INTRODUCTION TO THE 1995 EDITION

I

In fact, it seems to me quite possible that the 1960s represented the last burst of the human being before he was extinguished. And that this is the beginning of the rest of the future, and that from now on there will simply be all these robots walking around, feeling nothing, thinking nothing. And there will be nobody left almost to remind them that there was once a species called a human being, with feelings and thoughts. And that history and memory are right now being erased, and that soon no one will really remember that life existed on the planet.


History is not sensibly measured out in decades. The period of upheaval we conventionally call “the sixties” is more appropriately seen within a broader setting that stretches from 1942 to 1972. These dates too are arbitrary, but they define with somewhat greater accuracy a remarkable period in American history. Let us call it the Age of Affluence.

The year 1942 marks the point at which the United States finally emerged from the Great Depression. That transition was embodied in Franklin Roosevelt’s landmark announcement of the new wartime economic order. “Dr. New Deal has retired,” FDR proclaimed. “He has been replaced by Dr. Win the War.” In the brief three and a half years that followed, all the grim antagonisms and oppressive necessities of the depression rapidly melted from the scene. Corporate leaders who had spent the past dozen years vilifying FDR as a “traitor to his class” now flocked to Washington as “dollar-a-year men” in
return for bulging, cost-plus military contracts. By the time the war was over, the entire industrial plant of the United States had been rebuilt from the ground up to become the world’s only state-of-the-art technological establishment. A new skilled workforce had been trained and booming new industries (electronics, chemicals, plastics, aerospace) had been born. Unscathed by the damage that other nations had suffered in the war, the United States had no economic rivals. It had emerged from the war as king of the world industrial mountain, so vastly wealthy that it could afford to export the capital needed to revive the European and Japanese economies that would one day become its major competitors.

Move forward a generation to 1972 and we find ourselves in the midst of the oil shortages that hit America where it hurt the most—in the pocketbook via the gas tank. However it was engineered, the gasoline-pump crisis represented the first sighting by the general public of any advanced industrial society of a serious ecological constraint. An unsettling lesson was about to be learned: Things deplete. You can’t have it all. The sky is not the limit; the earth is.

What I have called “the counter culture” took shape between these two points in time as a protest that was grounded paradoxically not in the failure, but in the success of a high industrial economy. It arose not out of misery but out of plenty; its role was to explore a new range of issues raised by an unprecedented increase in the standard of living. For a period of some twenty years the world’s most prosperous industrial society became an arena of raucous and challenging moral inquiry the likes of which we may never see again—at least not if those whose wealth, power, and authority are at stake have anything to say about it.

During the mid to late sixties, I was living in England editing a small, radical pacifist journal. The publication was closely connected with the great Aldermaston disarmament
marches that were calling for an end to the arms race, which most European protesters were prepared to blame primarily on the United States. The early sections of this book were written and sent home as articles for *The Nation* while I participated in a characteristic experiment of the period: the founding of a turbulent, short-lived “Antiuniversity of London” where transient students arrived with little more to their names than guitars, begging bowls, and a stash of magic mushrooms to study the teachings of Timothy Leary, anarchist politics, and Tantric sex. I mention this as a reminder that the upheaval of those years was more than an American phenomenon; it extended to western Europe. Living abroad in so intense and often anti-American a political ambience offered me an odd, distancing perspective on all I saw transpiring in my own country. I became aware of nuances between protest in America and abroad. I could not help but become more severely critical of the way the United States abused its prodigious power around the world, but at the same time I became more sympathetically appreciative of the strange new significance that the American protest movement had assumed in our time. Youthful insurgents in Europe tended to fall back on a long-established left-wing tradition that was all but nonexistent in this country. At first I was inclined to agree that this was a sign of America’s political immaturity. But before this book was completed, perhaps because I felt so stung by the somewhat smug remarks my European colleagues often made about the ideological naiveté of the United States, I had concluded that the very weakness of conventional ideological politics in the United States lent the counter culture its unique insight. Questions about the quality and purpose of life, about experience and consciousness, about the rationality and permanence of industrial growth, about our long-term relations with the natural environment arose more readily in America than in the older industrial societies. The United States was
closer to the postindustrial horizon where issues of an unusual kind were coming into view.

Oddly enough, many of those issues could be traced to preindustrial origins. They stemmed from a dissenting sensibility as old as the lament that the Romantic poets had once raised against the Dark Satanic Mills. But as a factor in the political arena of the modern world, that cry of the heart was distinctly new—so new, in fact, that it was difficult to imagine it being successfully communicated to society at large. And, of course, it wasn’t. Little more than the sensational surface of the protest filtered through the mass media: gestures of irreverent disaffiliation that had to do with drugs and sex, jarring new styles of music and dress, obscene language and bizarre alternative lifestyles. Nevertheless, matters of remarkable philosophical substance did come to be hotly debated by a larger public than had ever participated in the serious political deliberations of any modern society. Members of a rising, college-educated generation—the “new class” as some commentators called them—were using their well-trained wits not to bolster the system in which they were meant to find their fortunes but to shake it to its foundations. Of course, most members of the new class were on the fast track into the technocratic elite, the regime of expertise that has since emerged in every advanced industrial society. More of them would become button-down junior executives at IBM and ITT than many hippies. But it was those who elected to drop out of the privileged middle class and make trouble who would stamp the era with its special character. The ingratitude of these malcontents could not help but attract concerned attention. Even the spectators who stood by bewildered before this thankless outburst could not fail to register this much of the message: Something isn’t right here. Something has gone desperately wrong. And those in charge cannot be trusted to fix it.

Or words and music to that effect.
More important than any single invention or investment of America's wartime economy was the new political constellation that came into being between 1942 and 1945. It would later be named by President Dwight Eisenhower in the only memorable speech he ever made. In his farewell address in 1960, Ike sought to warn his compatriots against "the acquisition of unwarranted influence . . . by the military-industrial complex." But the warning, if anyone cared to hear it, came too late. By 1960 the military-industrial complex quite simply was the American political system, and few were inclined to take issue with it. It was running too smoothly, providing fat profits at the top and full paychecks at the bottom. If the politics of the twenties and thirties had been a struggle between trickle-down and prime-the-pump economic policy, the forties, fifties, and sixties were a happy combination of both policies and seemingly the best of all possible worlds.

The cost of living adjustment—the COLA, as it came to be called—serves as a telling sign of the times. In the days of Eugene Debs and Big Bill Haywood, workers had needed to go up against goons and scabs and federal troops to raise their pay by pennies—and then usually failed in the attempt. With the advent of the COLA in the 1960s, pay raises were built into the contract, as were paid vacations, overtime incentives, medical insurance, and retirement plans. This was the era of the Great American Job. Big labor, which had to fight for its life in the thirties, was a partner, if a junior one, in the military-industrial complex. In a nation as rich as the United States, what else made sense? Good jobs provided the purchasing power the system needed. They were a smart investment in well-lubricated industrial relations.

Affluence lies at the core of any discussion of the countercultural sixties. Affluence lent the protest of the period its
unique quality of radical disaffiliation. It did this in two ways: the most obvious is the simple fact that dropping out during prosperous times was a great deal more possible for middle-class youngsters. The society provided a big economic cushion to fall back on: if not social programs, then the parental bank account. And dropping back in again was not all that difficult.

But there was another, far more important way in which postwar prosperity produced the counter culture. In affluent America a daring new strategy of social control came into play: the carrot became as big as the stick—maybe bigger. Abundance spilling over from the World War II gravy train made it affordable and feasible for corporate America to flirt with the old Populist demand to “share the wealth.” Following the booming wartime years the economy seemed to be under new management. What was the point of beating workers into submission over nickel-and-dime pay raises when there was so much to go around? Better to have peace on the assembly line and a steady flow of goods through the marketplace than strife and upheaval. So let the good times roll! The counter culture cannot be understood without taking into account the new spirit of patrician largesse and leniency that prevailed on the corporate summit.

For those of us who lived through it, it was difficult to believe the Age of Affluence would ever end. It seemed so deeply embedded in our history and aspirations, so rationalized by theories of the expanding economy that it looked like the manifest destiny of American civilization. Now, looking back at images of post–World War II life, it is even more difficult to believe that such an era ever really existed. The grotesquely tail-finned cars that cruised the burgeoning freeways now look like the mechanical equivalent of dinosaurs. At one end of their daily commute the gas-guzzlers connected with cities that were just beginning to thicken into characterless “metropolitan areas.” At the other end of the ride were Elysian subur-
ban fields neatly parcellled out into the ticky-tacky dormitories for the ticky-tacky families that have become the folklore of television reruns. Each home had its own eighth of an acre of lawn needing the attention of a power mower; each had its spotless kitchen focussed on a stuffed refrigerator as big as a boxcar. And there, scurrying about among the gleaming appliances and humming gadgets, was the housewife and mother, eternally smiling, eternally aproned, with never a hair out of place, devoting herself to the daily fight against floor-wax build-up.

A famous phrase entered our language: “Go to your room!” addressed to misbehaving six-year-olds by parents whose memories of childhood in the Great Depression surely included no better room of their own than the living-room sofa. After dinner, with the breadwinning father comfortably back at home, we imagine this family settling down to watch one of the give-away quiz shows, where the parade of merchandise mattered more than the questions or the answers of the contestants. Getting, having, owning: that was what life was all about. And for those who did not have the wherewithal to get, have, and own, the credit card appeared as the most fiendishly efficient means of encouraging consumer debt ever devised.

The war-torn Europeans, looking on in envy and resentment at the Americans who had ridden into such abundance after liberating them from Fascism, called us “pigs in heaven.” A neorealist Italian filmmaker of the period told the story of a man who came home to Naples after visiting his prospering relatives in the United States. Asked what life was like in America, his response was to take out a box of Kleenex, blow his nose in a tissue, and cast it out the window. “Use it up, throw it away. Use it up, throw it away.” Today we ponder the mysteries of sustainability. But the ideal of the forties, fifties, and sixties was disposability: TV dinners (more packaging than food) were disposable; so too the TV itself, which was regularly scrapped in favor of something bigger, in color, with more
buttons and controls; so too the home that surrounded the TV, which might be vacated as soon as the father found a higher paying job across the country. The great gas-guzzlers were disposable, destined, before they were much more than two years old, to finish as rusting scrap in the automobile cemeteries that were becoming a feature of every American city.

Where did all the disposables go after they were disposed of? What an odd question! Did they not simply . . . disappear? Down the garbage disposal and gone forever. Out of sight, out of mind. No fear of running out of room for all the garbage. The world was understood to be a waste receptacle of infinite capacity. No fear of running out of resources to be turned into garbage. There was a substitute for everything. After all, had we not discovered plastic?

Marriages and families also became disposable. Divorce, once the luxury of the well-to-do, became an affordable middle-class prerogative. Customs and traditions that would later be called “family values” crumbled before the onslaught of an affluence that made a healthy skepticism about social customs affordable. Hidden miseries and resentments, long confined to the politics of the family, suddenly came to seem insupportable. All that social historians had long known about the idealized bourgeois home of the nineteenth century—namely, that it was predicated upon the patriarchal subjugation of women and children—was at last rising to visibility, as was the age-old friction of the generations. Grandparents too old to work, a dependent population that had once crowded their children’s homes, could now be bought off with Social Security and Medicare, which assured their independence. The seniors took off in mobile homes or into retirement communities. Few will admit it these days, but the entitlements that have lately become such a bone of contention began more as an act of selfishness on the part of the young than as greed on the part of the old. They were an effort to get burdensome
seniors off the hands of an increasingly careerist and transient younger generation.

More consequentially, affluence made it affordable for parents to buy off the demands of troublesome children. If the kids could be given rooms of their own, why not cars of their own, money of their own, a culture of their own? Dr. Spock's theory of permissive child rearing sanctioned leniency; bulging paychecks made generosity possible. The result was a uniquely pampered generation of children—the baby boomers—who grew up to believe that every finger painting they brought home from kindergarten ought to be admired and every problem of high-school life ought to be a family obsession. With discretionary spending power in their pockets, adolescents soon became a commercial opportunity. At first the culture of the young was nothing but merchandise: clothes, records, movies, cosmetics. The teenager was invented as a market. But the market dangerously intensified self-awareness in the adolescent years of life that most lend themselves to brooding introspection. A fateful development. Rebels who began without a cause might soon find more than enough to justify rebellion.

What a strange way of life this was! A delusionary consumer's paradise that could thrive only in a hothouse of ecological ignorance where it was assumed that everybody's rising expectations could be indulged. Students I teach these days find it hard to believe that there was ever a time when a cheap college education could be guaranteed to every middle-class kid (and to many working-class kids like me), when jobs came built into every college graduate's life, when economic theorists seriously discussed the possibility of abolishing work in favor of a guaranteed annual income. Now, with hindsight, we can see that all this was a passing phase like the halcyon days of the Roman patriciate before the barbarians appeared across the river and the aqueducts began to leak. The Age of Affluence will be remembered in the history books not as the world's entry upon
a permanent plateau of abundance but as a last outburst of extravagance on a mass level before the biospheric facts of life reported in.

Of course, the reality was rather different from the images. Not everybody got in on the great consumer binge. The inner cities were the "other America." They were becoming the haven of the low-skilled unemployable. Moving the unsightly poor out of the way to make room for malls and condos was called "urban renewal"; on the streets it had another name: "Negro Removal." But then economics is as much a study in fantasy and aspiration as in hard numbers—maybe more so. What an economic system promises is as important as what it delivers: the promises console and motivate. For thirty years after the end of World War II, affluence was understood to be the norm; where affluence was absent, we spoke of "pockets" of poverty. The very phrase is revealing. Poverty was seen as a stubborn and doomed resistance to the victorious advance of industrial growth that would soon engulf the world. Not everybody got in on the affluence, but everybody believed they could or would, if not by political agitation and reform, then by the logic of inevitable abundance. "A rising tide lifts all the boats," John Kennedy proclaimed. Just let the system keep pouring out plenty, and soon we shall all live like Ozzie and Harriet.

III

As they surveyed this prospering vista from above, it was easy for those on the commanding heights of the affluent society to believe that corporate America had simply evolved toward munificence. But it was also the case that well-administered affluence helped create a population of "cheerful robots" (as C. Wright Mills phrased it) who would give no trouble to their generous superiors. Bribery replaced vulgar coercion as a means of securing acquiescence. The deal was this: let the Pentagon,
the CIA, and General Dynamics run the show, and the cornucopia will continue to flow. The rewards for obedience were never higher. On the other hand, the penalties for dissent had rarely been greater. For those who stepped out of line, the McCarthyite boom was waiting to be lowered. These were the days when people refused to sign petitions in support of the Bill of Rights for fear of losing their jobs, their security clearance, and their credit rating.

Unfortunately, granting the military-industrial complex a free hand to set the political agenda entailed liabilities—like the cancellation of democracy. Or, worse still, the possibility of incinerating the greater part of the civilized world. The military-industrial complex was, after all, a system committed for its very survival to an authoritarian style and a paranoid geopolitical worldview. Otherwise, how to justify the expanding warfare state and the endless arms race? Even if the post-Stalinist leadership in the USSR was serious about peaceful coexistence (and how was one to be sure?), what chance was there that our corporate-military establishment could afford to take them up on the offer? The Cold War was the lifeblood of the military-industrial complex, and the Cold War brought with it the balance of terror and a worldwide community of fear. Sooner or later somebody with his finger on the button was bound to miscalculate. But what of that? Intoxicated with apocalyptic power, thinkers in high places began to flirt with surrealistic thermonuclear scenarios of “acceptable casualty levels” that ran to a hundred million . . . tops.

By the early 1960s the film Dr. Strangelove was making black comedy of such terminal horrors. The movie sounded like satire Old Style (“learn to stop worrying and love the bomb”), but it wasn’t. An important new counter-cultural theme was being sounded: madness in high places. In the century that started with Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, the psychological dimension of politics was at last rising to the
surface. Perhaps sick fantasy and sexual derangement had more to do with policy than reason and numbers. Psychosis might be a more serious threat to our well-being than simple corruption. Was it possible that these counterphobic generals and compulsively macho strategists really believed what they said? What was one to make of the fact that men in suits around the long tables at the RAND Corporation flippantly referred to World War III as a "wargasm"?

Life in the Age of Affluence was revealing certain contradictions. Credit cards galore and backyard barbecues... in return for secret government and the rough beast slouching ever closer to Bethlehem. Were the rewards worth the risks? The parental generation was in no position to raise the question. Born out of depression into world war, it had sacrificed more than its share. Now it eagerly embraced its chance to relax and enjoy. And the enjoyments were many. Permissiveness was not the cultural property of the young alone. What Dr. Spock did for children, Dr. Kinsey did for the parents. Age-old repressions were being gleefully stripped away. Censorship was vanishing, and sexual shame, always among the main levers of social control, was rapidly going out of style. Erotic pleasure was being permitted guiltless expression. It could be openly discussed and displayed, and, thanks to the Pill, indulged without limit. Indeed, sex was taking on variations that served the system. Frolicking among the Playboy Club bunnies was among the highest rewards of the successful Organization Man. By the early seventies, Club Med vacations and swinging singles bars had become the perquisites of corporate status. The neo-Marxist critic Herbert Marcuse called this tactic "repressive desublimation": allowing just enough freedom to dampen and integrate discontent—but not enough to endanger the discipline necessary for a stable industrial order.
The Age of Affluence represented a daring experiment on the part of ruling elites in maintaining their dominance not by starving and bludgeoning their opposition into submission, but by seducing it into compliance. Maybe corporate leaders saw this as more than a strategy of social control; they may have sincerely believed that they were civilizing the system. Through their burgeoning foundations they were lavishing grants and awards upon their dependent millions. They were endowing universities and fostering research and the arts. Perhaps they foresaw the day when some bard of the marketplace would echo their baronial names down the ages like the Hellenic tribes of *The Iliad*. GM, GE, AT&T, IT&T: the flowers of postscarcity civilization. The very fact that many corporate leaders may have honestly believed they were elevating American society to a new level of humanity and excellence must surely have contributed to the hurt and resentment that would soon result from the ingratitude of their foremost beneficiaries.

What, after all, was their alluring philanthropy worth to the next generation coming along? For those who had been fed on demand as infants, nondeferred gratification was not a reward for good conduct but the given nature of things. By the early sixties these permissively parented young were arriving on college campuses expecting to find all the freedom and happiness their parents had been struggling to give them since they were born. This was a generation raised on *MAD* magazine and *Catcher in the Rye*. They had been taught that their parents' way of life was laughable. What did that leave them to do but (in Paul Goodman’s phrase) “grow up absurd”? By the late fifties, bolder members of this generation in identity crisis had already decided that Beatnik poets and Greenwich Village folk-singers were better role models than fathers who had sold their souls to General Motors or mothers who racked their brains all
all day to bake a better biscuit. They dreamed of being “on the road” rather than on the job. Hair became an issue: letting it grow long meant dissent. Dirty words became an issue: the expletive undeleted meant irreverence. Sex out of marriage became an issue: it meant risk-free promiscuity and possibly women out of control. Puffing a joint became an issue: it meant courting outlaw status and outlaw consciousness. It was easy to find issues. They grew plentifully in the gaps between the dying morality of privation and a lush new economic order that all but made gratification mandatory.

Young people of the early sixties arrived on campus under the impression that education was about self-expression and free choice and radical possibilities. Instead they soon learned that the multiversity was committed to a very different political agenda: it flourished on bomb physics contracted by the warlords. By way of required, mass lecture courses, those who administered the Pentagon’s academies were there to recruit the personnel that would staff the military-industrial complex. Worse still, the warlords might at times expect blood sacrifice. For among the several peripheral military adventures they had undertaken around the world was a low-profile skirmish in a place called Vietnam, where the bloodshed was dragging on rather longer than expected. But not to worry. That would soon be mopped up—given enough cannon fodder.

IV

By the mid-sixties cannon fodder was proving hard to come by, except among the underclass. And even the minorities were hearing voices—like those of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—raised against a war effort that was eating into the Great Society’s resources at the expense of black youth, whose proper place was in the front lines of the War on Poverty. As for the pampered white young, they simply refused, in increasing
numbers, to regard Vietnam as a career opportunity. Their unusual historical experience with an affluent and permissive lifestyle had made them rotten soldiers. Some poke fun at slogans like “Make love not war,” but it was a fine, gentle sentiment, and at the time a brave thing to proclaim.

Here then was a contradiction that left-wing ideologues of the past had never foreseen. Marxists had always predicated revolutionary change on the “immiserization” of the proletariat. But in postscarcity America, rebellion was breaking out where it was to be least expected: amid younger members of the very bourgeois elite whose interests the military-industrial complex purported to serve. Taking full advantage of the security permitted by the general affluence, this generation began to demand levels of freedom, self-expression, and enjoyment that suggested they saw life as something more than getting and spending. Worse, they demanded an idealism that life rarely affords in adulthood. Instead of thanking their benefactors, they mocked them in their songs and poems, and proceeded to raise issues that suggested severe doubts about the rightness and rationality of urban industrial society. They were doing no less than calling the myth of material progress into question. Some retreated to rural communes, wanting to live lightly on the earth; others rigged up wigwams and yurts and affected the lifestyle of voluntary primitives. These were gallling gestures that implied our leaders might have the wrong future in mind.

The McCarthyites of that period identified every complaint against the system as Communist-inspired. But the counter-cultural critique did not stem from the familiar ideologies of the past. The Communist and Socialist Left had always been as committed to industrialism as their capitalist foes, never questioning it as an inevitable historical stage. From this viewpoint, all that needed to be debated was the ownership and control of the system. But here was a dissenting movement that yearned for an entirely different quality of life. It was not