

The Spoiled Child

by Henry Fairlie

In the years since Dwight Eisenhower led an army into Europe, the course of the United States at home and abroad has been astonishing. To look back now is to find a landscape that is barely recognizable, yet one in which the signs were already posted to the landscape of today. It is near the end of World War II that we may start.

America was turned outward to the world. The shelves of bookstores were filled with books and maps that seemed to announce a new world, of which the New World had become the center. Europe and even Australia were shrunk to the size of frankfurters, as someone said at the time, whereas the American continent was so enlarged that Winnipeg "suddenly showed up as the center of the world." The revolution was Copernican in nature: America had become the sun around which its satellites revolved.

It was not just an advent of power that was being celebrated, but a sense of mission in the world, and of confidence in its success. Bonwit Teller

Henry Fairlie is a British writer. This article is adapted from his book, The Spoiled Child of the Western World, to be published in January by Doubleday. ©1975 by Henry Fairlie.

advertised a new perfume that was called "Bretton Woods"; across Central Park a new saloon opened on the corner of Broadway and Seventy-third with the name of "Dumbarton Oaks." At a more serious level, Thomas E. Dewey declared, three weeks after the invasion of Europe: "I say to you, our country is fighting its way to new horizons. The future of America has no limit." Playing in *A Guy Named Joe*, Spencer Tracy gave the mood a characteristic utterance: "Everything's going to be prettier, you're not going to have any more bad dreams, you're going to have all the things people have, your life is going to be living, laughing, fighting, and loving." Thirty years later, there seemed to be nothing but bad dreams in the land, and everything did not seem to be prettier; or so at least we have been persuaded.

It was a time when even the most traditional institutions in the country were trusted to cope with the new international responsibilities; the confidence of the United States was the confidence of its middle class. In particular, the professional leadership of the middle class was seized by a progressive spirit that was unusually generous in its estimate of the Ameri-

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can people, their needs and capacities; it had not yet cultivated a disdain for the ordinary people of the country and their cares. Middle class organizations such as Americans for Democratic Action were not yet contemptuous or supercilious in their attitudes to the working class; it was assumed that each needed the other.

The confidence of the middle class—in themselves and their country, its institutions and its people—rested to a large extent on the fact that it could still draw on the resources of its conventional morality. Even its professional and intellectual leaders, who might not observe its traditional standards in their private lives, and sneered with Mencken at the "booboisie," were in fact sustained by the awareness that the morality and the standards were nevertheless secure—somewhere.

"There was not the slightest evidence in the 1930s, or even in the decade following," wrote the distinguished American sociologist Robert Nisbet in 1971, "that the time would shortly come when to be middle class would mean being indulgent, permissive, tolerant, in a wide range of political, social, and moral matters to

a degree that can only be called radical (and to a degree that would certainly have appalled either Marx or Freud)." But perhaps the evidence was there, if only the signs had been read. The signs of experimentation, of a straining to be free from the standards and morality of the past, were already to be discerned. In short, the spoiled child of the Western world was about to arrive.

As early as 1940, observers were already commenting on the extraordinary growth of the middle class in America. During the preceding seventy years, whereas the working class had multiplied only six times, the middle class had multiplied eight times, and the new middle class of salaried employees no less than sixteen times. By the 1950s the middle class in America was a social phenomenon of considerable novelty and interest. It was in many respects the entire society, and those who did not yet belong to it were soon to be called "the minorities" or "the disadvantaged." It was composed of "the common man," within whose way of life (rather than against it) his children would appear to rebel. There was no profound social protest to make, no

protest of a class on its own behalf or on behalf of another. In these circumstances, it could be a rebellion only of the self and, as we will see, the ground for such a rebellion in the popular culture had in the high culture been prepared for a long time and in many ways.

If the middle class in the United States at the end of the Second World War was about to become "indulgent, permissive, tolerant, in a wide range of political, social and moral matters," it was because two influences were already at work: a science that was creating the *opportunities* for permissiveness, and a culture that was encouraging the *experimentation* with permissiveness. Science (with its handmaiden, technology) had said: "We have freed you from the physical constrictions of the past." Art had said: "Freed from the constrictions of the past, you may now experiment with your freedom."

Permissiveness is too slight a word to describe the kind of freedom which, by 1945, could be imagined as a result of the advances in science and technology. Life itself was being reshaped in no obvious mold. At the end of 1943, for the first time in its history, the American Medical Association published a list of approved contraceptives in its journal. This was a concession by medical science to the morals that science itself had made possible.

The consequences of this science and technology have often been as far-reaching as they have been indirect and unintended. In 1944, 16 million women in the United States had jobs; almost four million of them were employed in war industries. Observing these figures, Fannie Hurst commented on the opportunities for the further emancipation of women after the war, but immediately added: "I am beginning to doubt whether we want it. Home fires are going to roar"; and roar they did, although the metaphor seems a little inappropriate to most American homes. But what were the women to do in their homes?

Even those home fires did not need their attention. Increasingly the freedom from the physical constrictions of the past had given their lives not so much a new shape as no recognizable shape at all.

One of the answers was given by Alexander Wiley in 1948, when he was the U. S. Senator from Wisconsin, in words that can be cherished: "When I see my grandchildren, these lovely clods of human clay given to us by God, I reflect that each of us is a sculptor of that soft, receptive clay. We can fashion it whichever way we will. We can make of it a masterpiece of human art." But this attention to the child, having become the primary if not the sole occupation of the woman in her home, in fact yielded a generation of parents who were more permissive than could have been imagined only a generation earlier. The clay was not shaped, it certainly was not fired; and the most important of the reasons was that life had ceased, as a result of science and technology, to be as hard and earnest as before; it was understood that it would be even less hard and earnest for the new generation when it reached maturity.

By the 1950s the struggle for existence had ceased to be a preoccupation in the lives of the majority of the American people. Even the vogue of existentialism at that time, which could be interpreted as recommending a kind of permissiveness, had its origin in this fact: since the struggle for existence had ceased to be a problem, one's existence itself became the problem. Existentialism is not a philosophy for someone who lacks a crust of bread. The voice of an earlier generation, pointing the contrast, may be heard in an answer that Patricia Nixon gave to Gloria Steinem during the 1968 election campaign: "I never had the time to think about things like that—who I wanted to be, or who I admired, or to have ideas . . . I've never had it easy. I'm not like all you people. . . all those people who have had it so easy."



Diana H. Walker

Being and Nothingness

Art was to become the accomplice of science. Since the struggle for existence was over, the effort could begin to remake that existence. The urban middle-class popular culture was in the mood to experiment, to try new things. In 1944, Alfred A. Knopf made the surprising announcement that his second best seller of the year, after *A Bell for Adano*, was *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran; and at the same time there appeared the first English translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* that was both authoritative and readable. Immediately it was reviewed in the news magazines, whose editors did not seem to regard it as a provocation to their readers. Eastern religions have always been given a hearing in the United States, but this was the first time, at least since the days of the Theosophical Society, that there was evidence of their attraction for the popular mind, of its willingness to

experiment with them, as it was also beginning to experiment with drugs. One of the first popular news stories about the use of marijuana appeared as early as 1945 in *Newsweek*, which called it "a notoriously troublesome civilian problem," no longer confined to jazz singers and black ghettos.

After the liberation of Paris in 1944, lines of American soldiers filled the Rue Saint-Augustin to pay tribute, not to Charles de Gaulle, not to a night club singer, but to Picasso, who in the end had to plead that they would honor him more if they left his studio to him. The master could not make a remark so silly that the news magazines would not print it. Art had become a celebrity, and leading the way was the advertising industry. "The unassailable fact," said *Printer's Ink* in 1944, "is that one of the most conspicuous trends in advertising today is the adoption of surrealist techniques in advertising illustrations"; and it added that it was odd that such a "radical, eccentric art form should

have been embraced by the most conservative element in the American community, i.e., business." Today we do not find it odd; we are well aware of the role of "Madison Avenue" in the culture. But the phenomenon was then new.

We are now used to the rapidity with which the messages of the high culture are transformed into the codes of the popular culture; and since the high culture has for long been experimental, the popular culture has in turn been attuned to experiment. By the time in 1949 that Andy Warhol moved to New York, "frail and pallid, raggedy and poor," the stage had been set for him.

The urban middle-class popular culture of the United States had already gone before, preparing the way for him to take the actual world and, by painting his signature on it, to turn it into a work of art. Freed from the struggle for existence, each man might be an artist, and the artist in particular of his own life. It is in this sense that one speaks of a spoiled child: freed from the physical constrictions of the past, he gives himself now to the gratification of himself in his-self, the immediate satisfaction of what he conceives to be his vital desires.

By the end of the Second World War, existentialism was already beginning its spectacular career from the high culture of Europe into the semi-literate culture of the United States. Again the news magazines bent their energies with a grotesque earnestness to expound the "philosophy." A reader of *Time* would by 1947 have grown facily familiar with the vocabulary of "anxiety" and "absurdity" and "being in the world," and the associated vocabulary of "alienation." By 1948, Kafka had become a hero, not only of the literary critic, but of the popular culture, celebrated as the archetype of the contemporary man, the dedicated artist, and The Victim. Any pressure of society on the individual was described as "Kafkalike," and the incitement of the individual to defiance was implicit.

The spoiled child was taught to despise both the reality and the ordinariness of the human situation, and to meet it with an invigorating even if superficial conviction in the possibility of his personal salvation. By a "wild leap of the will," as Iris Murdoch puts it, he could even fly in the face of facts.

The Child as Redeemer

In the United States, the idea of the child as born in sin was quickly transformed, first into the optimistic notion of the child as redeemable, and then into the extravagant promise of the child as redeemer. It is in the twin concern, with the child as an individual and with him also as the guardian of the future of the Republic, that we know we are in the United States. The promise was held out that, generation after generation, the individual could be so made that, generation after generation, the Republic would be redeemed.

It was after the Second World War that this idea became a form of national mission, and the literature of Women's Liberation is false in believing that the emphasis that was then placed on motherhood and the family was merely, although it certainly was in part, a device to keep women in the home. The center of concern was the child.

An article, one of hundreds, in *American Family* in 1949, put it clearly: "Parents who make companions of their children, who treat them as equals and friends and who join with them in their enjoyment of life, are amply rewarded in knowing that their children when they leave home are fortified with characters that will stand any test which may be met Our world and tomorrow's civilization are in the hands of the parent of today's children." The prescription is far-reaching. To read the family magazines of those years is to read of a nation that was confident in its power and its mission in the world, and certain that it could make the future

by making its children.

Turning to literature, we find that the adolescent was exquisitely celebrated by J.D. Salinger. Here indeed was the child brought forth as redeemer: the prescriptions of *American Family* in the 1940s pursued to their logical conclusion in the self-centered Holden Caulfield, the artless child as artful dodger. Salinger's dreadful creation was to become the folk hero of the young, and especially the educated young, of the American middle-class family, and especially the educated middle-class family, in America. What most matters in the career of Holden Caulfield is not that Jerry Rubin says: "I dug *Catcher in the Rye* . . . Holden Caulfield is a yippie," for that is an influence one would expect. What matters is that he had an adult audience as well, he was tenderly appreciated even by adult sensibilities, and given by them a palm.

The persistent accusation of hypocrisy against the adult world which is made by Holden Caulfield was accepted by the adults themselves, as they again accepted it when he issued in real life as Jerry Rubin; and again we ought not to be surprised when we consider what the adults had been taught, by their own literature, that spontaneity and authenticity are to be found only in the self, untouched and unguarded, in other words in the child.

'A Slice of Cheese'

The spoiled child is now sovereign in our Western societies, bent on discovering his-self only in himself, asking to be judged only by what is unqualified in him, untutored and undeveloped, his sincerity and his authenticity; distraught by his spontaneity, the immediate expression of what he conceives to be his vital desires; given to the exploitation of his-self in any god of his imaginings; finding in nature any reassurance that he requires, whether of his godlikeness or his beastliness; reducing the whole

we bring them
all together

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of life to the pinpoint of the self, yet demanding of it the gratification of all his appetites, only to complain, when they are refused, of his alienation.

We should not be surprised to find this spoiled child most fancifully represented in our images of our movie stars, in a Marilyn Monroe as once in a Brigitte Bardot. "If as a symbol, she stands for anything in our times," it was solemnly said of Bardot, later to be repeated with as much solemnity of Monroe, "she stands for the absurd, for a view of life characterized by profound, sad, dizzy, gay meaninglessness. As she herself said at Androvet, the cheese restaurant, 'If life is not a slice of cheese, what is it?'" It is to this idiocy that the philosophies of the contingent and the absurd are in the end reduced. But the maundering of the movie star, whom one may expect to be idiotic, is no more trifling than that of a writer such as John Barth, who is taken to be serious: "... reality is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there." It is the sentimentality, perhaps even more than the lie, that is offensive; and the cheapness of the effect.

The reality that Barth disdains is the society of other people, who present themselves to us with the manners that we share as human beings, in the estate that is the field of our common and cultivated behavior. It is in our encounters in this society that we discover both the complexity of our lives and the means with which to cope with that complexity.

It is our estate, the place that we have made for ourselves, that has been banished from our art and our literature. Novels used to present a picture of society at work, and of the negotiations of the individual with it; but they have now lost almost all interest in the social. In short, an idiom of our literature—what it chooses to talk about in the voice in which it chooses to talk—has been allowed to oust the idiom of our everyday lives—what we in fact talk about, in the voice in which we actually talk. We imagine

our commonplace world as if it is as empty and meaningless as it is represented in our literature. It is extraordinary that in our actual existence we have been willing to capitulate to an artistic idiom, that we have allowed what has happened in the novel to happen in our lives.

The twin vision of Henry Miller in *Tropic of Cancer* is now commonplace and facile. American society means to him "the ubiquitous bathtub, the five- and ten-cent-store bric-a-brac, the bustle, the efficiency, the machinery, the high wages, the free libraries, etc. etc." Against this he sets what? "I made up my mind that I would hold on to nothing, that henceforth I would live as an animal, a beast of prey, a rover, a plunderer"; and in all this he would find "above all, ecstasy." As long as this remains the voice of so much of our art and literature, we cannot look to it for help in reimagining our estate, and the relationships of ourselves in it.

There is an urgent need for our culture, and for American culture in particular, to return from myth to actuality, from a concern with ultimacies and extremities to a care for the daily round and things as they are, from the self in its-self to the individual in his society, from an obsessive interest in personal relationships to a decent curiosity about social relationships. That the need is felt is clear, not only from the popularity of "pop" sociology, but from the engagement of a novelist such as Truman Capote in what has been called the "new journalism," and in the audiences for the serialization on television of a novelist such as Galsworthy, whose interest was in the relationship between the individual and his society.

We need to return, from god, from nature, from the self, to our estate; from the unknown, which they all are, to what we can know, and use. As we gaze and reflect on the society of the spoiled child, it seems indeed that the individual has achieved the opposite of what was promised, not the realization of the self, but its palsy. ■

political book notes

*Public affairs books
to be published in November*

Act of Vengeance: The Yablonski Murders and Their Solution. Trevor Armbrister. Saturday Review/Dutton, \$10.95. Armbrister tells us the full and horrifying story of the Yablonski murders (Jock Yablonski ran against United Mine Workers president Tony Boyle in 1969, lost, and was then murdered with his wife and daughter in an "act of vengeance"). The lengthy section describing how, step by step, police, FBI and prosecutors led by Special Prosecutor Richard Sprague worked their way up the chain of command, convicting first the gunmen and finally Tony Boyle himself, is as morally satisfying as the murders were outrageous.

Armbrister lets the events speak for themselves, but at times he seems too unemphatic, as he chops from episode to episode, sometimes failing to discriminate in emphasis between the dramatic and the trivial. But where the narrative lags, the events themselves are sufficiently arousing to ensure that the reader will keep turning the page. A commendably thorough job.

The American Testament. Mortimer J. Adler, William Gorman. Praeger, \$7.95.

The Arabs: Their History, Aims and Challenge to the Industrialized World. Thomas Kiernan. Little, Brown, \$12.50.

Asia and the Road Ahead. Robert A. Scalapino. University of California, \$10.95.

Don't Make No Waves . . . Don't Back No Losers: An Insider's Analysis of the Daley Machine. Milton Rakove. Indiana University, \$10. Residents of Chicago enjoy provoking do-gooders with statements like "Politics is about picking up the garbage." Only rarely do they add the Chicago corollary: "If you want your garbage picked up, vote Democratic." This book, by a Chicago resident, uses the garbage thesis to argue that Chicago is "better governed than any other city in America." Many people are saying the same thing these days, but the author has an unusual combination of expertise. He spent many years in the Daley machine, marching in the annual St. Patrick's Day parades and

running, mostly unsuccessfully, for various local offices. He is also a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. His case for machine politics is almost convincing. As Rakove says, the personal accountability afforded by the machine's network of precinct captains and politicized garbage men is often preferable to the tyranny of the unionized civil service that has replaced the machines in most American cities. His contention that the Chicago machine will survive the migration of white Chicagoans to the suburbs is also interesting—if debatable. But one misses in this book the critical stance of Mike Royko's *Boss*, which conveyed Daley's poli-

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