

**FORTUNE'S CHILD**  
Lewis Lapham / Doubleday / \$14.95

Mitchell S. Ross

The front of the jacket to this book refers to *Fortune's Child* as "a portrait of the United States as spendthrift heir." This describes the book's point of view pretty well, and it is not hard to see how Lewis Lapham arrived at it. He was grandly educated at Hotchkiss and Yale, even tasting the scholarly desserts served at Cambridge University in England. His family is apparently wealthy: Lapham's views on the oil market first took form at meetings of the

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clan. An arrested development led to newspaper work instead of employment by the CIA, favored by so many of his Yale contemporaries. It was a fateful choice. For two decades Lapham labored in comparative obscurity as a reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Harper's*.

Then, in the mid-1970s, he ascended to the editor's position at *Harper's*, and shortly thereafter it became disconcertingly clear that the modest reporter had all along been operating a one-man spy service. Around the same time Philip Agee started spilling the beans on his

fellow operatives, Lapham began to write *Harper's*' Easy Chair column with a similar—and, let us add, more sensible—purpose. He is now the nation's foremost policeman of the privileged. Whenever Lapham's by-line appears, his old schoolmates run for cover.

Class consciousness like Lapham's is an uncommon thing these days, and *Fortune's Child*, which for the most part is a collection of "Easy Chairs," is an odd specimen of it. On the one hand, Lapham is imprisoned by none of the traditional ideologies; on the other, he is without striking prejudices of his own. Prejudice is, after all, the chief tool of the personal essayist. It can come packaged in virtually any form. Lapham's predecessor in the Easy Chair, Bernard DeVoto, for example, made himself familiar through his indignant conservatism. Others begin with a confession of personal frailties, a recital of enthusiasms, or a grunt at specific objects of scorn. Lapham's essays, in contrast, have more of the odor of Sunday sermons about them. They are diffusely opinionated. They embody some of the same qualities I

have always disliked in Ralph Waldo Emerson.

There are times when I wonder about him. Is he leveling with us when he writes, "I left California because I didn't have the moral fortitude to contend with the polymorphousness of the place. . . . I needed the company of other men who had roused themselves from sleep and who had set forth on the adventure of civilization"? Was it really like that: young Lapham gazing sadly out over Nob Hill, with a cry of "Eastward, Ho!" rising out of the depths of his soul? And, if so, does this not qualify him as one of the "American bedouins" he characterizes in another essay as wandering "in search of the soul's oasis"? "The holy city of absolute truth shines in the eternal sunlight beyond the next range of abstractions. In New York or Los Angeles, as well as in Houston or Cheyenne, men exchange travelers' tales about their journeys into Freud or Zen. They confuse metaphysics with geography, and they speak of their newfound philosophies as if they were places on the map." Is there not a connection to be made here, one which would involve more personal writing but ultimately contribute to a deeper resonance?

In brief, Lapham seems rather unsure of his own sensibility. Some of his pronouncements are very odd, such as this one: "The greatness of man expresses itself in the force of mind, in Bach's music or Shakespeare's plays, in the art of da Vinci, the physics of Newton, or the theories of Marx." The theories of Marx? How did they get in there? Great because successful? Lapham formulates theories where idle observations will do. Because there are so many bad parents on the East Side of Manhattan, where he lives, it occurs to him that "American society bears a grudge against the future. . . . By denying the reality of its children, the society expresses its rage against change." This is bosh.

I am in danger of quibbling too much, however. Lapham is reliably learned and eloquent, and he strikes many a telling blow. He is also, it so happens, a fine reporter. There is an astringent excellence to his journal of a failed Broadway musical and to his account of a visit to an Indian ashram favored by the Beatles and Mia Farrow in the late sixties. There is sound reporting on the Army and the "energy debacle." And, even when he gets carried away with the themes and variations he plays on his typewriter, Lapham is bound to make several penetrating points.



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He is best when true to his original role as a spy in rich man's land. The most seriously provocative of his notions here is that an American courtly society, fundamentally hostile to the tenets of democracy, has begun to entrench itself. He is genuinely sensitive to the various corruptions of freedom practiced by

free men. No doubt I ask too much of him, but as a general rule I'd like to see less of the sage and more of the rascal in Lapham, less homage to Hotchkiss, Yale, and Cambridge, and more attention to the ratty little secrets of the streets and the state-rooms which he seems capable of understanding. □

**PURITAN BOSTON AND QUAKER PHILADELPHIA:  
TWO PROTESTANT ETHICS AND THE SPIRIT  
OF CLASS AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP**

E. Digby Baltzell / The Free Press / \$19.95

Robert Nisbet

It is safe to say that no other living social scientist or historian is as qualified to write this important and fascinating book as E. Digby Baltzell. In addition to the sociological and historical skills he brings to his work—skills developed in the researching and writing of two earlier studies of American upper classes and elites, *Philadelphia Gentleman* and *The Protestant Establishment*—he brings also the kind of knowledge of subject that is the result exclusively of *belonging* to what he writes about. That is, Baltzell took care to be born a Proper Philadelphian, thoroughly at home from the beginning in Philadelphia's upper crust and able to make his way naturally to Boston's, needing thereafter only the acquisition of the tools and strategies of professional sociological research. In *Philadelphia Gentleman*, Baltzell demonstrated an enviable capacity to write with objectivity about Proper Philadelphians, which must have been mildly upsetting, to say the least, to some of those who found themselves case studies and statistics in his book. The result, though, was the best book yet written on the American upper class.

From the beginning, Baltzell has had his eye on what many would regard as the central problem today in America, indeed, in the entire Western world: the problem of authority in a social order that has been wracked and tormented by the forces of modernity, however benign many of these may be intrinsically to the ends of freedom and democracy. In *The*

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*Protestant Establishment* he showed how the old WASP aristocracy in this country came into existence, how it prospered and left its mark on American society, and how and why it fell into decay. His answer to the last was, like Tocqueville's on the Old Regime in France, the loss of authority. As long as WASP norms and values contained the greater part of American literary and scientific creativity, of political leadership, and of social and economic enterprise, WASP ascendancy worked to the lasting benefit of American civilization. But when new ethnic and religious elements entered the mainstream of American history, offering fresh creativity and enterprise, and when the Protestant Establishment refused, through all the means establishments have, to allow any of these new, fresh movers and shakers into its ranks, its day became twilight.

The splendid thing about Baltzell's work is that it has never been rooted in the false idols of egalitarianism. Today, even in the innermost precincts of sociology and political science it has become acceptable—well, almost acceptable—to question the virtues of all-out egalitarianism and to say a good word occasionally about social class and elites. But it was anything but acceptable when Baltzell's writing began in the 1950s. He made it evident from the beginning that while the old upper class had lost or squandered its rights of authority in America, *some* system of upper class authority was indispensable to a free and creative society. In *The Protestant Establishment* he wrote:

Following Tocqueville's classic analysis of the decline of authority in France, I

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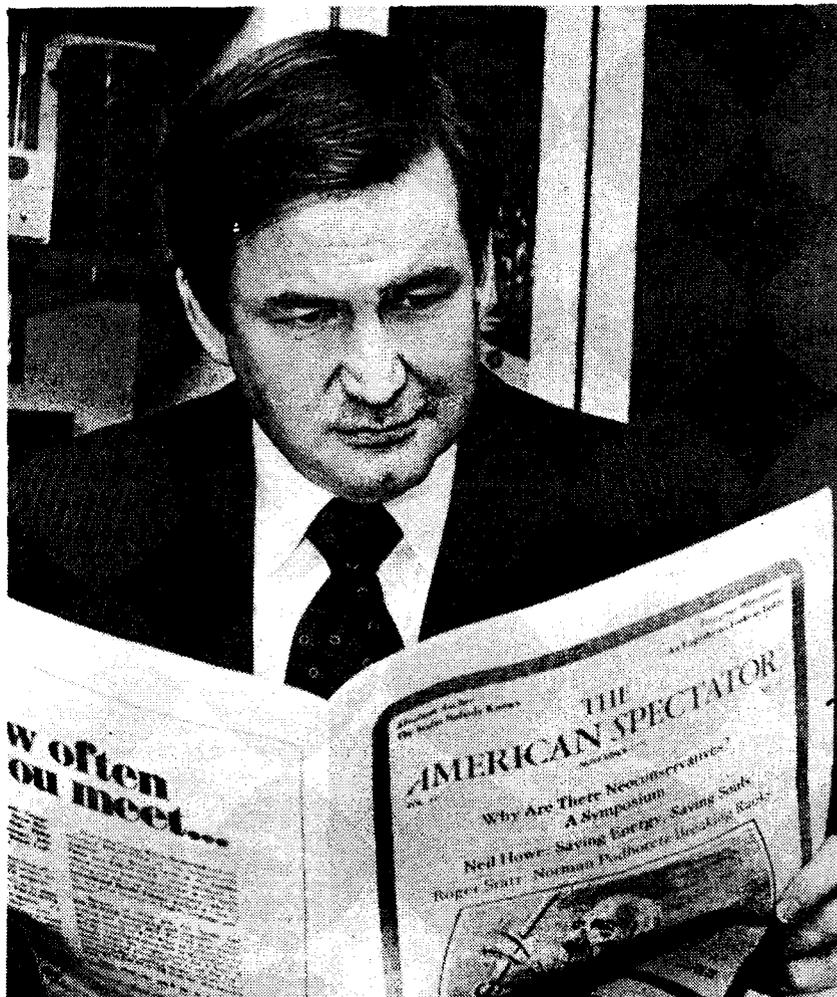


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