The Crisis of Modernity: Deviation or Demise?

I What crisis?
There are those who believe that the contemporary crisis of our society is a temporary, a limited setback as our civilization rises to higher plateaux of organization, knowledge, planning and competence, onward and forward into the ultra-modern (or technetronic) age. The swelling symptoms of disaffection, especially the counter-culture of youth, are viewed as limited in scope and significance, and as only delaying progress. Even among the young, it is argued, only a minority rebels and those who do are mainly from among the students, largely in the humanities and some of the social sciences, who react to the growing obsolescence of their generalistic, abstract perspective. These rebelling few, these reactionary neo-Luddites, are said to perceive correctly that they will be even more out of place in the 1980s than they were in the late 1960s, as society will be run increasingly by a technological elite, applied scientists and administrators. The rebellion is thus written off as a small, albeit troublesome, price that progress exacts.

But obviously, we point out, not only students rebel. Racial minorities, senior citizens and significant segments of women are also increasingly disenchanted with 'the good life' that contemporary society is supposedly offering, and they act out their alienation. Yet the significance of this broadening front is discounted because the goals of the various member groups vary significantly. The blacks (and other ethnic minorities), it is said, are fighting basically for their share in the system, their cut of the affluent pie; while the young radicals wish to slay the modern goose that lays the consumer eggs and to return to the culture (and economics and ecology) of poverty. And, it is added with some Schadenfreude, even the rebelling young are not in agreement. Some seek a traditional revolution in the old leftist sense of the term, daydreaming of storming a Bastille or palace, mounting the barricades, followed by soviets of students, workers and peasants, taking over, ushering in the sunshine society. Others expect the same result to be achieved by personal acts of faith (by raising consciousness) and by a change of life style (What could General Motors do if we all chose to ride bicycles or, better yet, walk?).

The friends of modernity point to the rapid rise and fall of various rebellion fads to document further their complacent thesis. In 1968 there were major outbreaks of riots in black ghettos in scores of American cities; it was widely argued that, unless major
reforms were made to favor the blacks, the subsequent summers would grow hotter until the whole country would go up in the flames of civil war. Actually, while the reforms that followed were small tokens, there were fewer fires in 1969, still fewer in subsequent years. The student uprising that gained momentum in the mid- and late 1960s was said then to endanger academia and polity alike. Louis J. Halle, writing in the New Republic, saw a 'student drive to destruction' which threatened 'the breakdown of the discipline of civilization', and it was no longer impossible that 'Mr George Wallace or someone like him will become President of the United States in 1973.' Dire consequences were predicted if the rebelling young who gave the political system its 'last chance' in the 1968 elections, by campaigning for Eugene McCarthy, were to find it unresponsive. The editor of The Nation opined that a 'sizable number of voters will turn to a third party or a fourth... which if it cannot prevail in 1968 will pave the way for national, radical change in 1972,' adding ominously, 'provided the fat has not gone into the fire by then'. But 1968 came and went; not just Gene but even Humphrey lost, and Nixon – anathema of anathemas – took over; yet in the following years the young were heard less of, not more. Soon, it is said, few will recall what the initials SDS stand for, and even the extremist, violence-prone Weathermen, who finally decided to talk down dynamiting, have just about blown themselves away. By 1971, not only had the campuses ceased to boil over, but even their internal turmoil had subsided. Still, it is my thesis that the crisis remains a real enough one (albeit much less dramatic and less visible than the headline-writers first had it, then lost sight of). I shall try to show that America is being transformed and, more globally, that modernity is coming to an end. That America is not falling apart, or returning to a pastoral primitiveness, is hardly to the point; there are other, much more historical, much more frequently encountered ways for a particular form of society to be superseded. The thesis I shall try to advance is that the modern world is, step by step, being replaced by a new pattern which will make more room for individual self-actualization along with enhanced community values, and which will gear the instrumental processes more closely to the advancement of humanist and social values. The present counter-culture movement – as inept, fad-ridden, apolitical, splintered as it is – is not the last hurrah of obsolete romantic humanist ideas, but a hothouse of new personal, cultural, and societal experimentation. The future America, we shall see in some detail, is not about to look like a hippie commune, a Woodstock festival, an Aspen Marathon or an Earth Day teach-in. All these, however, contain the seeds of possible future developments of societal significance, among which we must choose (or elect to combine) and, above all, adapt to apply on a society-wide scale. But let me proceed one step at a time.

II Some data on the scope and nature of the crisis
How can one sustain, in the face of the observations of the technetronic prophets cited above, the thesis that a grand transformation toward a new society has begun? There can be no gainsaying the fact that various forms, organizations and ideological factions of the rebellion have come and gone with a faddish speed hitherto known only in the world of clothing and cosmetics. However, what the friends of ultra-modernity – the technetronicrats – seem to fail to perceive is that, as one rebellious form is replaced...
by another, the rebellion itself is swelling in scope and growing in depth. The expressions of protest do shift about rapidly from civil disobedience to peaceful marches, from confrontation demonstrations to dynamiting, political campaigning and other forms. The mass media, which quickly tires of any one form of protest, rewards with prime-time or front-page coverage the finding of a new format. Moreover, time and again, one segment or another of the highly unorganized movement lapses into restless and alienated apathy, seemingly disappearing, only to be available again (or at least many of its members) for protest against the system; it has remained hostile even in its latency. Expressive politics and apathetic alienation, both of which require no more than a short fuse, are more akin to each other than either is to sustained involvement in routine politics.

Thus, for instance, the blacks, while recently disinclined to sit-in or burn out — and although the mode of expression of their disenchantment has swiftly shifted from one form to another and from various kinds of activism to alienated passivity and then again back to the streets — are highly disenchanted with the system. They are systematically and significantly and increasingly less satisfied with their personal fortunes and futures than are whites.4 And a sizable group believes that only violence will gain them equality — 21 per cent of a national sample, 36 per cent of Northern young blacks. But what about the others? Four out of ten endorse militant organizations (41 per cent) and are willing to take to the streets in protest (42 per cent); six out of ten feel that ‘people who have power are out to take advantage of you’ (61 per cent); nearly seven out of ten favor organizing boycotts where whites discriminate against blacks (68 per cent), while over three-quarters of the blacks approve keeping up the heat on the federal government (77 per cent).5 It is true that large-scale riots are less common; however, the number of small-scale civil disorders, arson, shooting of policemen and firemen, bombing and prison riots (wardens speak of a new breed of militant inmates) has significantly increased.6 John Herseky, author of the New York Times article just cited, referred to ‘shifting battlegrounds’ of group violence.

Similarly, much has been made of the finding that only one out of five students believes ‘that some degree of violence is necessary to produce needed social change in this country’.7 However, a third of the respondents in a student sample back extreme left politics; 44 per cent believe in the need for radical pressure to bring about social change and 75 per cent see a need for fundamental changes. Ninety per cent of the seniors of one class (1968–9) said they were ‘very critical of our basic institutions’. Thus, the ‘hard-core’ radical activists and the prospective militants have all the sea they possibly could wish to fish in, and the potential scope of the rebellion is not narrow, but — compared to other periods — seems uncommonly encompassing. That only small minorities of the social groupings involved are themselves militants, and that they hardly all march in the same direction and to the same tune, should not lead one to underestimate the rebellion. A study of any previous successful uprising, from the French Revolution to the Russian, from the Boston Tea Party to the wars of national liberation in Asia and Africa, shows beyond any doubt that rebellions are all carried by small minorities, backed by much larger groups of occasional participants and sympathizers. Thus, there were no more than 10,000 full-timers in the Israeli underground that caused the British to pack up and leave. The French Revolution was largely
a Parisian matter, involving about 80,000; and the number of those who stormed the Bastille was only in the hundreds.

Splintering, intra- and inter-sectarian feuding and fanatical ideological hairsplitting, are the noises emitted by all rebellious movements, from Protestants rising against Rome to European socialists battling capitalism, from pre-independence Indian nationalists to the Cuban underground against Batista. The noise is hardly raised for the purpose of lulling the powers that be; the infighting is real enough. Nor is the suggestion that it shows a weakness of the movement without foundation. But we should also not ignore the fact that, divergent as the directions the various dissenting groups march in may be, they all lead away from the existing system. And the day that the system is seriously challenged, the conflicting factions often suddenly find a common tune, a 'united front'; and those groups that do not actually join in will stick to the sidelines rather than uphold the system. Thus, the goals of some blacks who feel excluded from the affluent society may well not coincide with those of student anarchists who seek to abolish affluence, but these blacks were not seen rushing to defend Columbia University on the day students took over its buildings, or trying to stop CORE from blocking New York City's bridges, or blocking the march on the Pentagon.

Most important, this line of reasoning - led by Lipset - as to what proportion of a social group (generation, students, blacks, etc.) is willing to use force to overthrow the system is chiefly relevant to those who expect a traditional revolutionary movement. For those who expect a transformation, the scope of alienation from the old values - whether mobilized or apolitical - and the spread of commitments to new values is more to the point. As we have seen, for every student, black and other rebelling person who is willing to use force (or says so to a pollster or writes it on a questionnaire), there are three or four others who are turned off the system. How many of those are already turned on to a new set of values and active work in reshaping a new personal and collective life is harder to assess. An attempt at such estimates will be made later when the most important of the new systems are discussed.

It is not a case of one ethnic minority yet to be cut in, or students laboring under humanistic hangups: the lineup of groups that are alienated in various forms and degrees from contemporary America is by now much longer. It encompasses not only a rising proportion of the blacks (12 per cent of the US population), but a large number of Spanish Americans (especially Puerto Ricans and Chicanos), Red or Indian Americans, Americans of oriental descent and others. The growing population of older people has been for decades a major source of alienation politics. That a significant proportion of women have been caught up in the liberation movement is well known; 24 per cent of American women sampled agreed with the most ideological statement of Women's Liberation, that 'women are discriminated against and treated as second-class citizens'. Many more agreed with specific demands. Nearly 70 per cent favored low-cost child care centers for working mothers. More than 70 per cent favored equal job opportunities for women; over 80 per cent, equal pay. Rejected out of hand were more esoteric notions such as that women should not be appraised on the basis of sex, beauty and appeal and should be drafted. In another poll 42 per cent of American women favored 'most of the efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society'.
Not even nearly correct is the image of a majority in favor of modernity being challenged by a wild disarray of minorities, inasmuch as a large segment of the white working-class and middle-class population is deeply alienated, too. The reasons 'Middle Americans' or the 'ethnics' are resentful are many and varied: they need not be explored here. Whatever the reasons, it is evident that the new high standard of living, the main payoff of modernity, has not kept them jumping with joy. While a large majority tends to feel that tension is a constant element in modern life (73 per cent in 1968, 83 per cent in 1972), and an even larger majority would like to rid life of constant tensions (86 per cent and 93 per cent), a decreasing minority believes that such a condition can be achieved (16 per cent in 1968, 9 per cent in 1972). A poll of Middle Americans at the end of the sixties found that 40 per cent thought that 'the US has changed for the worse over the past decade' (the figure in 1972 was 54 per cent) and 58 per cent expected that it was likely to change for the worse over the next decade.

In the poll of the sixties half (48 per cent) agreed that there was need to experiment with new ways of dealing with the nation's problems, and even more (54 per cent) that 'young people are not unduly critical of their country'. In the sixties a sizable proportion favored the government's spending more money on public needs (e.g., 56 per cent cited depollution) and social justice (47 per cent, medical care for the old and the needy). Now, more than ever, people want the focus of the nation's efforts to shift from foreign missions to reform at home (77 per cent in 1971 as compared with 31 per cent in 1965).

True, construction workers (hardhats), American Legionnaires or groups of Poles in Detroit, Chicago or Cleveland (a small fraction of their total groupings) may be counted upon to show up in support of the flag, the Fatherland and the beating up of those 'hippies' or 'niggers'. But study after study confirms that even they are bewildered, frightened and disappointed with the system. They are patriotic, loyal to the nation, but not to the values of modernity, rationalism and liberalism. On the contrary, they tend to be anti-science, against 'big government', impulsive and restive. They, too, seek more from a society than fleshpots or porkchops.

Institutions that used to be the citadels of conservatism and the mainstays of society are hollowed by internal erosion of authority and confidence. Two-thirds of the Roman Catholic priests in the United States disclosed, in an N ORC study conducted by the Reverend Andrew Greeley, that in their judgement Pope Paul VI misused his authority in issuing his 1967 encyclical against artificial birth control. Only 40 per cent of the priests agreed in 1971 with the official Church position on divorce. And 56 per cent believed that priests should be free to marry. Even the Army has been shaken by a crisis in morale and discipline as serious as any its oldest and toughest soldiers can remember. The rate of those absent without leave rose from 57 out of 1,000 in 1966 to 177 in 1970, and of deserters from 15 out of 1,000 in 1966 to 74 in 1970. 'According to an Army study, there may well exist such a profound crisis of discipline that the Army's ability to function is in doubt'. Police departments are becoming increasingly alienated. Nothing seems to be exempt from the crisis of legitimation and authority.

No wonder, then, that when polls take random national samples rather than studying one group or another, the result is a combination of disaffected minorities – those who seek to outgrow modernity, those who have not made it yet into the modern
society and those who do not wish to make it – and a disaffected majority.

The kingpin of a system is its political structure, which rests on two pillars, legitimation and power. When the former is absent power is naked, and tends to weaken because it has to be used so frequently; this increasingly alienates the subjects, and since its inherent weakness is exposed no élite has sufficient force to control all or most of the subjects, especially not to induce them positively to fulfill their various roles. A measure of voluntarism, of consent, of legitimation by at least the majority of the citizens is vital. Underdeveloped societies, which conduct little business collectively, and whose citizens' awareness of the political processes is often limited, may get away with a combination of voodoo and tyranny (as Haiti under Papa Doc and the Dominican Republic under Trujillo demonstrated). However, modern societies, especially active societies, which require a high degree of collective activity and citizens' involvement, need legitimation as badly as they need electricity. It is widely agreed, even by the super-optimists of modernity, that a polity cannot draw forever on the stock of legitimacy provided by its founders. Without renewal of the investments – without the continuous investiture of power through legitimation – the depletions lead inevitably to loss of the inheritance.

While public feelings about the main branches of the polity – the Supreme Court, Congress and the President – rise and fall from year to year, even with daily events, there is a persistent pattern. The majority of Americans view all three as ineffectual, at best grading them unenthusiastically as 'fair'. Thus, for instance, a 1968 national poll by Gallup found that little more than a quarter of Americans (28 per cent) considered the Supreme Court to be doing a good job: a meagre 8 per cent graded it 'excellent', while over half the nation (53 per cent) rated its performance as 'fair' or 'poor'. More generally, 'Only 23 per cent of the adult population think that the system of justice in America is working well today, compared with 46 per cent who say they would have given it high marks five years ago.'19 The positive rating of Congress, given by two-thirds in 1965 (63 per cent), declined year after year until it reached a low 26 per cent in 1971.20 By 1972 a majority (52 per cent) of pre-election representative voters agreed that they 'do not trust people in power' as much as they used to.21

Distrust of the President is high. Two-thirds of the public believed LBJ was not telling them the truth about the Vietnam War (65 per cent, Gallup, February 1967). About the same level of distrust continued in the Nixon era: Asked if Nixon was 'frank and straightforward' about Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, those who distrusted him have varied from 45 to 50 per cent and those who trusted him from 33 to 43 per cent, in several polls taken in 1971. At no point did the majority mark the President as creditable. In 1971 51 per cent agreed with a more general and stronger statement: 'People are not told the real truth.'22 Even before publication of the Pentagon Papers, the term 'credibility gap' was widely applied – at least since the Eisenhower era. Richard Harris, writing in the New Yorker, put it:

While the American political system is variously attacked and defended within the United States today, there seems to be increasing agreement on one point: those who run the nation are not to be trusted. That point is crucial, for, in order to survive, democracy must have the trust of the governed; without trust there can be no consent, and without consent there can be no democracy.23
Distrust of President Nixon increased during the course of investigation of the Watergate bugging affair. Asked to rate the President on ‘inspiring confidence personally’ the public moved from 48 per cent positive in February to 33 per cent positive in April.24 His overall rating fell from 60 per cent positive in February to 50 per cent positive in April.25 Asked specifically whether the White House was frank and honest regarding the Watergate affair, 63 per cent felt it was not.26

When a national sample of white middle-class Americans, considered the nation’s mainstay, was asked about the government in general, ‘only 23 per cent of the sampling said the government was doing a ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ job of dealing with the nation’s problems; two-thirds said ‘fair’ or ‘poor’.27 Asked how the leadership in various non-governmental areas now compares with the past, the public replied affirmatively as far as medicine, science, and business were concerned (all rated ‘better’ by no less than 64 per cent), but the federal government and politics scored respectively, a very low 19 and 13 per cent.

Americans show very little confidence in the capacity of their government to provide them with even the most basic personal security. The percentage of those worried about safety on the streets (‘more than last year’) has risen from 49 to 53 per cent in five years (1966–71) (64 per cent of American women feel less safe on the streets than a year ago28), and of those who personally fear racial violence, in the same period, from 43 to 52 per cent. While 99 per cent of the Americans felt that ‘a decline in violence in the U.S.’ would be desirable, only 33 per cent felt that the decline would come in their lifetime, and 57 per cent felt there would be no decline.29 By early 1973, big city residents said crime was the worst problem in their city, followed by traffic and drug abuse.30 If one takes into account that a proportion of the population still lives in small towns and areas without minorities, obviously the overwhelming majority in the relevant areas feel personally threatened.

Elections are the corrective that American democracy offers the public to express its discontent. They are meant to grant legitimation to the course of the society (‘this is what the people wanted’) and to provide new alternatives, a ready-made, ‘institutionalized’, nonviolent way to enter the system. However, the candidates among whom the public must choose are selected with little public participation. This is especially true in national elections with two major party candidates to choose between. The question, hence, is to what extent the citizens feel that the people they would like to vote for are before them to choose from. While it is impossible to run all those who are wanted by someone, the higher the proportion of the public whose preferences are excluded, the more alienating are the elections. In September 1968, pollster Harris asked a national sample of Americans: ‘Suppose instead of voting in the election, you yourself could pick anyone who is living and has been active in politics, to be President of the United States. Who would you pick from this list?’ Only 21 per cent opted for Nixon, and only 9 per cent wanted Humphrey. Many of the few who named LBJ (6 per cent) or Romney (3 per cent) may not have felt too cheated by being restricted to a choice between Nixon and Humphrey. However, those who asked for Nelson Rockefeller (12 per cent), Eugene McCarthy (7 per cent) or John Lindsay (4 per cent) and those who named Edward Kennedy (18 per cent) – all these no doubt felt that their kind of man never had a fair chance. This would hold even more for the 13 per cent who
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named George Wallace, because of the obvious hurdles faced by third-party candidates.

The 1972 election results are (mis)interpreted by many as an indication of the stability of the American establishment and of the limited appeal of demands for radical change. And yet, as I see it, the election results do not reflect the feelings of the country. Why? First, many of the alienated did not vote at all. Actually, the count of those who did not vote in the 1972 election is bigger than that of those who voted for the Democratic candidate. It might hence be stated that McGovern came in not second, but third. The reason public-opinion polls, which gained so much attention before the election, do not reflect this large segment of Americans is that they cover only those they define as 'likely voters'.

While it is true that some of the non-voters absented themselves for reasons other than resentment, it is also true that some of the resentfuls did vote, and thus these two 'inaccuracies' in our generalization tend to cancel each other out. Moreover, even if people did not vote for other reasons, e.g. because they did not register, this often reflects at least a degree of apathy if not active alienation.

In addition, McGovern failed not so much because there was no alienated majority but because he did not succeed in capturing the divergent alienated groups. Unlike the populism of Bobby Kennedy, who seems to have mobilized (for a while) the left-liberals, part of the Wallace potential from the middle classes and many of the disaffected working class, the McGovern brand appealed mainly to the left-liberal wing.

Finally, and most significant, many of the center and conservative alienated who did vote, being even more opposed to McGovern's alleged radicalism than to the system, voted for Nixon as the lesser of the two evils. This group represents the majority of those who feel ignored, unrepresented, disaffected.

The two political parties constitute the main channel of political expression. Yet there has been a steady erosion in the proportion of Americans who are willing to classify themselves as belonging to either and a steady increase in those who define themselves as independent. In 1960 the parties still polled 77 per cent; in 1971 the proportion had declined to 60 per cent, with the percentage of independents rising from 23 to 31 per cent.

At the same time, there has been a rise in reports of extra-institutional expressions of protest (see table).

The statement 'campaigns are so expensive these days that only a rich man can afford to run for office,' agreed with by 81 per cent of the public, most of whom are not rich, is another indication of the sense of unrepresentation.


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Nor does the American public show great confidence in the working of other civic or commercial institutions. Asked over the last twelve years to rate the 'job' done by local government, schools and newspapers, less than half the respondents thought they did a good or excellent job, and in all three categories the favorable responses declined substantially during this period. In another poll, a clear majority (59 per cent) saw the quality of products as declining, probably more a sign of rising disaffection and critical orientation than of a change in the goods themselves, a mood also reflected in the fact that about the same proportion (58 per cent) considered that 'business has become too big to take a real interest in its customers'. Moreover, confidence in the leaders of financial institutions has fallen from 67 per cent in 1966 to 39 per cent in 1972. In late 1972 Harris noted a general public skepticism toward leaders of most public and private institutions. Thus while in 1966 61 per cent had 'a great deal of confidence' in educators, this figure dropped to 37 per cent in 1971 and 33 per cent in 1972. As for medical personnel, only 48 per cent felt full confidence in 1972 as opposed to more than half the public in 1971.

More generally, Americans are pessimistic about the state of the nation. A general sense of where the public at large is at is revealed in that two-thirds of the American people were reported in 1971 to believe that the country had lost its proper sense of direction. Less than one-fourth said: 'things in this country are generally going in the right direction today' (13 per cent had no opinion). A similar finding was reported by Potomac Associates, who found that in 1971 about half the people (47 per cent) were pessimistic about the nation's future and believed there could be 'a real breakdown in this country'.

People are not just bitching; in unprecedented numbers, they are considering the ultimate cut — to cut out and quit. In 1971 12 per cent (about the equivalent of 16 million adults) told Gallup they would like to move abroad, twice as many as were so inclined in 1959 and three times more than the number who were, psychologically speaking, ready to pack soon after World War II. An even grimmer statistic, which must be viewed with great caution because of the difficulties in gaining and interpreting reliable data, is that suicides among young Americans are reported on the rise, reaching the level of 4,000 verified suicides a year in age group 15-19 by 1971.

Yet at the same time people seem highly satisfied with their personal states. Thus, Gallup found in 1971 that four out of five Americans (81 per cent) were satisfied with their jobs, six out of ten with their incomes (62 per cent) and with educational opportunities for their children (63 per cent). Fewer, but still a clear majority (56 per cent) were satisfied with their personal and their family's future. While in all these matters Americans have grown less satisfied since 1963 (although more satisfied as compared with postwar scores), the striking point is that large majorities are quite satisfied in personal terms. David C. Anderson of the Wall Street Journal, commenting on feeling personal satisfaction along with a sense of social malaise, observed that while people find themselves 'more opulent than they had ever expected', they also realize that personal well-being does not solve everything and can bring on new problems. 'People are reexamining old ideas of progress and trying to formulate new ones.' The same conclusion was reached by a group of survey researchers: '... the major concern of Americans is not with their own well-being or their personal financial prospects. It
is rather with the environment in which they live'.43 This news has not reached the
U.S. News and World Report, which published a typical gee-whiz book about the
United States full of quantitative statistics on the flow of material goods into private
hands.44

Haynes Johnson, who traveled across the United States for six months for the
Washington Post, deserves to be quoted at length because he seems to me to have
captured best, 'qualitatively', what the statistics of polls reflect:

Everywhere there is evidence that America is in the midst of a kind of revolution
it has not experienced before. Not over labor and capital, not over race, not over
political theories or forms, not over ideologies, but over personal attitudes and
values. Never, in nearly a decade of extensive travels throughout the nation, have
I encountered so many people asking so many serious, intensely personal and
searching questions – about their jobs, their wives or husbands, their children,
their country, their aspirations, their future.

Americans have changed. They have re-examined some of their most deeply
held values – about the worth of their material comforts, their desire for their
children to 'succeed' or even automatically go to college, their old vision of the
good life in the city or suburbs, their supreme confidence in their country's
indefatigable rightness – and rejected many of them.

'I want a life that is whole rather than chopped up,' said a teacher, explaining
why she had left the city for a new life in a rural New England town. Out on the
West Coast a middle-aged professional man who was also starting over again
put it differently: 'I think people are missing the point because they confuse money
with real wealth. They spend a lifetime working for a future that never comes.'45

Johnson adds:

Modern myth-making aside, it isn't only young Americans who are raising
those kinds of questions about their society. In fact, the most noticeable change
in attitudes is taking place among parents – and from whatever stereotyped
group you might choose: hard-hats, Middle Americans, silent majority or what
have you. They, too, are wrestling with new questions about American life.46

The Potomac study, cited above, shows that Americans express less concern with
material elements than they did five or ten years ago, as if they felt that this kernel of
the American has been or is being taken care of. It is here that the rustic wing of the
counter-culture has caught the essence and yet missed a vital point. True, beyond doubt,
the citizenry at large is increasingly concerned with quality and not just quantity,
with the human and environmental cost of progress rather than merely the statistics
of GNP, with public goods (education, health, safety) and not just personal material-
ism. There is a genuine and widespread yearning for a quality of life. However – and
this is the point missed by the counter-culture – not at the cost of returning to the
poverty, the short lifespan, the illness-infested life of pre-modernity. What the over-
whelming majority yearns to achieve is a life of greater freedom, less alienating work,
more depth, beauty, 'quality', sensitivity to others and openness to self, on top of, and
not instead of, the material comforts (though not necessarily all the gadgets) and high
standards of health that modernity acquired.

III More and better of the same?
Does this not fall right in with the technetronic prophets? Would not the ultra-modern
society, equipped with an ever-larger GNP, be able to pay for all the newly desired
public goods, from depollution to preventive health care – on top of affluent consump-
tion? Could it not – equipped with better planning, higher co-ordination, more
knowledge – offer to the individual a greater variety of jobs, and after hours greater
flexibility and more leisure as work, especially of the routine kind, is increasingly
automated? No doubt more can and will be achieved by greater cybernation and wider
use of applied science, administration, computers. The sense of imbalance owing to
rampant consumerism (twenty-nine kinds of soft drinks, eighty-eight kinds of lipstick
in every suburban supermarket) and meager public services – Galbraith’s well-known
lament – can in fact be corrected, and the sense of an incompetent government and hence
nation possibly reduced.

But several key ingredients will be missed. Without a clear view of the priorities
in ordering public goods, without a clear understanding of the constraints involved,
and without an overriding perspective, the demand will be as ceilingless as it is in
private consumption. There is absolutely no reason to believe that, given more and
more products – a summer house, three color TV sets, a 36-foot boat – a person
becomes truly sated. He may grow jaded, even increase his interest in non-consumer
goods (e.g. free time), but he will still not feel deeply satisfied. Similarly, America is
now experiencing a revolution of rising aspirations in demand for public goods, which
knows no acceptable definition of a ceiling. Thus, for instance, in health services the
quest is to provide each citizen with the same service now provided by a few elite
hospitals in major urban centers (Massachusetts General, Presbyterian) to their rich
clientele. However, this kind of service is so demanding, not so much in cost as in
numbers of talented physicians, that it is not possible to provide it to 200 million
Americans. Even if we should assign to this field all of the resources it could use, there
still would be significant differences in talent among the million or so physicians we
would need to offer every American top-quality service. This is not an argument
against social justice in medicine. We could, at least theoretically, share equally all we
have or will have (although this would require forcing top professionals to move out
of the preferred urban centers to the South, Southwest, Midwest and other less blessed
parts of the country). But the share each would get would be substantially lower than
that the rich are now getting. More or less the same holds for the quality of other
services, e.g. education. We can give everyone a high school and even a college educa-
tion, but it will not all be the same as that given by Bronx High School of Science or
Harvard College, which is precisely what is called for now.47

We must remember, too, that the leaders and members of the counter-culture come
chiefly from those sons and daughters of the upper middle class who have grown up in
the most affluent and thus, educationally, medically, etc., the best served sector of the
country. Their example hardly reassures us that the ultra-modern society – merely spit-
ting out more goods and services – will be any more loved than its modern predecessor.
We need, then, both in private and in public goods consumption, a new world view which puts ceilings on aspirations and redefines levels of satisfaction. Social justice provides one such definition. It says, in effect, ‘OK, I’ll settle for less as long as I get the same share as everybody else’, or ‘as long as everybody else gets the same share I have’. Alternatively, increased interest in interpersonal, community, cultural or spiritual matters could reduce the saliency of private and public goods consumerism, especially among those who materially are quite well off, releasing all or most of new resources to serve those lacking now. Otherwise this act in itself would prove to be so alienating to the affluent majority that it would be politically impractical or would require, to make it politically practicable, giving some to all; the latter would be intolerably expensive, especially in regard to scarce resources. To put it succinctly, if the affluent classes would go for Zen Buddhism the rest would be easy. However, citizens’ involvement in such a new ‘enough-is-enough’ world view cannot be engineered. To some degree it will grow out of the spreading and rising ‘counter-culture’ as it gains in followership. (We do not expect millions to drop out and turn on, but to accept, in a moderated way, many of the core values of the counter-culture: aspire for less, accept their given world more: consume less, enjoy more the beauty of the mountains, the peace of the soul). Over all, it can be achieved only through authentic participation of the citizen in the setting of goals.

Participation, both in various levels of government and in the management of work, housing, health clinics, schools and other so-called ‘private governments’, is the only way to drive home to the citizens, once the initial dogmatic belief and political passivity have been overcome, that one must set ceilings to goals, square them with each other and face environmental constraints. All these are limitations which those in positions of decision-making face, and which typically uninvolved citizens – and the ‘irresponsible’ utopian thinkers – tend to ignore. It is no wonder the citizens would ask for stable prices, full employment, rapid economic growth, lower taxes, more government services, rapid depollution, high public safety, elimination of poverty and then some here and now, inasmuch as they have never experienced the limitations posed by limited resources, insufficient knowledge, lack of consensus and so on. They have not been sufficiently involved to understand that these are not fully compatible demands. The élites do not wish to involve the citizens, but not because they believe them incapable of absorbing the necessary information or reaching sensible judgements: the chief reason is that, in the process, the citizens would discover that the system is tilted against them and in favor of the élites. Hence, opening up to citizens participation in their government involves ‘de-élitization’, another value that the ultra-modern society does not offer; yet society would be advanced by authentic participation of the citizens in the rearrangement of their lives.

The term *consensus* has acquired the status of a dirty word ever since President Johnson said, ‘“Come, let us reason together”’ [but meant that] he was merely giving everyone a chance to agree with him’.48 Consensus is nevertheless a major prerequisite for effective public policy, especially in a society that is highly co-ordinated and carries a large volume of public activities. It is not just that it is almost impossible to make stick a policy most citizens reject – *vide* Prohibition (and there are serious limitations to the extent consent can be manipulated) – but that policy is by definition unable to
satisfy the citizens when there are serious differences among major groups of them as to what the desired direction is. Thus, for instance, if 50 million Americans favor spending $20 billion on space exploration and another 40 million favor spending the $20 billion on restoring the environment on earth, not only is neither policy likely to be enacted, but it will not be pleasing if it is – or is not. One main reason desegregation proceeded so slowly is that major segments of the public in both North and South never consented to its implementation. Consensus is never unanimous, but measures that are endorsed by three out of four Americans have a much greater chance of being effected than do those endorsed by five out of nine. Measures put on the books to placate a vocal minority (or a weakly committed majority) are later not implemented by adequate legal teeth (e.g. automobile safety acts) or funding (most new domestic programs were initiated under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations: Nixon has not initiated any). The consensus of a large majority, strongly committed, kept alive and well, will expand such programs as social security (favored by about 90 per cent) and government support for low-income housing (favored by 70 per cent – (Fortune, September 1948); by 75 per cent (1964)).

Will those 38 per cent of Americans unhappy with their incomes and those 37 per cent worried about the educational opportunities of their children be pacified if given a chance to ‘participate’? Or, more generally, is participation not a luxury of the rich, whereas the rest need more income, education, etc.? As I see it, participation is the chief way they will get their just share of that which is to be had. The rich may be able to rely on their extra resources for gaining control of the state or the economy, but most people must draw on their political participation, first to transform the system toward equality, then to keep it responsive to their changing needs. Not participation as a substitute for resources, but the gaining of political resources via participation. Social justice will be achieved in no other way: it will not be handed down.

Agreement among the citizenry can be marshalled only in an open give-and-take between them, which only participation offers. True, increased and broadened participation may bring out, at least initially, even greater conflict; but out of this the citizens may come to see why their community or nation is not moving, may at least understand their deadlock, and thus will be moved to draw closer together. In any case, the sense of incompetence and of being shut out will be reduced. A significant segment of our overdue business is, to begin with, largely a matter of public consensus – and little else needs to be done than for the public to have a deeper and more encompassing understanding. Computers, administrators and applied scientists will not help in those problem areas where all that is required is for the public to be more tolerant, at least to the point of removing the state’s power of intervention, e.g. as in proscription of certain sex acts between consenting adults and the penalizing use of arbitrarily selected stimulants and drugs. Moreover, greater tolerance of each other’s morality, sexual mores and lifestyles, as well as ethnic differences, may well be the major step needed to remove irrational (as distinct from ‘interest’) opposition to the transforming forces. The conservative majority is not pleased by anything the transforming minorities do, nor does it grant any moral, specifically sexual, latitude. A sense of moral discomfort seems prevalent: 78 per cent of Americans sampled stated that they felt life in the United States was getting worse in terms of morals; only 8 per cent felt that it
was getting better; 49 86 per cent of middle-class Americans sampled said sexual permissiveness was undermining the nation's morals.50 This is accompanied by a sharp increase in the sense that religion is losing its influence on American life. In the fifties there was a sense of religious revival; in 1957, 69 per cent reported increased influence, 14 per cent a declining one.51 By 1970 the figures reversed themselves sharply: according to Gallup, 75 per cent saw a waning influence, and only 14 per cent an increase. An unusually large majority felt the country was coming apart owing to the sexual amorality of the younger generation, especially the 'hippies'. One could argue that sexual freedom is just picked upon as a convenient symbol for resentment by the elders, who resent the have-fun, hell-why-work nowness of the young, as well as their radical political ideas. Nonetheless, nothing seems to raise as much heat as sex; in race relations the ultimate challenge seems not to lose your job/house/school to a 'nigger'—else he'll marry your daughter or prove more potent to your wife. In the attitudes toward the radical, nothing seems as provocative as sexualism. One must hence also assume that if the harmlessness of sexual variety and freedom from taboos would only be understood, the heat of the opposition to the transforming message would be cooled down to a point at which at least most of the conservative citizens could bear if not condone it.

A major source of the crisis is the sense of being shut out, being governed by forces one neither understands nor controls, being assigned and manipulated, powerless and unheeded. Harris uses a set of various questions to measure the sense of alienation. More than six out of ten Americans sampled (62 per cent) felt that the United States is a country in which 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer'. Close to half (44 per cent) felt that 'what I think doesn't count very much', and about the same proportion (41 per cent) felt that 'people running the country don't care what happens to people like me'. Fewer (33 per cent) felt that 'people with power are out to take advantage of you' (which may be more a sign of lack of paranoia than lack of alienation), and even fewer (20 per cent) said, 'I feel left out of things around me', which, since it refers to the immediate environment, may be more a sign of social participation than of lack of alienation.52

No super computer, power of applied science or efficient bureaucracy will eradicate this feeling; on the contrary, it is their frequent lapses that now allow for some humanization: the first offender finds his way back into society because his file is not forwarded and he gets the job; homosexuals are able to meet in a gay bar; lack of official planning allows for individual plans. The more efficient the controls, the greater probably will be the sense of alienation.

Participation will foster a sense of belonging, of public attention and competence. It can be a major source of personal satisfaction, excitement and fulfillment, of precisely the kind that materialism is lacking and profit-making is losing. Participation provides the individual with an opportunity to feel relevant, socially effective and involved, and to integrate his fragmented world. For the society it provides a legitimate and constructive release for energies otherwise explosively bottled up and a source of the resources needed to fuel mass systems, which require a volunteer staff and 'watchdogs'—from 'Pals' for youngsters without effective parents to monitors at election time. None of this will be achieved by elites dealing with each other.
A methodological appendix
In the preceding pages a good deal was made of public opinion polls, a use that will be questioned both by some social scientists and by some of the other readers. The use of polls to capture the mood and attitudes of the public is of course routinely carried out by the social scientists, the daily press and the political leaders. All have found them more reliable indicators than alternative ones available, such as asking your taxi driver, maid, milkman, barmaid or – worse – contemplating your own feelings and generalizing from those.

Any one poll can be off, and any two polls do not fully complement each other; but when a large number support each other they make a point. Polls show differing pictures over time and it is quite possible that, by the time these pages are published, one or more of the indicators used – eg. the proportion of public feeling positive about the government or nation – could show a rise or a fall. Such an indicator, like the polls cited here, should be put into a longer-run perspective. If this particular indicator showed a persistent rise, the crisis will be winding down.

The polls measure only attitudes and these may be poor indicators of behavior. Fortunately, it was also possible to point to some behavior indicators such as AWOL rates and extra-institutional protest.

Finally, the statistical data were augmented with qualitative observations by journalists and travelers of the kind the historian and anthropologist frequently use. All this does not allow us to state flatly that we know where we are at, but it does give some evidence in support of the position set forth.


Manuscript received July 1973.

Editor's note: The editor wishes to draw the attention of readers to the fact that this manuscript was received in the London offices of The Human Context in May 1973 and therefore takes no cognizance of more recent political issues in the United States of America.

2 19 October 1968.
3 22 July 1968.
5 Newsweek, 30 June 1969. A later poll shows higher proportions so inclined (Time, 6 April 1970).
7 Questionnaire administered in 1969 by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research; reported in the New York Times, 26 May 1971. Sample equals 1,374 men between the ages of 16 and 54 who 'represent all races, regions, economic and social classes'.