1997

Is the United States Falling Apart?

Lindholm, Charles

MIT Press

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3837
Boston University
Is the United States Falling Apart?
Charles Lindholm and John A. Hall

_Daedalus_ 126: 183-209.

A host of bestsellers have appeared in recent years complaining that the social fabric of the United States is unravelling.\(^i\) What is at issue is not solely the insistent demands emanating from previously unheard of entities such as `the Queer Nation' and `Nation of Islam' as well as from more familiar ethnic and religious groups. Rather, the `new groupism' rests on sophisticated philosophical attacks against the very notion of a common American culture. One such criticism argues that the American dream had content, but that this content was so biased and limited, Waspish and racist that there is no reason to lend it any credence.\(^ii\) Another view sees Anglo-Saxon culture in general and American culture in particular as lacking content, being so individualist and atomist as to deny the way in which collectivities create compelling moral identities for their members.\(^iii\) Noting the difference between these two views—one seeks to abolish any common frame, the other to create one—should not obscure their shared belief that the promise of the seal of the United States—`E pluribus unum'—has now lost its relevance in an atmosphere of `culture war'.\(^iv\)

The debate about the immorality or absence of a common American cultural value system has been posed in another way by theorists who lament the supposed development of a new American character type, so lacking in moral fibre and fearful of social opprobrium as to have no capacity to make ethical commitments.
This is the 'other-directed' American made famous by David Riesman and his associates. Following in Riesman's footsteps, *Habits of the Heart*, the hugely successful recent portrait of American life drawn by Robert Bellah and his colleagues, presents Americans as individualists without substance, unable to undertake principled communal action because they are terrified to differ from others in a competitive, fluid and atomistic social world. The claim of diminished social responsibility has also been made from a somewhat different perspective by Robert Putnam when noting that Americans now 'bowl alone', a development he holds to represent a waning of the social capital hitherto created by the associations of civil society.

A paradox is apparent amidst this plethora of discordant warnings: Americans are simultaneously imagined to be unable to resist the tyranny of groups and to be isolated individualists. This suggests the need for reconsideration of the condition of the United States in order to reveal the underlying institutional patterns and shared cultural values of the society, and then to decide whether these institutional structures and cultural commonalities are enough to hold America together. Any such reconsideration must begin with a discussion of history.

*With Liberty and Justice for All: The Institutional Framework*

The first and foremost thing to note about the United States is that it never had an old regime. Americans were able in consequence to create a society with a unique commitment to
egalitarianism and to social mobility. Such a future was not preordained. The identity of most of the early colonists was initially very firmly British, and its leaders took for granted the hierarchical class ethic of the colonizing power. At the same time, the colonists were also loyal to an ideological conception of the rights of free-born Englishmen, and not to a particular piece of territory. Ironically, the very Englishness of the colonists did much to encourage their rebellion: for although the taxation proposed by Westminster in its attempt to put its first empire on a sound financial basis was moderate, the logistics of eighteenth century power meant that consultation by means of representation did not take place, thereby infuriating the settlers, who believed they deserved to be treated as free-born citizens of the realm. Still, these first rebels were men of substance, whose conception of 'the people' was limited to the propertied.

It was only the military exigencies of the struggle for independence that forced the American elite to turn to genuinely popular elements, both in the cities and in the West, where strong egalitarian and individualistic values held sway. The ensuing mass military mobilization undermined the potential, which had certainly existed, for the emergence of a local old regime of hereditary gentry. That potential was further weakened when the property of almost all Loyalist large landholders was expropriated, obliging them to flee from the United States in numbers five times greater than Royalists from France during the Revolution--which to say that America was born
amidst a dose of political cleansing of a large proportion of its potentially aristocratic elements.\textsuperscript{x} More lastingly, the revolutionary political elite which laid down constitutional principles for the new society could not ignore the popular contribution, making an emphasis on liberty, democracy and the rights of small property inevitable. Of course, elite distrust of the people was an element behind the decision to create a system of checks and balances, that is, a political system which would be hard for anyone to dominate. Regional fear that one part of the country might dominate further weakened the power of the central government by introducing a system of federalism and by rendering all the states equivalent in the Senate, regardless of their actual population.

Despite these safeguards, the American nation was very far from established in the early years of the republic. Some states, most notably Vermont, were reluctant to join the union. More importantly, local interests were so divergent that threats of secession were made in earnest. Although the earliest of these came from the Northern states appalled at the war of 1812, the most serious of course came from the South. If the South's secession had to do with its fear that it would eventually be overwhelmed by new states without slavery, it remains the fact that Lincoln, convinced that the United States stood as a beacon on the hill for other nations, fought primarily for continuance of the Union.\textsuperscript{xi} Military outcomes very often determine national histories, and this has most certainly proved true in the United States. No further serious challenge has been directed against
the Union, though the notion of states' rights and a deep distrust of the federal government has continued to have a constant appeal to local electorates everywhere in America.

Of course, territorial continuity is not in itself a guarantee of social peace: to the contrary, vicious struggles can and do take place within accepted frontiers over the definition of a society's character. The classical experience of Europe saw religious and class struggles deeply divide even those countries which were not polarized by the problem of nationalities. Comparative historical sociology most often explains class conflict in political terms, stressing the extent to which radicalism resulted from the despotic character of state power. Most obviously, the various trajectories of European labor movements are best understood as the result of authoritarian regimes' determination to exclude the people from participation. For instance, anti-socialist or anti-union legislation in Imperial Russia and Imperial Germany made workers focus on and attack the state since it was futile for them to attempt to organize at the industrial level. In relatively liberal Britain, where unionization was possible, conflict was diffused more evenly throughout the whole society. In addition, where the state was linked to an official church, conflict was likely to be made the more intense by the layering of two sources of dispute on top of one another. The occasional intransigence of the left in French history owes much to its also being the party of anti-clericalism; in contrast, the relative peace of England resulted in part, as the French
historian Elie Halevy noted, from workers having their own religion, so that Methodism replaced the appeal of Marxism.\textsuperscript{xv}

These comments allow us to highlight some especially salient aspects of the institutions of the United States. The American Constitution, by refusing to accept a state religion and giving each individual the right of religious freedom, ensured that, unlike France, religious disputes would not layer themselves on top of any other source of conflict. The Founding Fathers thereby created a system whose dynamics were well understood by both Adam Smith and Rousseau. Personal religiosity and sectarianism were to be encouraged by the lack of an established faith, whilst challenges to state authority would be limited both by the movement between sects and by the tendency for their interests to clash; government could therefore encourage the quest for the salvation of one's soul, but discourage the existence of any ecclesiastical claims to authority in this world. This model came to define the American experience of religion: the vast majority are believers, but no one religion predominates--whilst new religions are continually being born. The occasional appearance of millennarian awakenings and local charismatic cults that has long been characteristic of American religious life is a small price to pay for the relative stability of this arrangement.

A very similar pattern explains the nature of American labor history. One of the most famous of all treatises about American life asked why there was no socialism and no great workers' movement in the United States.\textsuperscript{xvi} The answer is simple.
Given that all white males achieved the vote in the Jacksonian era, even the poorest of them were loath to oppose a state which they felt to be their own. Furthermore, the much publicized openness of American society and the spatial and social mobility of Americans permitted the vast majority of people to believe that by their own efforts they could raise their standards of living and perhaps become wealthy themselves, which subverted any desire to overthrow the monied elite. Why destroy those you hope to join? This attitude remains pervasive despite the fact that downward mobility, rather than upward mobility, is more the rule than the exception in modern America, and in spite of the fact that differences between haves and have-nots are accelerating.\textsuperscript{xvii} Nonetheless, recent survey data on all social groups in America, including the most disadvantaged, shows that—despite some feeble socialistic rhetoric—there is almost no popular support for even such minimal redistributive mechanisms as a ceiling on income.\textsuperscript{xviii}

Aside from reflecting a touching faith in social mobility, American acceptance of vast differences in wealth is also a secularized transvaluation of the Protestant ethic, wherein earned (not inherited) wealth is associated with such highly valued characteristics as assertiveness, initiative, effort and ability—rather than with membership in an ascribed caste or wealthy elite. It is also generally believed that the wealthy will lose their riches over the generations, and that new hard-working entrepreneurs will take their place. As a result, Americans may feel envious of the rich, but they do not
want to destroy them or flatten out the income curve; rather, they want a chance to reach the crest of that curve themselves.\textsuperscript{xix}

Political arguments about the justice of economic inequality in America do not challenge these basic assumptions. From the right the argument is that the race is indeed fair; the poor have failed to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them and to everyone else and so deserve their poverty. The argument from the left is the reverse; the playing field is not level, therefore those players who fail are not at fault and should be helped to achieve parity. Both sides accept without debate a cultural belief, inherited from Protestantism, that only those who are trying seriously to escape poverty and succeed in the competition should be given aid; there is no charity for those who are `lazy'—as recent debates about welfare make clear.

Of course, these values exist in tandem with and also validate the relentless quest for wealth which has long been a central preoccupation for Americans. As Tocqueville wrote in 1840: `It is odd to watch with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue prosperity and how they are ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it'.\textsuperscript{xx} He explains this characteristic obsession in terms of the problems of gaining status in an egalitarian society: `When the prestige attached to what is old has vanished, men are no longer distinguished, or hardly distinguished, by birth, standing, or profession; there is thus hardly anything left but
money which makes very clear distinctions between men or can raise some of them above the common level'.

Intense competition for status through wealth stimulates the `hypocrisy of luxury... peculiar to democratic centuries' where the conspicuous consumption of expensive goods is the major route to prestige.

Within this egalitarian yet aggressive society of assiduous consumers, the present day suburban mall has evolved into a temple where the adherents of the American cult of shopping can worship. In its protected, artificial and homogenizing environment Americans gather to peruse, comment upon and purchase the status symbols that not only indicate their relative positions vis a vis one another but also show their shared participation in the American dream of economic success.

It is easy for academics, who tend to disdain the crass pleasures of materialism, to underestimate the symbolic importance of consumption in bringing Americans together. Of course, there are class divisions here--some malls and the goods they offer are for the relatively wealthy, others are for the relatively poor--but in all of them the carefully controlled environment and the overwhelming display of items for sale is a concrete representation of a shared fantasy of achieving and displaying material wealth.

Conflict and Coherence

Important qualifications must be added to the argument to this point lest it seems unduly complacent. Although it is clearly the case that the quintessential American dream is one
of gaining riches and thereby status, and that Americans have been, and continue to be, bound together by their shared hope for success in that quest, this ambition is rendered most plausible during the periods of productivity and wealth generated by American capitalism. But America has not always been an economic dynamo, and those who lived through the depression have a very different attitude toward consumption and display than their younger fellow citizens.

The experience of economic deprivation in a society where no one is ever content with his or her lot also helps account for the fact the United States had more deaths at the end of the nineteenth century through labor violence—in absolute terms and in proportion to population size—than any other country except Tsarist Russia. But instances of industrial rioting for higher wages ought not to be taken as indicating a serious rift in American society. It is important to note that violence directed against strikers came from Pinkerton detectives rather than from the central state. Such action of course depended upon judicial consent, and here the fact that capitalist property rights were so early on enshrined in a written constitution mattered a great deal. Nonetheless, participation in the polity, the possibility of reform and especially the felt opportunity for eventually gaining wealth were also available to workers, and these powerfully undercut class unity, despite a short-lived surge of leftist activity among radical unions such as the I.W.W.
Equally, religious persecution has a long and ugly history in the United States, from colonial times when Quaker missionaries were killed as heretics by New England Puritans, to the nineteenth century when Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, was murdered, and up to the present day, in the immolation of David Koresh and his followers. Less apocalyptically, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and now anti-Muslim hate literature continues to proliferate in the more paranoid segments of American popular culture. However, in general the state has only actively participated in religious persecution when the cult in question was held to be actively challenging government authority—as in the stockpiling of weapons by Koresh. Rather than facing persecution, religions of all sorts have instead been easily absorbed within the amorphous American framework, so that nowadays Jews, Catholics, Muslims, and Hindus are lumped together with the predominant Protestant sects as part of a multitude of denominations all of whom are assumed to be worshipping, in some fashion or another, the same God. In fact, the main problem for religious groups in America is not persecution, but maintaining some form of distinctiveness, as interfaith marriage is increasingly common, and religion becomes more and more a matter of choice, not birth.xxv

So religious and class differences, although sometimes violent, have not in the final analysis significantly challenged the relative stability of the United States. Nor has ethnic conflict, which has torn other societies asunder, had much effect in America. This is not because of lack of opportunity.
As Michael Lind has pointed out, the United States was relatively homogenous ethnically until the huge mass immigrations from Europe that occurred the end of nineteenth century. This immigration, was a `second revolution' which challenged the authority of the Anglo-Saxon majority. Racial prejudice against these newcomers was rampant for a time, both among the elite and the masses, as learned doctors documented the cranial limitations of the Irish and the natural brutishness of the Poles while murderous race riots erupted in urban ghettos.

Yet, far from causing American society to disintegrate, this influx of `foreigners', most of whom were in fact white Europeans, actually strengthened the nation--in part because their loyalty was to the idea of America rather than to any particular place, in part because the host society responded by creating the most inclusive public educational system within the advanced capitalist world, which immeasurably helped to incorporate the immigrants into their new society. A host of studies tell us that the overwhelming experience of immigrant families was that of transformation into Americans. The majority of immigrants willingly accepted deculturation and the loss of their native languages in order to embrace wholeheartedly the opportunity for their children to succeed and to participate politically that had been lacking in their homelands. In amazingly short order European immigrants who had been considered, and who had considered themselves, to be absolutely distinctive and impenetrable races were redefined as hyphenated
Americans, distinguishable from one another primarily by food preferences and ethnic holidays. Since the Second World War, intermarriage among these `ethnics', like intermarriage between religious groups, has become pervasive.\textsuperscript{xxvii} For contemporary American suburbanites belonging to an ethnic community has now become primarily a matter of personal choice, albeit a choice that is validated by a biological ideology of `naturalness'.\textsuperscript{xxviii}

We can say then that the historic achievement of the United States is remarkable, especially when seen in comparative perspective: it is that of a nearly complete assimilation of immigrants, combined with a remarkable absence of concerted class warfare or religious violence. The analytic point about this pattern is that the United States has long demonstrated a strong homogenizing nationalism that draws its citizens away from any particular ethnic, class or religious identity. Alternative visions have been marginalized in favor of a standard notion of what America ought to be, namely, `the land of opportunity' where old settlers and new migrants, rich and poor, Protestant and Catholic, all have an equal chance to gain economic success through hard work and individual enterprise, and where `the voice of the people' rules a democratic polity that is not tarnished by aristocratic pretensions.

The Homogenizing Power of American Culture

Americans themselves generally believe, as one of our students proudly put it: `We Americans don't have a culture; we are all different'. American intellectuals arguing for the
stability of the society have tended to accept the premise that Americans indeed lack a culture, and to assert that the United States coheres because of its institutions and the democratic and liberal ideals that underlie them. So long as Americans have faith in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, they have no need of a shared cultural identity, but can exist within a pluralistic `nation of nations'.xxix But this sanguine view leaves aside two important facts. The first is that to have any lasting effect ideals cannot be institutionally imposed, but must resonate with pre-existent shared perceptions and ways of being in the world. Many societies, after all, have wonderfully democratic and liberal constitutions, yet manage to be totalitarian and genocidal despite them. Secondly, grade-school civic lessons aside, very few native-born Americans have any clear idea of what the sacred documents of the nation actually contain, but they are Americans all the same, instantly recognizable not by their differences but by their enormous similarities.

This commonness of the culture of the United States can be approached by a moment's reflection on the claim noted, namely, that Americans are different and so do not share a culture. No sentiment could be more quintessentially American! For the assertion itself rests on a culturally specific faith that all persons are independent actors, each separately responsible for his or her own fate and endowed with a God-given potential for free choice and agency. Ideally, all such persons are equal before God and the law, with equivalent rights and privileges,
and all are worthy of respect regardless of wealth, prestige or power. This pervasive belief, derived in part from the historical absence of an aristocracy in the United States, in part from the culturally dominant Protestant faith in the capacity of individuals to choose their own fates, and in part from the great social mobility of American society, has always been expressed in ordinary interaction through an absence of deference and by strong moral demands for the expression of equal esteem for all members of the community. The historian David Fischer notes that from colonial times `extreme inequalities of material condition were joined to an intense concern for equality of esteem' as rich and poor `wore similar clothing and addressed each other by first names. They worked, ate, laughed, played and fought together on a footing of equality'.

Despite ever greater distinctions in rank and wealth, Americans remain extremely careful to cloak authority relations with the trappings of equality. On the job subordinates are `team members' whose `consent' and `cooperation' are `requested' by their `supervisor'. At home it is perfectly acceptable to have servants or to go to an elite school, but not to put the servants in livery or to have a genteel accent; in short, it is politically correct to be rich and powerful just so long as one does not make claims to be different and better. The surest way to be ostracized by Americans is to have the reputation of being a snob; the surest way to be accepted is to be friendly and `nice' to everyone, regardless of status.
Such effacement might seem to conflict with the well-publicized self-assertiveness of Americans - an assertiveness strikingly indicated by national surveys showing that 70 percent of Americans think they are above average in terms of leadership! But we should note as well that even more striking statistics apply for Americans' notions of their `ability to get along well with others' where none believe they are below average, 60 percent report themselves to be in the top ten percent, and 25 percent believe they are in the top one percentile! These seemingly contradictory findings can be reconciled once we note that Americans find status and respect primarily through being liked, and want leaders whom they can like in turn. Therefore, for Americans the ordinary Joe is the better leader, and it makes sense that the majority of Americans, ordinary Joes (and Janes) who try hard to be nice and adapt to the needs of others, feel they are, as a result, potential leaders.

Americans `niceness' and distaste for elitism, so often commented on with various degrees of amusement or condescension by foreign visitors, correlates with a fluid social world where there are no clear status markers; this unstable and potentially threatening universe is made liveable by the expectation that one's own friendliness and helpfulness will usually be reciprocated. Such an attitude can only exist in conjunction with a basic sense of trust in the public sphere, which is believed to be populated by men and women who, like oneself, are basically fair, decent, and kindly. Social trust
is a legacy of the original Protestant covenanted community, now transformed, as noted above, into the larger secularized social world where the primary values are being `well liked' and `getting along well with others'. Training toward these ends is clearest in the American school system, where popular students are elected as student body leaders whose job is to `represent' their fellows, where `school spirit' is heavily promoted, and where children are graded on the quality of their `citizenship'. Students are also expected to participate in extracurricular activities that oblige them to cooperate together on a voluntary basis. Team sports especially are highly valued as an expression of `school spirit' and local pride, where individuals can show off their personal talents while helping their team mates to victory through disciplined self-sacrifice and cooperation. These institutions have nothing to do with formal education, everything to do with learning how to participate peacefully in a competitive society of co-equal individuals.xxxiv

Alongside diffuse trust goes another characteristic American stance, that of `moral minimalism', which prohibits overt interference with or judgement upon other people.xxxv This ethical position of benign detachment, like the requirement to be nice to everyone, is a product of the underlying American value system of individualistic egalitarianism, which means that all persons have the freedom to make their own fates, without restraint from their neighbors, and, concomitantly, should not meddle with anyone else either. This American pattern especially correlates with the roomy and fluid world of the
suburb, where there is no need for individuals to confront one another, where it is even possible for members of the same household to have separate rooms, separate schedules, separate meals, and almost never to come in contact. Under these conditions, Americans tolerate diversity, so long as they are not obliged to interact with others who are too different from themselves, that is, who are `snobs' or `not nice', or with people who are intrusive and make demands on their time and autonomy.

The violent hatreds that motivate ethnic cleansing and nationalistic pride are not to be found here. Rather, modern-day middle class Americans are weakly held together precisely by their bland acceptance of one another, an acceptance that is smoothed over by the ideal of friendly interaction, and justified by a common belief that nothing in the public world--or even in the private world--is really worth getting too excited about. This may not be heroic, and it may not provide strong ties, but its very mildness has obvious benefits.

Beneath the generalized `niceness', social trust and moral minimalism of America stands the basic premise that `individualism is natural, community problematical. Society has to be built'. Generated again from Protestant principles in the context of American social openness, this perspective imagines society not as a pre-existent entity but as a moral corporation knitted together by voluntary agreements between independent and co-equal agents each bearing personal responsibility for their acts. In a real sense, this notion of
the political community replicates the image of the egalitarian American family; an institution, as the anthropologist David Schneider demonstrates, that is believed to be a locus of "diffuse, enduring solidarity" where authority is democratically exercised through consensus and affection and where all are treated equally without regard to status, power or capacity because, ideally at any rate, all love and are loved equally.\textsuperscript{xxxix}

In the familial vision of the American community, political action takes on a sacred aura, and political power holders are imagined as exemplary figures, who must always demonstrate that they are not egoists or supporters of special interests, but rather are agents of consensus and selfless servants of all the people in a nation that ought to resemble a loving family. This high moral ideal gives Americans a strong sense that their polity is not just the locus of power seeking and deal making, but is the ethical center of a society based on shared caring and common humanity. American presidents, in particular, portray themselves and are portrayed in the cultural imagination as expansive and encompassing symbolic figures who reach beyond interest groups and despised `party politics' so as to work for the `good of the nation'. The emotional expressiveness increasingly demanded of presidential figures is an indicator of this function, since the revelation and sharing of strong emotion demonstrates the president's common humanity--whereas policies and `politics' are divisive. Voters who can sympathize with a president's personal tragedies and family
trials will feel a comforting communion with him: he is a good man who suffers just as I do, his nobility and compassion are like my own.

In sum, America is a unique society based upon shared values of egalitarian individualism and capitalist free enterprise. It has demonstrated an astonishing capacity to integrate new immigrants, to defuse religious, class and ethnic hostilities, and to promote a homogenized national culture. This culture is animated by dreams of monetary success in the competitive marketplace, but this is softened by an ethic of generalized social trust and a pervasive interaction style that combines `niceness' with moral minimalism. Within this shared frame of reference, Americans imagine their social universe to be, in its ideal form, an extended family, based on the love and voluntary co-operation of co-equals engaged in the joint task of building a community. From the point of view of its citizens, the United States is the best of all possible worlds, one that, by and large, delivers on its promises. Instead of ethnic nationalism, Americans have the nationalism of an ideal: they firmly believe that, if they could, everyone in the world would love to join them, and become citizens of the United States.

**American Civilization and Its Discontents**

The American experience is fraught, like any other, with inner tensions that provide the dynamic for its movement. What is perhaps unique is that Americans believe this should not be so! Pervasive idealism about politics, for instance, means that the electorate is continually disappointed when its leaders
prove to be fraudulent in their claims that they serve neither themselves nor any interest group, but rather are dedicated to the higher communal end of representing `all the people'. An increased scrutiny of public figures and the widely reported mass contempt for them reflects deep ambivalence toward the political realm as sacred ideals of selfless community service are increasingly seen to clash with unacceptable realities of difference and interest, and as politicians are shown up as heroes with feet of clay—which could never happen if they were not thought of as heroes in the first place.

Another element in the widespread sense of malaise in America is the equally ambivalent relationship Americans have with groups. Tocqueville was perhaps the first to note that Americans are great joiners, finding refuge from a competitive universe by associating together in a vast array of civic and social organizations. Important recent research shows that this continues to be the case: there may be truth to Putnam's claim that membership of bowling leagues has fallen, but that there is none to his more general notion of `declining social capital'--as can be seen in the huge growth of membership in therapy groups, children's football leagues and in health clubs.\textsuperscript{xli}

But what matters more than sheer numbers are the beliefs entertained about group life. Associations are believed to be held together, as noted, less by interest than by shared love and mutual caring. Disagreement is kept to a minimum in favor of enjoyment of one another's company,\textsuperscript{xl1} and there is usually a concerted effort to avoid the appearance of any form of
hierarchy, for fear of being called a snob. Each such group feels itself to be unique, though for an outsider the actual differences between groups may appear negligible. For instance, self-identified members of ethnic groups often believe their group has many distinctive rituals, where in truth the rituals are shared by almost all Americans xlii. Similarly, middle class black and white college students may vehemently claim that they belong to completely different `cultures', but for an observer the discernable differences between the two groups are negligible. xliii While we do not seek to downplay the subjective importance of multiple cultural identities in America, there remains everything to be said for Tocqueville's notion that the characteristic American elaboration of small differences is best understood as an effort to establish a personal identity and a place of comfort and community within the homogenizing and competitive world of the United States xliv.

A number of consequences follow from this effort. Members of American groups tend to feel themselves united by shared caring and kind intentions; they are good people and good citizens, acting as `everybody' should act. But they are suspicious of the motivations of members of other groups, who may only be pretending to be decent and caring persons in order to further their special interests against the interests of the whole. For example, college students typically describe their own group as a bunch of friends, while other groups are `cliques'. Similarly, American social activists see themselves
as trying to draw people into the community, while their opponents describe them as power-hungry and exclusionary.\textsuperscript{xlv}

The tension between an idealized us and a demonized them manifests itself at every level of American culture. Survey research on the leading members of a variety of influence blocs—labor leaders, businessmen, feminists, bankers, farmers, media people, blacks, students, and so on—shows that in general their ideals are the same as the ideals of the public at large.\textsuperscript{xlvi} But all of them disagree about who actually does have influence, and all see `themselves as the victims not of a system deaf to all groups but of a system that "plays favorites"'.\textsuperscript{xlvii} Only one's own group is pure, and only one's own group therefore actually holds the general will at heart. It follows that one's own group should dominate, since only one's own group actually expresses the true voice of the public. This circle of self-delusion and self-congratulation among groups validates public qualms about corruption and degeneration in the political realm, and leads to further cynicism about—and withdrawal from—political action, back to the realm of personal friends and family.\textsuperscript{xlviii} It should be emphasized, however, that the pervasive ambivalence of Americans about politicians and groups does not threaten the society with disruption. In fact, it makes it harder for any group or individual to present themselves as the savior of the American way, and so provides a base for the mundane continuance of a social order based on trust of other Americans as individuals, distrust of them in groups or as leaders.
Much more troubling is the continued prevalence of anti-black racism in America.\textsuperscript{xlix} While white ethnics (and, to a lesser extent, Asians and Latinos) have been `melted' into American society, retaining only symbolic cultural identity, those of African descent, who have been in America from the beginning, still feel themselves to be excluded and discriminated against, despite their best efforts to participate in the American dream.\textsuperscript{1}

The most obvious reasons for this unhappy situation are to be found in America's cruel history of slavery. The humiliation of bondage, especially in a society where freedom and equality are so highly valued, is a stigma that is hard to erase, and African Americans continue to be tainted with that dishonoring heritage, which is exacerbated by the fact that, to quote Tocqueville once again, `the insubstantial and ephemeral fact of servitude is most fatally combined with the physical and permanent fact of differences in race. Memories of slavery disgrace the race, and race perpetuates memories of slavery'.\textsuperscript{li} The problems of the historical memory of a slave past are compounded by the continued poverty, powerlessness and ghettoization of a huge number of African-Americans. Their low status reinforces negative attitudes of whites towards them while also solidifying their own sense of exclusion and indignity. The amplifying layering effect of group hostilities so brilliantly avoided in American religious matters thus resurfaces with a vengeance in American race relations.
Alongside these causes, there is a less well known source for the continued gap between blacks and whites, one that can be best understood as a dreadful corollary of the blanket American faith in equality. To account for real inequality, or even for difference, Americans tend strongly to `naturalize' distinctions, making biology the source of differences that the ideology cannot explain. We can see this tendency manifested in the apparently perverse claims made by white `hyphenated' ethnics that they can recognize innate biological characteristics of their chosen ethnic group. Belonging then becomes `natural', and not to be altered, despite the real permeability of ethnic categories. If this is so for white ethnics, it is even more so for African-Americans, whose skin color renders their difference obvious, and whose poverty and high crime rate can then be attributed to that difference.\textsuperscript{1iii} The same method has, of course, been used to deny equality to women as well. Biologizing inferiority allows maintenance of the faith in human equality in the face of blatant bigotry and oppression through the simple expedient of denying some people full human status.\textsuperscript{1iii}

Well-meaning attempts to redress this and other racial injustices has led to the development of the categories of the census which create five types of ethnic American (including the catch-all category of `Hispanics')\textsuperscript{1iv} and to the much bludgeoned demon of multiculturalism. Does this mean that groupism is stronger, that America's power to homogenize is over? The preponderance of evidence suggests a negative answer. Despite
all the publicity, ethnicity remains a relatively weak identity marker with very little content; it has the subjective value of giving a vaguely personalized community in a world of diffuse and atomistic relationships. Nonetheless, like class and religion, ethnicity seems to have minimal potential to develop into oppositional movements with any substantial alternative content. Rather, ethnic identity groups, like sexual identity organizations or religious sects or twelve-step groups, will multiply and subdivide, as Americans choose the communal identity that `feels best' to them.

At the same time, we will also see a continuance of the tendency for these groups to make claims to be `natural' in order to validate their existence and maintain their solidarity, so that gays have to `act gay', blacks will have to `act black' and Hispanics to `act Hispanic', whatever these terms may mean. But such claims--presently authorized at least for `races' in the census categories--will inevitably be contested, as the individualist, self-assertive side of American culture comes to the fore, and as people refuse to be pigeon-holed into prearranged categories--however `natural' they are claimed to be by those with an interest in maintaining them.

The real danger is that some Americans may continue to find it especially difficult to make such self-assertions; they cannot choose who they want to be, but instead have negative identities thrust upon them. The effort to turn a bad hand into a good one by repudiating the culture that dealt it is an understandable reaction, but one that takes for granted
exactly those cultural premises of the United States we have already noted: that people have a God-given right to manufacture their own identities and assert themselves within the social and political marketplace. Black Americans' belief that they can and should struggle against oppression and for justice and equity actually shows the depth of their Americanness. That many white Americans can understand and sympathize with the plight of African Americans shows that racial prejudice, although generated by the contradictions of American egalitarianism, is never wholly legitimated within it, and that the struggle against racism is as much a part of the American grain as is racism itself. It also behoves us to note that those who feel themselves utterly excluded and alienated from American culture lack the structural resources to mount a challenge of any real seriousness against the stability of the society—a reflection that of course makes apparent the extent to which the notion of `stability' is value-laden.

Conclusion

In this short paper, we have sought to refute the claim that America is falling apart. On the one hand, the institutional structure of the United States has the capacity to diffuse potentially divisive conflicts between classes, religious sects and ethnic communities throughout society—rather than concentrating them against the state. On the other hand, as long as the economy is healthy, putative new identities and groups do not offer any real challenge to the basic premises of American culture, nor is the highly flexible social fabric of
America likely to be torn asunder by their demands. Whether black or white, gay or straight, female or male, the vast majority of Americans continue to believe in the possibilities of economic success and to act as if the world was made up of nice nonjudgmental individuals who build familial communities through mutual and voluntary cooperation. Despite the inevitable, and wrenching, tensions and paradoxes implicit in this idealized belief system, it shows no signs of losing its hold.

It may be useful to highlight the argument by reflecting upon the notion of civil society. In a characteristically brilliant argument, Daniel Bell once claimed the United States was nothing but a civil society.\(^{lvii}\) There is a good deal of sense to this: the diffusion of conflict within society results precisely a plurality of groups whose interests are not united against an overbearing state. But our argument goes beyond Bell's. Most obviously, we have stressed the presence of a common cultural frame, acceptance of which plays as significant a part in limiting conflict as does the sheer fact of pluralism.

But a more subtle point needs to be made, and this can follow from a fuller definition of civil society.\(^{lviii}\) Civility in society--rather than, as the traditional definition has it, the mere presence of strong and autonomous groups within society--depends upon a particular social agreement to agree to live together with difference. The greatest example of such an agreement in European history remains that symbolised by the
Treaty of Westphalia in 1648: given that neither side could win the religious wars, it suddenly became reasonable to consider religion a private rather than a public affair--and thereby to live with genuine difference. ¹⁰⁹

Given this definition, we can see that the United States is not really a civil society in the full sense suggested, though it is indeed a society where considerable personal civility is practiced. Clearly, despite the plethora of noisy interest groups, in the United States there is little recognition, whether resigned or enthusiastic, of genuinely alternative ways of life, despite the rhetoric about difference. This point can be underscored by noting a standard European joke about American foreign policy: the United States wishes people to be free to choose--just so long as they choose the American way. And this is scarcely surprising: the American experience has not been that of the clash of utterly different ways of life--except for the challenge from the South, whose opposition was so completely destroyed. Rather, the differences that exist in American civilization are objectively relatively small: whilst ideologically `all are different', Americans in fact are remarkably `all the same'. The homogenizing powers of this framework have been astonishing, and the dynamics of the culture suggest that this is scarcely likely to change: America will remain a land intolerant of real divergence, but simultaneously capable of absorbing differences and turning outsiders into Americans in short order.
We can conclude normatively by suggesting that no very harsh judgement be made about this powerful homogenising force. For one thing, homogenisation is to a universal ideal which, however imperfectly realised, stands far removed from the ethnic particularisms that can tear at the heart of most nations. For another, it is as well to remember that the seventeenth century European invention of the ideal of toleration was followed first by the ideological surge of the French revolutionary period and then by fascism and communism, the two great totalitarian ideological forces of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. In contrast, America's homogenizing capacities have ensured that its internal conflicts have not led to world war. Perhaps then, given the American experience, we should show some skepticism towards the unfettered praise of difference that dominates contemporary social theory: there may be something to be said for the decencies of a little dullness and the comforts of a measure of conformity.

Endnotes


The most apocalyptic voice making use of this phrase is that of James Davison Hunter in Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America (New York: Basic Books, 1991) and Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War (New York: Free Press, 1994).


It should be noted that Riesman thought this type was more empathetic and kindly than the inner-directed traditional man, and strongly rejected all notions that his work showed an absence of moral commitment in America.

As Bellah and his colleagues write: `An absolutely autonomous self and a self determined completely by the social situation do not, then, turn out to be opposites'. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 80). See also Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, (New York, Norton, 1978) who stresses the inner rage of the conformist required to adapt to an alienating environment.


For one recent argument in favor of American coherence, see David Hollinger Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
Unfortunately, we do not have the space to do anything more than sketch a few of the most salient aspects of the American past, and must of necessity ignore long term shifts in institutions and attitudes as well as generational differences in favor of a very broad overview.


Of course, the abolition of slavery did not lead to the end of racial discrimination: to the contrary, attempts at wholesale reconstruction were defeated, and a type of second class citizenship, based on the purported principle of 'separate but equal' ensured that American democracy was not complete. We will discuss the consequences of this failing in a later section of the paper.

In the European context, this applies as clearly to nationalities. For a general view, see J.A. Hall, *International Orders* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996, chapter three).


Indeed, survey data show that Americans of every status, race, occupation and ethnicity are remarkably uniform in their agreement on the proper disparity of wealth for occupational groups, with businessmen unquestioningly accepted as deserving top salaries and unskilled labor entitled to the lowest pay. See Sidney Verba, and Gary Orren *Equality in America: the View from the Top* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985).

In fact, data in Jennifer Hochschild's *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992) indicate that the poorest Americans believe more fervently in the American dream than do the middle classes. It is true that there was considerably more radical political activity in America in the early part of the century, especially in reaction to the depression. But even in those dark days, redistributive demands were minimal compared to Europe.

There is, of course, some ambiguity about the inequalities that result from this laissez faire attitude. For example, Hochschild found that many of
her respondents, when questioned, say ‘other people would not permit equality to work, even though they themselves might welcome it’ (Hochschild *What’s Fair?* p. 171).


xxi *Democracy in America*, p. 615.


xxiv On this matter, see Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, vol. 2, chapter 18. Violence in America has long been widespread, but it is usually between individuals, not groups. Within a certain range of virulence, such personal violence is to be expected within a society based on the values of individual autonomy and self-help, and is not necessarily an indicator of social malaise.


4/5 of Italian-American since 1950 marry out, 75% of English, Irish, Polish, 50% of Jews today.

Waters, Ethnic Options. The biological metaphor becomes even more crucial for black Americans, as we shall see.

As Michael Walzer puts it, it is sufficient for hyphenated Americans to rest their political faith in the American side of the hyphen, leaving their cultural identity in the left.

David H. Fischer Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 p. 754). Fischer is talking about frontier America, where egalitarian display was most marked, but assertions of equality were found all over colonial America, save in Virginia, where aristocratic values, exaggerated by the institution of slavery, prevailed. For a classic anthropological collection devoted to American character, see J. Spradley & M. Rynkiewich (eds.) The Nacirima (New York: Little, Brown 1979). For a more recent effort see H. Varenne (ed.) Symbolizing America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1986).

See David Potter 'Individuality and Conformity' in Michael McGiffert (ed.) The Character of Americans (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press 1964) for these, and more, examples; for the American requirement to be friendly see Herve' Varenne 'Creating America' in Symbolizing America and Stephen Kalberg 'The Sociology of Friendliness' (ms). Michael Moffatt in Coming of Age in New Jersey (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1992) describes the dire consequences of being accused of snobbism among undergraduates at Rutgers. Adam Seligman nicely illustrates this supremely American characteristic through a dialogue he overheard between a well-to-do suburbanite and a tramp rummaging through a garbage can. The two exchanged polite greetings and the
suburbanite informed the tramp that better quality pickings were likely to be found down the street. Seligman remarks that this exchange would be impossible in Europe, but it is standard in America, where "individuals confront one another in their individual identities and not as members of broader solidarities or groups". The Idea of Civil Society (New York: The Free Press, 1992. p. 155).


xxxiii This point was first made by Tocqueville.

xxxiv See Page Smith A City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History (New York: Knopf, 1966). It may seem a long leap from Calvinist Protestantism to high school sports, but that would be to forget that it was the Calvinists who invented baseball, football and basketball with specific concern for inculcating moral values in their youth. For more see Fischer Albion's Seed.

xxxv See M. P. Baumgartner The Moral Order of a Suburb (New York: Oxford University Press 1988). Following Riesman's analysis in The Lonely Crowd Baumgartner believes the American ethic of avoidance is a result of social fragmentation associated with modernity. However, she also notes that 'moral minimalism' is in fact a dominant form of conflict resolution in many small-scale societies.

xxxvi Lower class relationships in America tend to be more volatile and confrontational - a consequence both of differing values and more constrictive social settings. For a recent ethnographic study of the complex
relationship between class and concepts of self in America, see Adrie
Kusserow `The American Self Reconsidered: "Soft" and "Hard" Individualism in
Manhattan and Queens' (Cambridge: Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University
Department of Anthropol-

xxxvii In the same vein, the high political apathy so often decried as
indicating social breakdown may equally mean that people are quite reasonably
unmotivated to argue about issues that might disrupt a carefully constructed
and delicate social facade.

xxxviii Herve' Varenne Americans Together: Structured diversity in a Midwestern
Town (New York: Teachers College Press 1977, p. 70), emphasis in the
original. See Bernard Bailyn The Ideological Origins of the American
of Equality in American History (Berkeley: University of California Press
1978) for an elaboration of this argument.

xxxix See David Schneider American Kinship: A Cultural Account (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press 1968) for this model, abstracted from his
intensive study of the structure and symbolism of American kinship. In this
setting, the father is hardly a commanding patriarchal authority figure.
Rather, like all other family members, he must use negotiation and example,
rather than command, to get his way. The absence of paternal power in middle
class America correlates with the very real independence of children, who
share little collective property with the father, cooperate little, save when
pursuing pleasure, and have almost no long-term interests to bring them
together except the fragile emotional bond of love. For classic statements
about the American family see Lasch Haven in a Heartless World and (in a
very different mood) Erik Erikson’s Childhood and Society (New York: Norton
On love as the central metaphor of American culture, see Herve' Varrene's *Americans Together*.

For examples see the special issue entitled 'Civic Participation in American Democracy' of *The Public Perspective* (vol. 7, no. 4, 1996), edited by Everett Carl Ladd. It is perhaps worth noting as well that those accused of the bombings in Oklahoma City did not 'bowl alone', but were in fact active members of a bowling league.

Varenne reports that 'some of my informants could literally be brought to tears if someone they considered close to them appeared to seriously disagree with them' (*Americans Together*, p. 92).

See Waters, *Ethnic Options*.

See Moffat, *Coming of Age in New Jersey*, who notes that the major objective difference between black and white students at Rutgers was their taste in music. Elsewhere in the same book a West Indian student comments that his classmates, whether black or white, seem to him to be indistinguishably American.

'In democracies, where there is never much difference between one citizen and another and where in the nature of things they are so close that there is always a chance of their all getting merged in a common mass, a multitude of artificial and arbitrary classifications are established to protect each man from the danger of being swept along in spite of himself with the crowd'. *Democracy in America*, p. 605.

See Elwin Hatch *The Biography of a Small Town* (New York: Columbia University Press 1979) for an example. Note too that Americans tend to portray everyone but themselves as nationalistic and self-interested—an attitude that infuriates allied leaders.
The major exception were feminists, who were far more radical in their ideology and leveling in their politics than any other group.

Verba and Orren *Equality in America*, p. 189. The exception are members of the media, who have a uniquely high opinion of their own powers of influence.

It is within this context that we can understand the general American repudiation of the political demands made by special interest groups such as gays, blacks and feminists. As Samuel Huntington has remarked, relatively disenfranchised groups obliged to make public protests to gain their ends paradoxically undermine their own claims, since most Americans feel that these protesters are demanding special privileges for themselves at the expense of the community at large. Meanwhile, elites who quietly negotiate real power do not suffer the same public opprobrium, since their arrangements are personal and private. See his *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1981).

Tocqueville was prescient about this problem. For him, "the most formidable evil threatening the future of the United States is the presence of the blacks on their soil. From whatever angle one sets out to inquire into the present embarrassments or future dangers facing the United States, one is almost always brought up against this basic fact" (*Democracy in America*, p. 340). Nor was he sanguine about the possibilities for a solution to the race question. "In the United States the prejudice rejecting the Negroes seems to increase in proportion to their emancipation, and inequality cuts deep into mores as it is effaced from the laws.... Once one admits that whites and emancipated Negroes face each other like two foreign peoples on the same soil, it can easily be understood that there are only two possibilities for
the future: the Negroes and the whites must either mingle completely or they must part' (Democracy in America, pp. 344, 356).

The fact of discrimination is evident in any number of accounts---perhaps the best still being W. Lloyd Warner (ed.) Yankee City (New Haven: Yale University Press 1963). See also John Ogbu Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective (New York: Academic Press 1978), who describes American black-white relations as equivalent to a caste system. Interestingly, in her Facing Up to the American Dream, Hochschild shows that poor blacks are more confident in American culture and less suspicious of whites than their more successful middle class black counterparts. Hochschild explains this paradox with great subtlety, but we would argue that a major factor is simply the fact that poor blacks have very little real interaction with whites, and so can retain their illusions about their potential acceptance into white society. This is not to say, of course, that change has not occurred. It has. Economically and socially, black people now participate much more freely in American culture than in previous generations. But the problem has not vanished. For a recent survey, see Andrew Hacker, Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal (New York: Scribners 1996).

See Louis Dumont Homo Hierarchicus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980) for a structural explanation based on his own experience of the hierarchical society of India. The biological argument has recently found new intellectual justifications in Richard Herrnstein & Charles Murray The Bell Curve (New York: The Free Press 1994). For a debate on this volatile
issue see Steven Fraser (ed.) *The Bell Curve Wars* (New York: Basic Books 1995).


iiiv See Lind, *The Next American Nation* and Hollinger, *Post-Ethnic America* for accounts of the origins and character of these ethnic categories.

iv See Erving Goffman *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1963) for what is still the best examination of the options available for the stigmatized.

ivi The most radical form of Afrocentricism which demands a utopian communalism and a transformed personal consciousness is indeed a real challenge to American individualism in one sense, but in another sense it is simply another instance of the idealistic American attempt to create a covenanted community where the chosen will transcend the contradictions of individualism. Such communities have a long history in American life.


ix It should also be noted that the return to civil society in Europe has owed a very great deal to a geopolitical settlement which depended and depends upon the United States.