarely happened to them and that happens just as rarely to their descendants, both physical and spiritual, in the America of today. One of the most important groups in the shaping of the American character, they are, paradoxically, also one of the most ignored (which is different from "left alone")—for America's histories were written elsewhere than in the backcountry or on the frontier. American history has been written largely in the Northeast or in areas culturally descended from that region.

Even today, the descendants of the Borderers can claim a singular distinction in politically correct America: They are the only ethnic group that can be derided at will anywhere in the country. Even in the great Borderer stronghold, the mountains of Appalachia, it is fine to make jokes about "hillbillies" and "rednecks." The people there, at least, know a little of what they are talking about and often are embarked on irony when they joke—elsewhere, not so much.

A few years ago, at a university reception, I found myself in conversation with a group of colleagues, all of whom were either African American, Hispanic, or native New Yorkers (or a combination thereof). One of them made a comment about "devolved" "red state" culture, about hillbillies. Everyone laughed but me. As gently as I could, I told the group that the people they were disparaging were my people. No one believed me. Not only, I discovered, had none of them ever met anyone with family in the hills, but they refused to believe that a college professor could have that sort of background, even remotely. They also refused to accept Appalachians as having any sort of ethnic identity worth protecting or respecting. That is reserved, of course, for African Americans, Hispanics and, today, Italians, Russians, Chinese, South Asians, and the rest.

Borderers have gotten used to this. Many have learned how to skewer both disdainful easterners and their ethnic fellows. One of these was Joe Bageant, whose opening to one of his blog posts reminds me of my thoughts during that conversation with my colleagues:

> You may not meet them among your circle of friends, but there are millions of Americans who fiercely believe we should nuke North Korea and Iran, seize the Middle East's oil, and replace the U.S. Constitution with the Christian Bible. They believe the United States will conquer the entire world and convert it to our notions of democracy and fundamentalist Christian religion. . . . You may not believe me, and if you don't I cannot blame you for never having been exposed to such folks. Only an idiot or a masochistic observer of the American scene would subject himself or herself to these Americans. I like to think I am the latter, but the jury is still out.[4]

This is the way Borderer descendants, more often than not, feel they have to talk about themselves today, especially to "blue state" Americans whose understanding of the reality of the lives of many of their fellow Americans is woefully small. Bageant, still tongue in cheek, goes on to describe the Borderers as descended from "a group of Celtic cattle thieves killing one another in the mud along Hadrian's Wall":

> The homeland of the original Borderers was a squalid place. Denuded of forests and incapable of growing enough food to support its inhabitants, much less produce enough to sell within the traditional English culture of commerce, the natives survived by and gloried in "reiving" [cattle rustling]. It was a land of alternating famine and overpopulation, the only constant being warfare between England and Scotland along the fluctuating border. Rooted in centuries of national fighting—and in those rare times of peace, inter-clan warfare among themselves—they maintained their fierce ways, clan loyalties and holdings. The right to hold any turf they occupied was determined by their ability to defend it. Holding such miserable land was a worthwhile effort mainly in as far as it created clan proximity so it could be held. It was a vicious, near pointless circle. Given the unceasing looting, burning and moving, the Borderers built impermanent earth and log dwellings called "cabbins." Within their smoky cabins they lived a quick-tempered, hard drinking, volatile lifestyle, one that anthropologists say can still be seen in American trailer courts today.[5]

Mixing truth and sarcasm, Bageant presents, as well as anyone can, both the stereotype and the truth of Borderer life.

Even "serious" journalists fall into the ages-old trap of believing the worst of Borderers. Colin Woodard, in his book *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Regional Cultures of North America*, can see only the downside of Borderer culture, writing, "Proud, independent, and disturbingly violent, the Borderlanders of Greater Appalachia have remained a volatile insurgent force within North American society to the present day."[6] He goes on to write that, in America, they

> fell back on their old-country practice of taking the law into their own hands. Justice was meted out not by courts but by the aggrieved individuals and their kin via personal retaliation. "Every man is a sheriff in his own hearth" was a Borderlander creed that informed the Scottish practices of "blackmail" (as protection money), the blood feud (most famously practiced by the Hatfields and McCoys) and "Lynch's law," named for Appalachian Borderlander William Lynch, who advocated vigilante justice in the lawless Virginia backcountry.[7]

This sort of description makes it difficult for many Americans to take seriously Borderer culture, for it does little more than confirm long-held prejudices. And, by the way, one West Virginia Hatfield, called "Sid," made famous in the John Sayles film *Matewan*, was a ***real*** sheriff, a dedicated lawman who was gunned down on a courthouse steps not in a feud but because he stood against coal-mining interests and for the common people.

It is only today that we Americans as a whole are beginning to understand the mistake of ignoring the Borderers, for they have become the dominant force on the conservative side of the broader American culture, they are the "red staters" who elected Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, the suspicious right wing pandered to by Grover Norquist and his antitax crusade, the

fundamentalists who see religion in a light entirely foreign to the Massachusetts and Pennsylvania believers of the 17th and 18th centuries, the anti-immigrant crusaders who cannot abide anyone not willing to live like themselves. So influential are they that they have pulled the entire American political discourse toward them, creating a "center" far to the right of what it was under Richard Nixon, just 40 years ago.

*****

But who are these people, really? What makes them appear so mean and closed minded to outside observers? Part of the answer lies in that torturous path from the Scottish Lowlands through Northern Ireland and on to the American frontier starting in the 17th century. The root cause, though, is much older, stemming from the difficulties of eking a life from weak, hilly fields in an area beset by antagonists both north and south. Like their Irish cousins, the Borderers were a "problem" to England from the time the country coalesced and they continued to be a "problem" even when England and Scotland united, on the death of Queen Elizabeth, under her nephew James Stuart.

From the point of view of the new King James I of England (also James VI of Scotland), the idea and value of creation of "plantations" in the Irish counties of Down and Antrim on the Irish Sea closest to Scotland, plantations where English and Scots settlers could quickly and easily establish new communities, must have seemed a no-brainer and a problem solver. Just three years into his reign, in 1606, two Scottish "entrepreneurs," Hugh Montgomery and James Hamilton (who had made a deal for Irish land with an imprisoned Irish lord), induced "tenants and other Scots from the southwestern regions to come over as farmer-settlers. Since the distance was only twenty or thirty miles and the inducements were great, the risk was worth taking."[8] Thousands of others thought so, too, at least. After all, Scotland at that time "had never known orderly government or a rule of law instead of by men, nor had the country ever, for many years at a time, known peace. Life everywhere was insecure, not only because of recurrent wars with the English, but even more because of abominable economic methods, a niggardly soil, and constant cattle raiding and feuds."[9] Even when no actual war was going on, fighting was common between clans as revenge and even as protection against the omnipresent cattle thieves. "Life on the border was notoriously unsafe. At least until the Reformation, travel was dangerous anywhere in Scotland unless one went accompanied by armed men."[10] It is no wonder that, given the

chance, thousands of Borderers jumped toward the unknown rather than staying with the misery of home.

The king, wanting to please populations in both of his new kingdoms (English settlers would soon come over to Ireland, too), wishing to reduce the Irish "problem" that had bedeviled his predecessors by establishing a population more loyal to him, and, finally, wanting to fill his coffers, believed rightly that the Borderers would immigrate, given minimal incentives. "With the example of Montgomery and others and with his courtiers looking with hungry eyes upon the thousands of ownerless acres in the attractive Ulster countryside, James now decided upon an ambitious scheme of colonization of that region."[11]

Senator Jim Webb, in his own book about his Scots-Irish heritage, describes how the Plantation was laid out:

> Characteristic of traditional Anglo-Norman precision, the 500,000 acres of the original Ulster Plantation were laid out with exactitude. Half would be divided between "Undertakers"—lords and gentry of England and Scotland who would agree to "plant" Protestant farmers and also provide fortifications behind which their planters might defend the allotted areas, and "Servitors"—proven soldiers who could be used in further military operations in Ulster. One-tenth (50,000 acres) would be allotted to the twelve municipal corporations that comprised the government of London and would be responsible for developing trade.[12]

Though the story of this colonization rarely appears in American textbooks, the colonization of Ulster would prove every bit as important as Jamestown or Plymouth Rock to the history of the United States. Millions of Americans (including me) can claim as ancestors people who passed through Ulster Plantation—and their cultural impact can be felt to this day. After all, it was those now called the Scots-Irish who were at the forefront of western expansion, changing the backwoods into the frontier and establishing new European-based communities from the Alleghenies and Appalachians all the way to the West Coast. Their influence, as a result, is out of all proportion to their numbers.

Yet, so unknown is the division between the Scots-Irish Borderers and other American cultural traditions that scholars find it easy to assume that they mixed easily and naturally with the other colonists, creating one broad American culture. A generally astute Princeton professor, Nell Irwin Painter,

for example, claims mistakenly that the "first alien wave" of immigrants to North America was that of the Catholic Irish after about 1830. She writes that before "about 1820, most Irish immigrants had been Protestants from the north of Ireland, fairly easily incorporated into American society as simply 'Irish.' "[13] Presumably not aware of the acid reception the Scots-Irish received (and the cultural pride that reception helped engender), she even goes so far as to argue that they styled themselves "Scotch Irish" after the Revolution simply to distinguish themselves from Catholic Irish—in keeping with the anti-Catholic sentiments that had grown within the other folkways.

The very old distinctions between the English and the Borderers were higher than might be imagined. This would even have been true once the English language dominated the island. There was, for example, a lot less dependence on grain and cereal crops and a lot more on livestock among the Borderers than farther south in England. The idea of a "commons" that had become central to English agriculture by the end of the Middle Ages was not found so much in the borderlands, so there were fewer well-established villages with traditions tied to the land, certainly not ones grouped around a commons. Partly as a result, there was little manorial control or loyalty, and many of the houses of the poorer people were considered to be little more than temporary residences, thrown up quickly and easily abandoned (or rebuilt after destruction in one of the recurring wars). Fealty remained with family and not with a lord, and what inheritance there was relied not on a system of primogeniture but was partible. All in all, there was less of a commitment to place than one would find among the English. If important at all, place and place-bound tradition was significant and prized for what it might lack—control from faraway central authority and the safety of being far from the beaten track.

*****

Though I may use "Scots-Irish" or "Borderer" as a shorthand for the people who moved from the border region to Ulster Plantation and then to (most often) the Delaware Valley before proceeding into the Appalachian Mountains, it is important to remember that this group in no sense constituted either a "race" or a religion: "Lowlanders who left Scotland for Ireland between 1610 and 1690 were biologically compounded of many ancestral strains. ... Even if the theory of 'racial' inheritance of character were sound, the Lowlander had long since become a biological mixture, in which at least nine strains had met and mingled in different proportions."[14] Though they

CHAPTER 5

How the Other Half Lives

The American identity, as it began to develop in the new nation at the end of the 18th century, was imagined and written in New England, imagined and crafted separately by the southern white elite, and endured in the West. The great debates of the country in the 19th century centered on the conflicting views of North and South, reaching their peak with the outbreak of the Civil War. The West, in the context of this divide, either continued to be seen as grounds for extension of the North/South conflict or was ignored. Ignored, that is, until toward the end of the century when it became the new symbol of a grand American unity, myths concerning it even then crafted by the intellectual elite of New England and by East Coast writers generally.

In addition, while New England and New York were developing the first real American intellectual and artistic culture and the South was building its antebellum "paradise" on the backs of slaves, the Borderers of the West were busily engaged in a genocide that no one wanted to praise or even admit was happening. At the same time, they were eking out a living on land that often, as soon as they tried to lay claim to it, already seemed to be "owned" by someone from the East. The Borderers had no time for the "fully articulated pastoral idea of America"[1] that had emerged on the back of the Enlightenment and that was popular as an ideal in the East. Whatever garden they could find or create or conquer or defend was not often even *theirs* for very long. More frequently than we imagine, they were forced once again to move farther west and start from scratch—again. Poverty breathed down their necks; little of their lives would ever qualify as "pastoral."

Given the romantic vision that had grown up even then concerning the frontier, it must have been quite a shock for many from the coast during the 19th century when they encountered the reality of the west instead. Any sense of the "pastoral ideal" that, according to Leo Marx, had been building for so long in New England would have been quickly smashed. Easterners from areas that had been home to established European-based communities for more than a century must have felt that they had found a completely alien culture when they met the real frontier. Expecting to find Americans of a familiar type, they would certainly have been confused—if not scared half to death, creating an image that later would become the basis for the Eastern "dude" in tales of the West.

*****

If, as some of those in the East had argued, the landscape makes the man, then why were the backwoods folk so "devolved," so unlike their eastern countrymen? The land, after all, was abundant, filled with possibility. Why had the white people on the frontier not become, if they needed to change at all, more like the "noble" Native Americans? Such questions must have bedeviled any observant easterner as he or she traveled west. Writing about Robert Beverley's *History of the Present State of Virginia*, which was first published at the beginning of the 18th century, Marx says, "The new garden of the world, which Beverley has celebrated as the cause of all that is most admirable in the joyous Indian culture, now appears to have had a bad effect upon the English."[2] Beverley was not seeing the progress he had expected or a new and growing "society" (in the English sense of the word, almost one of class) on the frontier. All he found were people just as "base" as their ancestors had been back on the England/Scotland border—people a lot less sophisticated (in English terms) than those in the older, coastal colonies. Travelers for the next three centuries found much the same.

Numerous theories were put forward to explain the differences between the uncouth of the frontier and then settled "interior" of America and the civilized of the coast. Some writers actually blamed the land that had seemed so promising (as Beverley was coming to conclude at the end of his book), others blamed class distinctions, and still others saw the lack of civilizing government as the problem. Unfortunately, as all the writers were from the East (or from Europe) until well into the 19th century, those actually from the frontier culture had no voice in the discussion, no ability to ground the debate in the actual facts of the matter. As they would remain for generations more, they had been made mute. Few outsiders understood either their

perspective or their background, allowing erroneous conceptions to be put forward unchallenged and then to become received wisdom.

Because his own opinions were so rarely heard, it proved easy to romanticize the frontier farmer, transforming him "into a cult figure. Instead of striving for wealth, status, and power, he may be said to live a good life in a rural retreat: he rests content with a few simple possessions, enjoys freedom from envying others, fells little or no anxiety about his property, and, above all, he does what he likes to do."[3] It was only when the fans of the pastoral actually came into contact with backwoods folk (which was rare, admittedly) that such views were challenged—and the blame, then, was placed not on the ideas but on the people who were not living up to standards others had imagined for them. It was the farmers' fault; they must have allowed themselves to become debased. So disillusioning was this to the East that, according to Henry Nash Smith, "in the early nineteenth century ... the farmer could be depicted in fiction only as a member of a low social class."[4]

To account for the cultural slide that they thought they were seeing (or hearing about) on the frontier, many writers came to promote a

> theory of social stages which places the West below the East in a sequence to which both belong. The West has no meaning in itself because the only value recognized by the theory of civilization is the refinement which is believed to increase steadily as one moves from primitive simplicity and coarseness toward the complexity and polish of urban life. The values that are occasionally found in the West are anomalous instances of conformity to a standard that is actually foreign to the region.[5]

In other words, the frontier had no culture—and it was the duty of the East to impose one. Here again, we have one of the classic patterns of colonialism, the metropole putatively bringing "civilization" for the benefit of the local population of the periphery—while lining its own pockets, of course. Furthermore, "the notion that the lore and the mores of the backwoodsman might be interesting without reference to his function as a standard-bearer of progress and civilization, or his alarming and exciting barbarism, or his embodiment of a natural goodness, was quite late in appearing."[6] The resulting newer myth was created once the idea of the debased frontiersman had outlived its usefulness, the greater myth of an inclusive "manifest destiny" making it seem out of keeping with the newer ideas of American progress. Reflecting the views popular as the 19th century progressed to its end, Andrew Carnegie, an immigrant himself (from Scotland), saw the Americans as one culture, writing

that "they are essentially British."[7] Those who could not live up to that, again, were ignored or seen as debased anomalies.

One of the only differences between traditional conceptions of colonialism and the colonialism going on as the American West was settled by Europeans was that many of the people being colonized, the Borderers who had already arrived, were little different in language and bodily appearance from their "saviors." Almost all of them were white. What was going on, we find when we step away from the traditional myths of westward expansion in America, was a pattern little different from that of the internal colonialism that Michael Hechter explores, colonialism that occurred back in the British Isles themselves. One significant difference, of course, was that this colonial activity came fast on the heels of an earlier type of colonization but by a different group (the Borderers themselves) that was one of conquest and displacement. What remains clear, however, is that a much greater percentage of Americans than is generally admitted come from traditions where they have felt the brunt of colonialism even after the Revolution rather than simply having been the colonizers. For many of us from both cultures, our ancestors have been both colonizer and colonized, but the experience of the Borderers lasted long after real independence came to the secular-liberal culture of the coast.

Aside from (or in addition to) the English Enlightenment tradition that bypassed, for the most part, Borderers and Borderer-based communities, coastal American thinkers were developing their own ideas of community and individual interaction, ideas quite different from what was growing on the frontiers, growing with little notice in the East. After all, the coast looked to the West primarily in commercial terms and as an outlet for excess population. It did not expect to find independent intellectual activity there.

*****

Though today's Tea Partiers and fundamentalist Christians (both descendants of Borderer culture) try to gainsay it, the United States *was* founded on Enlightenment principles that excluded religion, for example, from the public political sphere and made science and "rational thought" the pillars for what was hoped would be a new type of society. Though the secular-liberal founders of the country themselves tried to deny it—even going so far as to construct the Constitution in both a populist and an elitist fashion (witness the distinct structures of the House of Representatives and the Senate)—most of them were elitists in terms of both class and culture. They believed that most of their fellow Americans were not as "enlightened" as they were and that the vast majority needed instruction as well as learned

guidance. Take Benjamin Franklin: As John Cawelti claims, his "conception of self-improvement was closely related to his belief in the necessity of a self-selecting and self-disciplining elite, men of virtue voluntarily assuming the leadership of society."[8] Like many of today's elitists, he skipped over cultural distinctions by substituting this idea of self-selection for success and leadership—something that was as much a fiction in the 18th century as it is in the 21st.

Franklin himself followed a long tradition of Americans who have felt they could best tell others how to manage their lives. In fact, according to Richard Weiss, even the later

> success literature bears much resemblance to the prescriptive writings of the divines of seventeenth-century New England. These Puritan guides gave advice on the achievement of material success, but always in the context of a larger framework of values. More than lists of commercial maxims, these writings were essays on the general conduct of life.[9]

At first, the Borderers fled this sort of admonition, especially when it came from those who saw Borderer culture only as a degraded form of their own. However, by the end of the 19th century, Borderers, like many other Americans, were embracing it as their own—as can be seen in the popularity across the cultures of such phenomena as the Lyceum movement, New Thought, Chautauqua, and others that sparked what Weiss calls "success literature" and that promoted a new conception of self-reliance. The impact of these, however, was somewhat different on the Borderers than it was on secular-liberal Americans.

Franklin, as we can easily imagine, probably would have been reluctant to put the distinctions between what he saw as classes of Americans into cultural terms. "Human happiness and social welfare were, in Franklin's view, dependent on two things: teaching prudence and self-restraint to the mass of men and encouraging the development of a new self-made leadership composed of men of practical ability and disinterested benevolence."[10] The elite would assist those rising to join them from the masses, no matter their backgrounds—something that anyone who watches societies in practice (not in the ideal) knows is not going to happen. In reality, we assist those who are "like us" much more than we help others. Sometimes we actually impede the progress of those furthest from us in similarity. Ability and drive are much lower on the list of criteria we look out for.

As time went on and at least some people began to see the limits of Franklin's ideals, presentation of the vision that Franklin tried to promote

became more and more restrained. As Cawelti, again, explains, "Later philosophers of success followed Franklin in the assumption that the new elite would select itself, but they narrowed Franklin's ideal of intellectual, moral, and economic improvement to a conception of individual economic achievement."[11] This did not have the result of slowing the growth of the idea that anyone can make it on their own, if only they are willing to put in the right effort. If anything, by narrowing the focus to economic success only, such writers fertilized it. No longer did you have to be good to be successful, though many began to believe that if you were successful, you were good.

At the same time, in the eyes of people from the secular-liberal tradition growing out of the English Enlightenment, there was indeed another criterion for success, a social one. There was only one "right" way to the cultural top, and that did not include either financial success alone or what Borderer culture might feel its members might be able to do for themselves. Conforming to the secular-liberal norm was required. Borderers could rarely cross that bar.

*****

Though attitudes toward the Borderers as uncouth and unlearned were seconded by coastal Americans, they could be seen most clearly through the eyes of the British who, paradoxically, often saw only one American whole, an essentially Borderer one:

> The contrast between nineteenth-century English and American attitudes toward self-improvement appeared often in the comments of English travelers in America. Mrs. Trollope, who visited America in the 1830's, was stupefied by the pride that leading Americans took in the fact that they were self-taught and self-made, which, as she acidly remarked, meant to her only that they were badly taught and badly made.[12]

Mrs. Frances Trollope was a delightful writer (one can see where her son Anthony gained his talent), but she was the product of a society of rigid class lines, where learning was defined from the top, as were fashion and style. She recounts a conversation she had while on the road:

> For the great part of this day we had the good fortune to have a gentleman and his daughter for our fellow-travellers, who were extremely intelligent and agreeable; but I nearly got myself into a scrape by venturing to remark upon a phrase used by the gentleman, and which had met me at every corner from the time I first entered the country. We had been talking of pictures, and I had endeavoured to adhere to

CHAPTER 6

The Townspeople, the Hero, and Alienation

Perhaps it seemed like the cult of individualism in America reached its height in the decades after World War II when the "loner" became the usual hero of popular media and when that loner, appropriately, was of a different sort than had been seen before. This hero became the icon of the Beats and then of the drug culture of the 1960s, exemplified by the solo motorcycle rider and by existential angst. It became the symbol of a cultural chasm that opened out of what had seemed a unity of wartime effort. In the popular mind, the new individual became both what was good for America and its actual best—as well as a lightning rod for what was its worst.

World War II saw not only the defeat of Germany and Japan but also the first signs of what would soon *seem* to be the final defeat of America's rural Borderer ethnicity as a distinct culture, the defeat of a vision of America rooted in small towns across the country from the mountains of Appalachia to California, a vision rising from much older Scots-Irish sensibilities. This vision did not actually die, of course, but it was pushed aside by a new "consensus" view of America, promoted not by Borderers but from within growing American print and electronic media and crafted by the Northeast and the upper Midwest—with strong aid from California and the Northwest.

To these cultural powers of the United States, there was much not worth mourning within the defeated vision. Its "wrongs" has been apparent for years—especially the essential wrongs of racism that had long warped the United States. For other Americans, the older vision was lamentably pushed aside by adulation for that new type of loner individualist—not a Daniel Boone trying to live alone but a person who could live alone even in a crowd.

Nonetheless, the once-idealized rural America of the self-sufficient Borderer remained a powerful and suggestive force, never dying but simply moving to the side in the face of the powerful new figure of individualism exemplified by superstars such as John Wayne (in his postwar incarnation), Marlon Brando, and James Dean. These were what Americans *should* be. The older individual, mired in family and friends, was now passé, its adulation naive—fit only for consumption by children watching television.

Looking back from a time of conservative resurgence, however, one can easily see that the Borderer ideal never should have been so ignored or treated with disdain. Doing so only widened splits already present in American society.

*****

Ultimately, the attitudes of those who saw the Borderer culture as backward, instead of demolishing Borderer attitudes, contributed to the culture's revival and, eventually, to its political domination. Starting with the Reagan era, this revival has shifted the entire American political debate far to the right. Referring to people as "hillbillies" and "rednecks" because their beliefs do not conform to the dominant media pattern has proven to be insufficient for dismissing the Borderers from the political realm. Instead, it turned them into an opposition—and a powerful one even in their days in the "wilderness" of the Barry Goldwater disaster. Then it led them back to a power that conservatives had lacked in America since 1932, power that, though it seems to be waning in 2013, is still potent in American political discussion, still defining the parameters of the debate itself.

In its rise from its own ashes starting in the 1960s, the American conservative movement has made effective use of the older vision of American individualism as well as of the resentment of the defeated, much as Democratic politicians in the South had done almost a century earlier. Unfortunately, from that low point after Goldwater's 1964 defeat, the movement's successes have also exacerbated American divides (red state/blue state, conservative/liberal, rural/urban) even as they have renewed the strength of that older but battered vision of America.

The media, through fascination with the "star" at the expense of the cast, have been complicit in the attempted cultural theft of the older Borderer identity of individualism. The theft has even helped lead to many of the resentments that the conservative movement has harnessed so effectively. Early on, as far back as the 1920s, Hollywood took hold of a stereotype and a cultural divide that had been beneath East Coast radar, used it, and then,

after the war, pushed it aside. By then, it had found a replacement for the older "naive" view of small-town America so no longer felt it needed to pander to it. Focused on the new individualist at the expense of the old, the movies turned the Judge Priest of Irvin Cobb's short stories into Judge Roy Bean (*The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, directed by John Huston, 1972) and Will Rogers (who played *Judge Priest* in the 1934 John Ford film) into Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes of the Elia Kazan's 1957 film *A Face in the Crowd*. Hollywood turned the small farmer into a hillbilly bumpkin, helping to marginalize him, and turned the hero of the people into the hero of himself.

Yet Hollywood could not completely destroy the older vision of the individual so long embedded in the "hayseed" population. Its reality was too strong a presence, even when it was converted into parody, in too much of America. It is an element of all American lives, whether they love to hate it, hate to love it, or just plain love it. As Appalachian studies scholar J. W. Williamson writes,

> The hillbilly lives not only in hills but on the rough edge of the economy, wherever that happens to land him. Meanwhile, in the normative heart of the economy, where the middle class strives and where cartoon hillbillies and other comic rural characters have entertained us on a regular basis since at least the mid-1800s, we take secret pleasure in the trashing of hallowed beliefs and sacred virtues—not to mention hygiene. . . .
>
> As rural memory, the hillbilly is not so easily dismissed. Hillbillyland is coated in barnyard, and the residue sticks like mud. Its denizens perversely refuse to modernize, obliviously miss the need to be in squalor. Free of our squeamishness, the hillbilly thrives in squalor. He's the shadow of our doubt.[1]

The hillbilly is also the repository for all the negative attitudes in sophisticated quarters for that other, that Borderer America—and, at the same time, he has become the Borderer thumb in the eye to the coastal elites. He is the image of the defeated "worst" of America (the stereotypical Borderer) as well as the symbol of their rise from the ashes. The Confederate soldier in a soiled and torn uniform on unofficial license plates in the 1960s south over the words "Forget, Hell" was more than just a statement on a century-old war. It was a challenge, one that seemed forlorn at the time, to the secular-liberal culture that seemed on the verge of dominating every aspect of American life.

Williamson's point, that the hillbilly may be easy to dismiss but always remains with us, on the edges of our consciousness and our politics, is well taken, of course, but I do not think he goes quite far enough. As politics of

CHAPTER 7

Keeping It All Apart

The cult of individualism, today, continues to have two parts, one associated with each of the major white American cultural groupings: the Borderers and the secular-liberals. Both, or the misunderstandings they generate, continue to be destructive to constructive discourse in the United States. Borderer individualism is retreating further behind the barriers of friends and families that were set up centuries ago, using the following twin justification for its actions (or inactions): First, the belief is that too many who do not work sponge off of those who do, necessitating creation of barriers against them. Second, the idea is that the individual, left alone, is always better able to do anything than the individual encumbered by societal dictates. Secular-liberal individualism, on the other hand, is premised on the metaphor of cream always rising to the top: The elite become elite because they know how to operate better, no matter the environment. They also see responsibility to ethical ideals as the highest commitment—not simply responsibility to law. Though these do not sound tremendously different, they are.

The differences between the visions of individualism do not manifest themselves simply in political divergences even though Borderer/secular-liberal distinctions are the basis for the American "red state/blue state" divide. Here again, there may be a high correlation between the two, but it is not one to one. As with the political diversity of the followers of Ayn Rand, many secular-liberals are also political conservatives—one of the reasons the right has been pulling itself apart since the 2012 election, for not even

conservative secular-liberals can understand Borderer viewpoints, many of which are much more fundamental than expressed political affinities.

*****

In conservative Charles Murray's *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, there is absolutely no mention of Appalachia, Borderers, or the Scots-Irish—or of any differentiation within the greater white culture of an America arising from older ethnic traditions. In fact, Murray goes so far as to assert that the "trends I describe exist independently of ethnic heritage."[1] Such a claim can be made only by ignoring *completely* the cultures and ethnicities of the U.S. population prior to 1960—which Murray does by taking the date of the John Kennedy assassination (November 21, 1963) as his real starting point. Such a claim, also, can be made only by focusing on the Enlightenment idea of the individual as a tabula rasa, as self-creation and self-responsibility, and by ignoring the influence of and responsibility for family—for family is the lynchpin of culture and the home of ethnic heritage and neither culture nor ethnicity can be considered without the other. Given the reality of human social organization, Murray's concentration on the self is as poor a focus as the opposite extreme, that of looking only at environment and history as the shaping factor in human success.

It also contradicts the much more nuanced (though incomplete) vision of American ethnicity presented by Nathan Glazer, another conservative (or neoconservative), who pretty much refuses to separate ethnicity and class, finding them caught up in different ways and percentages in different individuals. Glazer writes that "since the different identities are bound together in statistical clusters and are carried by a single human being, it is very hard to separate out the various identities people carry and to relate the varying interests that activate an individual to specific identities."[2] Glazer's own work illustrates the dangers he describes: A child of immigrants and one who grew up in New York City, Glazer does not question the monolith of "Anglo-conformity"[3] of the British-descended Americans, the idea of which, though incorrect, has been the received wisdom since at least the end of World War II.

What Glazer and Murray do agree on is that one's cultural orientation (ethnic, class, and more) has become something of a personal choice (à la "symbolic ethnicity"). This is one of the basic assumptions behind the secular-liberal cult of individualism and its promotion of the importance of a self-selecting societal elite. As on the census, ethnicity "is a matter of personal choice—no one will check on it and, presumably, no consequences will follow from giving an incorrect answer."[4] In this view, each person is free to create his or her own myth of personal background—even ethnicity, class, and culture becoming elements of individuality. This is quite different from the Borderer emphasis on family ties and an individualism framed by personal relationships.

Creating his own myth in his book, instead of tapping into older ones, Murray posits the formation of new and distinct upper and lower classes in America over the past half century. As he says, he takes his "new upper class" as a subset of what Robert Reich, David Brooks, Richard Florida, and Richard Herrnstein (in conjunction with Murray himself) have described as today's managerial and professional (or creative) class: "I am not referring to all of them, but to a small subset: the people who run the nation's economic, political, and cultural institutions. In practice, this means a fuzzy set in which individuals may or may not be in the upper class, depending on how broadly you want to set the operational definition."[5]

Like each of the four writers he refers to, Murray misses that the "new upper class" is not based solely on the accomplishments of individual members but has evolved from specific American ethnicities while excluding certain others. Arguing instead that the new class is based either on creativity or on economic success—or on both—he conveniently forgets that individuals trying to join it have to do more than prove creative or economic value. In most cases, they also have to come from more. To join this "new upper class," most people not there by birth would have to shed certain specific cultural and/or ethnic markers that illustrate the divide between their culture and, generally, the secular-liberal culture and adopt certain others. Murray can get away with this because, as he says, he is working with "fuzzy sets" and because, as we have seen in previous chapters, cultural and ethnic divides are *always* fuzzy.

The closest Murray comes to acknowledging that there actually were cultural and ethnic divides that created elites in the past is to nod his head in recognition to the old power of the Northeast. He says, however, that the members of that ruling elite, before 1960, "had little in common except their success,"[6] making his point through a distinction between David Rockefeller and the Jews involved in the creation of media empires. He also argues that Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, and Charles Collingwood belong in this elite in the same way a Rockefeller did, ignoring the fact that those media personalities were all employees, not the real elite at all but its paid public face.

By setting his discussion solely in terms of success, Murray misses the vital question of why *these* people were successful while others, many just as

intelligent and able, were not. This, of course, is a question often elided by followers of the cult of individualism. The successful rarely want to acknowledge the role of luck or of their starting point. Murray further limits his "narrow elite" to the movers and shakers: lawmakers, media professionals, and corporate executives. His "broad elite" consists of those in managerial and professional positions. He also ties his elite into the concept of the "self-made man," one of the very myths so much at the heart of American cults of individualism. He argues that even the "elite" of Eisenhower's and Kennedy's governments were not elite at all (in the sense of being of an old northeastern upper class) but self-made—exactly as in his vision of the elite today. The difference, he argues, is a common cultural taste or preference—though he never actually tries hard to convince his readers that the earlier elite did not have the same commonality. Of course, it did. And, not surprisingly, it was this common culture of the elite that provided the easiest and clearest demarcation of the divide between the Borderers and the rest of white America, though Murray and the writers he cites never seem to have seen it.

One of those writers, Richard Florida, discusses the Great Depression and the experience of his father, the son of Italian immigrants in Newark, New Jersey, noting that his

> father's experiences were broadly shared throughout the country. Although times were perhaps worst in the declining rural areas of the Dust Bowl, every region suffered, and the residents of small towns and big cities alike breathed in the same uncertainty and distress. The Great Depression was a national crisis—and in many ways a nationalizing event.[7]

The truth is that (and this is what Murray, like the other followers of the cult of individualism today, ignores as well), the experience of Florida's father in New Jersey and that of the part of the country culturally descended from the Borderers was *quite* different—as different as lives and experiences in Italy and, say, Scotland at any similar point in time.

What Florida—like Murray and many others—is doing is making a case for individual initiative as the deciding factor in success, doing so in part by ignoring completely the cultural and ethnic forces both aiding and impeding any particular individual. The desire to do this is as strong as ever in America today, the growing cult of individualism cutting down any emphasis on culture and ethnicity—and even poverty—to the extent that it is even affecting education. Teachers are finding themselves blamed for the failure of students,

even when outside factors of culture and ethnicity (and of poverty, of course) have clearly contributed directly to that failure.

As a grandchild of immigrants and growing up within sight of New York City, Florida likely had very little contact with the descendants of the Borderers during his childhood. Lacking that cross-cultural knowledge, he is willing to extrapolate from his father's experience to that of all Americans. His personal experience has given him no reason not to. This is something that too many in the secular-liberal American culture have been doing for generations, essentially ignoring the very real differences between themselves and the children of the Borderers, making the entire Borderer culture something of a ghost culture.

But it remains a ghost that has never really died.

Almost half of America has been living with that ghost for more than two centuries. They have been told constantly that their own experiences were no different than those of any other white Americans, effectively negating their unique cultural heritage. Life may have been a little harder in the Dust Bowl than in Newark, but that is all.

But it is not all. The heritage of the Borderer is quite distinct from that of the secular-liberal or even the Italian immigrant, and heritage has a huge impact on how people view their own possibilities. Perhaps, for example, it is appropriate to speak of "white privilege" when dealing with what once had been the dominant portion of the white population of America, that of the higher classes of the Northeast and the West Coast, but it is almost laughable when talking about much of the other half. Borderer lives have often been of rural hardship and deprivation—witness the James Agee and Walker Evans book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* showing Depression-era life for white tenant farmers in the South. Even when this reality is recognized, all that most people think about is remedying the poverty—that, they imagine, will make the groups equal. Just as Italian American, Jews, and others have risen from poverty into prominence in the greater culture, the children of Borderers should be able to do so, too, and by following the same path. This attitude, though, ignores the realities of cultural difference and leaves many Borderer descendants mired in poverty—just as it does for many African Americans.

It is not so simple as those who think that alleviating poverty or improving education can increase cultural equality might have one believe. The ghosts that Italian Americans and Jews and, of course, African Americans carry with them, religion and certain cultural stereotyping among them, have been recognized by the greater culture and are even explored by that culture in its arts and media. Even when there is discrimination against them, it is generally

clarified and recognized and called abhorrent. Generally, people know it for what it is, even if they cannot always stop it. But discrimination against the Borderer culture is not considered discrimination at all—for the Borderer culture is not even considered a culture. At most, it is considered simply lower class, carrying no baggage aside from accent (like the myth of the 1956 Alan Lerner and Frederick Loewe musical *My Fair Lady* and even George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, on which it is based), making it possible to "rise above" simply through work and desire. It is attitudes like this that make perfect fodder for those, like Murray and Florida, who argue that it is not culture or ethnicity at all that matters in contemporary America but rather creativity and ability. And it makes for the perfect opportunity to tell "hillbilly" jokes without the slightest twinge of unease.

Yet this idea that anyone can rise, that all one needs is within oneself, is as much a fiction today as it ever was. In a 2009 study for the Brookings Institution, Julia Isaacs compared family incomes from the 1960s with the family incomes of their children in the 1990s and 2000s. Her conclusions, which confirm what those with real experience of American cultural divides already knew, include this:

> Contrary to American beliefs about equality of opportunity, a child's economic position is heavily influenced by that of his or her parents.
>
> - Forty-two percent of children born to parents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution remain in the bottom, while 39 percent born to parents in the top fifth remain at the top.
> - Children of middle-income parents have a near-equal likelihood of ending up in any other quintile, presenting equal promise and peril for those born to middle-class parents.
> - The "rags to riches" story is much more common in Hollywood than on Main Street. Only 6 percent of children born to parents with family income at the very bottom move to the very top.[8]

One impediment for most people from the Borderer culture who do try to find success within the broader American society is that they have to hide their own heritage as they merge their lives with those of extant elites. Today, those from other "outsider" cultures do not have to do this quite as much. Imagine the conflict in *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927): Jack Robin (aka Jakie Rabinowitz) has rejected the culture and music of his cantor father. We in the audience respect both cultures and understand the dilemma that Robin ultimately faces. Next, remember *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004), whose Ray Charles offends a future wife by taking "church music" and making

it pop. Here again, we in the audience are able to respect both cultures and can understand her negative reaction to what he is doing. Now, imagine a movie about a country boy who wants to play, say, classical piano. Likely, the only way we can envision this movie is as a comedy. Why? Because the home culture of the boy has no respect in most of the rest of America; no one takes it seriously. In fact, it is rarely seen as a culture at all. For this reason, successful Borderers abandon their cultural heritage with an alacrity seen much more rarely, today, in people arriving at American success from other cultures.

Fortunately for Borderer strivers, most people mistake style for substance. If one can learn the dialect of the rich and its touchstones for individual judgment, one can "pass" into their society. This common and ages-old error of accepting the mask as the reality is one that Murray makes in his discussion of the television series *thirtysomething*. Murray claims that the culture presented in the show "had no precedent, with its characters who were educated at elite schools, who discussed intellectually esoteric subjects, and whose sex lives were emotionally complicated. . . . The characters all possessed a sensibility that shuddered equally at Fords and Cadillacs, ranch homes in the suburbs and ponderous mansions, Budweiser and Chivas Regal."[9] Yet what Murray mistakes for "sensibility" is nothing more than another set of markers of a cultural divide, one that he apparently does not even know exists. The simpler divide implied by his pairing is one of reliance on money and advertising against an undefined "real" and developed "taste." The choices, in his mind, have nothing to do with the evolving cultural conventions of a long-established upper class within the old dominant secular-liberal culture, conventions far removed from brand names or styles of homes. However, though Murray may style them as "sensibilities," in fact, these are simply the new markers for delineating between this contemporary version of the upper class and American hoi polloi, be they Borderer or otherwise.

This is not new, and the "refined" tastes are "better" only in that the things Murray lists above are items the "in" group has decided against. In reality, their Saabs and brownstones and Laphroaig only cost even more money and are the subject of less advertising. They may indeed be better made, but they impart no inherent superiority of taste or culture. Shuddering at others is only the same snobbishness that has been the hallmark of class-conscious literature for generations. How people who hold such sensitivities today are different in substance from the people of Edith Wharton's 1920 novel (set in the 1870s) *Age of Innocence* or from the movie *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940) is never explained by Murray.

*****