Continuity and Discontinuity in the Contemporary Crisis of Meanings

AMITAI ETZIONI

At least since Karl Mannheim published his seminal essays on "Diagnosis of Our Time" and "The Crisis in Valuation," it has been recognized that the erosion of legitimation and the loss of meaning are twin sources of Western civilization's deep crisis. As legitimation weakens, the polity, from the head of state to the rookie policeman, from the law of the land to traffic regulations, no longer seems justified, acceptable, or indeed, to make sense. Ultimately, all authorities— from schoolmasters to fathers— come into question. The crisis of meaning runs even deeper. For the members of society who are involved, the purposes of their acts, and hence of their lives, are hollowed— are experienced as no longer committing; the rewards society allots do not generate satisfaction and its sanctions evoke no guilt. As the crisis intensifies, socially approved roles no longer mobilize people to carry them out, and those who have lost their traditional places feel adrift, especially if they have not acquired new meanings. New patterns of meaning and

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Both included in his volume which borrows the title of the first essay, published by Oxford University Press, New York, 1949.
legitimation are experimented with and they compete for the right to replace the outworn patterns.

New patterns, though, do not emerge from a historical, sociological or ideological vacuum; they rebel against, reflect, and often, in fact, continue the old ones; in short, they are rarely entirely new. In this paper we discuss the main historical roots and the key features of the contemporary crisis. The examination is in the tradition of Max Weber and Karl Mannheim not only because it seeks to pick up where their analyses left off, but also because it uses the fairly abstract method of surveying historical trends that they both employed.

1. THE LEVEL AND FOCUS OF OUR ANALYSIS

Our discussion necessarily proceeds on the level which lies between the lofty history of ideas and the earthy study of societal changes. Ideas flow easily; in each period there are scores of socially relevant ideas which are advanced by one writer or another, by a Fabian, a Ripon, or some other “society.” These ideas are relevant to the purposes at hand only if they acquire wide societal bases and alter the behavior of a significant part of the society.

At the same time, we aspire to study much less than the transformation of our society. This would entail an analysis of many forces other than the ideological and psychic ones that are focused on here; we would have to add the exploration of technological, economic, and international conditions to our examination of changing meanings and legitimacies. Thus, we focus on one major vector, the hollowing of modern meanings and legitimacies and the ascending of socially significant challengers in the realm of socially effective ideas.

There are those so concerned with Marx’s shadow that they object to analysis on this level; they demand that we recognize the “epiphenomenal” quality of our subject and acknowledge the primacy of forces other than the dynamics of social and political meanings. However, we have never found a persuasive account of the reasons which explain why one societal force is more essential than all others. Even those who subscribe to such a theory of society must recognize, as did Marx, that ideological and psychic phenomena are not merely reflective. They do command a magnitude of might and a measure of autonomy, even if in the long run they follow the direction of history created by subterranean forces. Our concern here is with ideological dynamics.*

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The concern with the relative consequences of the fall and rise of

social and political patterns of meanings in modern Western civilization

should not proceed without an understanding of the historical condition

in which we find ourselves. Both the hollowing of meanings and the

erosion of the legitimacy of traditional patterns of modernity have

advanced more rapidly than the destruction of capitalist institutions;

the search for new patterns has progressed far more than the actual

forging of new polities or societal structures. True, once the ideological

crisis is as serious as it is at the present a major societal change can

hardly be far behind. This then only increases the interest in com-

peting new patterns because the direction of the coming societal change

will be somewhat affected by all of them.

The center of our examination is even more limited in scope than

the realm of socially effective ideas (a small set of the total world of

ideas). We study only those ideas which are now, have been, or strike

a future claim to be the core of a pattern of social and political mean-
ings in Western civilization. The concept of a core status in the realm

of legitimation and meaning is pivotal for the understanding of the

dynamics involved in any time period, especially in the modern and the

postmodern age we are moving into now.² Even in ancient and medi-

tal times, several ideological patterns coexisted. Within most societies

there have been significant deviant subcultures and even more than

one conforming subculture, although when this happened they tended
to differ in status. For instance, in seventeenth-century England when

the Anglican tradition was prevalent, the Catholic “deviants” and the

dissenters were semiconforming.

In any period, though, there has been one pattern of social and politi-
cal meaning recognized as central, of more consequence than all others:

Christianity, nationalism, and socialism are key examples. It is such a

core set that challengers seek to replace and by which they measure their

status. Of course, there have been historical stages in which one preva-
lent set was collapsing and another was moving into the core position,

and thus periods in which no set was enthroned; but these seem to have

been periods of transition, albeit they may have been rather frequent

and sometimes lengthy periods.

The West is now in a period of transition, but it is not a period in

which one pattern is collapsing and being replaced by another, as has

² For reasons discussed elsewhere, 1945 serves as a convenient dateline for the

beginning of the postmodern era. See The Active Society, Chapter 1.
been so often suggested. It is not moving from a Protestant to a Social
Ethic or from Consciousness II to III. A society does not drop its social
and political patterns to pick up new ones, like a marching band re-
places a tune. Our period, we suggest, is one in which the old core is
weakening; several new subcultures are emerging, and the struggle
is on for the new core position. The old core is unlikely to disappear;
if successfully challenged it will turn into a subculture, like the aristoc-
racy in European capitalism, and one of today's avant-garde—surely
changing in the process—will be tomorrow's new centrality. At the
present, no new core has evolved; on the contrary, it is an essential
mark of our time that there are many contenders and a conflict between
them, but as yet, no sign of a victor.

The study of the contemporary strains on the level of meanings and
legitimacies benefits from a historical perspective. It may be said that
all analyses of societal and political processes benefit from such a per-
spective. Its special value for the issue at hand lies in that we expect
the same set of ideas which at one phase were the prevalent core, to be
the challenged one in a subsequent period, and—far from disappearing
even if successfully challenged—to continue to appear in later ages
as a subculture.

2. FROM EARLY TO LATE CAPITALISM

There can be little doubt that the legitimacy of modernity, especially
of the capitalist-industrial variety, is waning for an increasing number
of members of capitalist-industrial societies. The familiar list of core
values, compiled by Weber and others, sanctifies a concern with this
world, and a commitment to rearrange it so as to enhance its produc-
tivity. The emphasis is on discipline, achievement, austerity, objectivity,
and rationality.* These values and their roles in sustaining modern in-
dustrial machinery, "free" markets, large scale administration, govern-
ment through laws, and the enterprise of science, have all been quite
adequately reported. They are the values of modernity and of capitalism.

Signs that these values are weakening are discernible in the question-
ing of the value of science by the young, the search for jobs which allow
for more self-actualization rather than higher income, the frequent resort

* Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York:
Charles Scribner & Sons, 1952), pp. 53-54, 86, 172; Robin Williams, American
pp. 415-68; Francis X. Sutton, Seymour E. Harris, Carl Kaysen, James Tobin,
The American Business Creed (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,
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to extralegal means of political expression, the questioning of “due
process” and freedom of expression, and other phenomena.
While it is commonplace to observe that the modern capitalist mean-
ing pattern is losing ground, it is less frequently noted that in itself it
underwent a major transformation, which significantly affects the con-
temporary crisis. There has been a significant shift within the capitalist
era from what may be loosely called the early capitalist instrumentation
period, in which feudal, parochial, and ascriptive legitimacies were
overcome, and the market-achievement ideology gained primacy, to the
late capitalist “affluent society” era, in which the stress on deferment
of pleasure was replaced by an emphasis on gratification.

This gradual and subtle change, chiefly visible in its accumulation, was
from the productive-austerity to the work-to-indulge pattern. To quickly
remind us, early capitalism stressed labor and thrift, a fairly high dedi-
cation to achievement at work, puritanical rejection of consumerism
and other luxuries, including, of course, escapist and aesthetic pleasures.
Ideationally, Weber held that these reflected the Protestant roots of
capitalism; economically, they led to the accumulation of capital and
labor and the psychic energy needed to build the industrial way of
life, deflecting as little resources as possible to other pursuits, including
the regard for workers, investors, and managers. Needless to say, not
all the early capitalists lived by these tenets and their austerity was less
severe than that of the workers. But, the legitimacy was on the side of
achievement-at-work and against consumption in the broadest sense
of the term, including leisure not geared to resting from work, and
education not geared to servicing technological and market needs.

Weber of course pointed out the “irrationality” of this rationale of
capitalism, that is, in our terms, a gnawing weakness in its core legiti-
mation pattern. As long as the austerity was ultimately tied to a set
of religious values it “made sense” in the substantive-rational way ideas
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can tell, they made the achieving society meaningful, at least to its domi-
nant class and helped keep other classes ideologically dormant.)

Secularization, however, cut off the fundamental anchoring of the
early capitalist pattern. God was replaced by man; rather than seeking
to meet — or demonstrate — God’s pleasure, the prime foci became
pleasing the individual person. The system was hardly designed to please

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each member, but its central claim became the provision of the necessities and comforts — the greatest happiness for the greatest number. The secularization of capitalism amounted to a *wholly new* core set of meanings justifying hard work, compliance to impersonal rules, etc., by stressing the rewards of the industrial machinery. Work became a means not to salvation but to affluence, and affluence no longer meant a large accumulation of assets (like the early Rockefellers) but an ability to lead a highly consumptive way of life. Thus, a hedonistic element was introduced. While this point has often been made in various forms by Lowenthal, Riesman, Whyte and others, two related developments have not equally been emphasized: the new hedonistic element was not simply added on, or even given equal status to the achievement-at-work orientation; it gradually gained primacy, and the status of a core value. Thus, the quest for more goods, services, and possessions indeed took the place once occupied by supernatural forces. It has even less frequently been reported that this new legitimation is severely strained.

Before one can explore the weakness of the legitimacy of late, hedonistic capitalism, it is necessary to point to another major force which evolved along with early capitalism but survived it, to be a major force in the late capitalist era. The rise of the legitimacy of achievement-at-work, of instrumentation and reason to the core status, was accompanied by the legitimation of more encompassing and penetrating polities, the nation-states. While the reach of some feudal regimes was more extensive than that of the nation-states (and more extensive than their free markets and the bureaucracies which replaced them) the penetration of feudal regimes into societal life was much smaller. The legitimation of nationalism, a secular “justification” to a penetrating polity, affected more social relations more deeply than those shaped before by the preceding political bodies and formulas and it entered more deeply the citizens’ personalities, fostering a new identity and staking considerable claims on their inner life. Early capitalism and nationalism went hand-in-hand; the former legitimated universalization, the opening of markets, thrift, discipline, and peace: all conditions sought by early capitalists.

As late affluent-capitalism began to rise, it came into conflict with nationalism. While the focus of the legitimation of late capitalism is the

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hedonism of the individual,7 nationalism—like early capitalism—speaks for the collectivity (and of course for those who control it). However, for a while, nationalism concealed the decomposing effects of hedonism in two ways: by setting demands on the individual for causes higher than himself, and by legitimating demands which frequently (although far from always) reinforced the principles of early capitalism. For instance, holding back consumption to strengthen national power often involved building up industrial machinery or control over foreign markets.

Now, though, as we enter the postmodern period, nationalism is losing its power to compensate for the weakening of the early capitalist legitimation. Nationalism itself is losing its capacity to mobilize, especially in those subcultures that question the meaning of capitalism. The new subcultures stress the individual in a way which brings all “higher” demands, be they of productiveness or of the state, into question.

3. FROM HEDONISTIC CAPITALISM TO — HEDONISM?

If late, affluent capitalism is a mix of the commitment to work and, more generally, to discipline (the central characteristic of early capitalism) and a devotion to indulgence (the main novel feature of the latter period), the new postmodern period which is setting in now is distinguished by the severing of the ideological tie between the legitimation of hedonism and that of achievement, a pushing up of the first and a dropping of the other.

This severing of the ideological tie is achieved in several ways which deserve some attention:

(a) The late capitalist tenet that he who works hard will reap the heaven of playing hard is questioned. The tenet was questioned before but in terms which acknowledged its legitimating power. If the question was raised, it was in the following manner: do those who work hard gain their fair share of the rewards which are to be had, and can the many who work little, get to play a lot anyway? These questions of distributive justice and fair play are significant parts of the trade union and “liberal” questioning of capitalism. By implication, though, they endorse the basic ideological virtue by tying consumption, in the broadest sense of the term, to efforts and results.

7The extent to which the focus of this legitimation on the celebration of consumption is truly responsive to human needs will be explored in a later publication.
Now the ideological challenges are: need one work-hard in order to play-hard? Is there not a sufficient accumulation of capital to allow society to “coast” on past achievements? Cannot controls and industrial machinery be automated so that they will do most of the work which is not intrinsically rewarding?

(b) The contradiction that hedonism and productivity cannot be combined because the tenets of one undermine the other is rediscovered within our present period of transition. Early capitalists saw this point but resolved it in favor of the primacy of achievement. The new legitimacies resolve the conflict in the opposite fashion: play well and work easy.

(c) The specter of a highly hedonistic society is raised not just as a legitimation for the reduction of the scope of work day, week, and year or of extracurricular demands (e.g., on the family); now the demand is that work itself be made more pleasurable, or self-actualizing; the rest automated or dropped. For example, Marcuse refers to the eroticization of labor, thus making it as attractive as sex.*

(d) The deepest challenge of all is to the logic of instrumentation which entails universalism, impersonality, and the primacy of rational considerations. The new emphasis is on the particular, personal, emotive and the self. The refocusing has many far-reaching implications for all the patterns of meanings in society; the point relevant here is that the traditional method of work is questioned. The tying of the right to self-actualization and pleasure to the amount of effort, and results to achievement, is seen as unnecessary, indeed, as damaging.

Thus, a central feature shared by the rising postmodern subcultures (whose ideological roots are as old as recorded history, but whose quest for core status is new in the contemporary context) is the promotion of hedonism. This neither arises out of the legitimacy of capitalism nor is it alien to late capitalism. The claim of a core status for hedonism contradicts early capitalism (and early state-socialism), but it also builds on and liberates—in the sense of removing from a constraining context—a major element of late affluent-capitalism (and middle-aged state-socialism), namely hedonism. Thus while postmodern hedonism is a basic contradiction of early capitalist legitimacy, it is only a component released out of the disintegration of late capitalism. This, in turn, is one of the deeper reasons why the theorem which states that the coming institutional transformation may be made without a violent

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... one work-hard in order to accumulate capital to allow control and productivity cannot be undermined; the work which today is rediscovered by capitalists saw this point of achievement. The new legitimacy of capitalism in still another way; while it is the major element that survives the demise of its source, hedonism further develops from the disintegration of norms, which define meanings, without their replacement by any new set. Then, hedonism arises out of the spread of normlessness. It is critical for the understanding of our age to realize that hedonism differs from all other sets of meanings and legitimacies because it contains few "do nots"; chiefly, its "dos" are either anticipatory or post factum endorsements of natural inclinations. For example, the sanctification of monogamy includes a complex set of taboos and few legitimated "can dos"; sexual liberty is based on the removal of most taboos (as to the number and kind of partners, the frequencies of exchange, the variations of sexual relations, etc.), and very few, rather vague, "dos." The legitimation which surrounds the removal of the sexual taboos speaks of the positive effects of the "erotization of the whole person," "the liberation of the body," the value of sensualism, and the qualities of sexual experimentation; it neither channels nor guides, as damaging.

Postmodern hedonism arises out of the disintegration of late capitalism in still another way; while it is the major element that survives the demise of its source, hedonism further develops from the disintegration of norms, which define meanings, without their replacement by any new set. Then, hedonism arises out of the spread of normlessness. It is critical for the understanding of our age to realize that hedonism differs from all other sets of meanings and legitimacies because it contains few "do nots"; chiefly, its "dos" are either anticipatory or post factum endorsements of natural inclinations. For example, the sanctification of monogamy includes a complex set of taboos and few legitimated "can dos"; sexual liberty is based on the removal of most taboos (as to the number and kind of partners, the frequencies of exchange, the variations of sexual relations, etc.), and very few, rather vague, "dos." The legitimation which surrounds the removal of the sexual taboos speaks of the positive effects of the "erotization of the whole person," "the liberation of the body," the value of sensualism, and the qualities of sexual experimentation; it neither channels nor guides, as damaging.

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4. THE TWO FACES OF LIBERATION

There are two stages in the transformation of social and political meanings (from the demise of an obsolescent core to the ascent of the new replacement): the critical period when the past is dislodged and the transcendental one when the future is provided for. Hedonism's critical status is quite different from its transcendental value.

As a critical force, hedonism is particularly potent. To approach pagans with Christianity, or feudal lords with nationalist conceptions, is to legitimate some liberties previously forbidden (e.g., freedom of travel) but also to set new demands (e.g., legitimate taxes for the king).
To call for indulgence of the senses is to liberate more than any previous pattern and to demand less. It is the easiest critical formula and the one which, it seems, is used throughout history more often than any other.

The transcendental value of hedonism, the extent to which it is not merely a powerful rebellion but a truly revolutionary basis for a new society, is a wholly different question. One's answer largely depends on how one perceives man's nature. Hedonism is much more defensible as the foundation of a new world if one assumes that man is inherently "good" and not governed by aggressive instincts or otherwise antisocial tendencies. It is clearly no accident that those postmodern legitimacies which are highly hedonistic draw on those writings of Freud that stress the neurotic costs civilization exacts (but not on those which stress the need for repression if civilization is to be sustained), on Maslow's optimism, and of course on Erich Fromm, Norman O. Brown, and most recently, the rediscovered Wilhelm Reich and the newly discovered Charles Reich. Rejected are the views that man left to his nature is beastly (in the selfish and violent Hobbesian sense). Also repudiated are the until recently prevalent views of R. Benedict, G. H. Mead, T. Parsons, B. F. Skinner, and others which see man's nature as basically neutral and highly malleable. Thus the idea that man must be shaped by norms if he is to be human at all is discarded.

As we see it, man may well benefit individually and collectively from reduction of repression and social controls — from a less rigid superego and from de-institutionalization. Repression and social controls may well have been excessive in the modern period and especially in the postmodern one. However, it does not follow that a personality can rest on a gushing id or any society on each individual member "doing his own thing." Some measure of self-regulation and societal harmonization is needed. Freud recognized this, of course, by opting for civilization despite his recognition of its costs. However, he did not concern himself systematically with the difference among various civilizations and levels of repression. Marcuse does, particularly in his concept of "surplus alienation,"9 to wit, that it is unnecessary to keep man and society autonomous as distinct from oceanic. While this cannot be demonstrated here, we expect to show in a later publication that Freud's view was unnecessarily demanding (or repressive) and Marcuse tends too much in the minimalist direction. But they both recognize the basic need for a core pattern, which in turn needs to be meaningful. This is a position we join.

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Seen in this light hedonism is the "appropriate" ideological con-
comitant to the withdrawal of legitimacy and meaning from a declining set of institutions; it completes well the critiques that picture the modern society as alienating, oppressive, and repressive. If the perspective is a backward look, to the patterns which are being unlocked, to the values which are being de-canonized, hedonism is liberating Looking forward to the future, and this is the point most often over-
looked or denied, hedonism does not serve as a viable foundation on
which either a whole person or society can be erected. "Free" does not
mean freedom in the positive sense where the psychic or social condi-
tions allow man to be free from anxieties, the slavery of his impulses, or
leadership pressure; here, man could choose between alternatives and
harmonize his choices with those of others (without which the concept
becomes self-contradictory because the freedom of one would then be
the subjugation of others). As has been often pointed out, hedonism
provides, at best, a contrived basis for human morality or social ethics.
(Justice is viewed as self-serving!) It offers no set of meanings to
secure affection, a basic human need, does not mesh well with hedonism, either
the sexual or consumer variety. The same must be said about the need
for emotional safety and protection from the aggression of others.
Hedonism also discourages the paying of attention to instrumental
needs, which contain elements of routine, objectivity, and sustained
effort, all of which are required even in an age of automation and

affluence. These are needed, not only for the mass production of con-
sumer objects, but also for mass education, mass medical tests, mass
research observations — none to hedonistic tastes. Nor is the discipline
required to deal with complexity endorsed (if only that required to de-
velop automation for more liberation from labor). Last, but not least,
hedonism does not recognize the deep gratification possible from service
to a social entity larger than one's self, unless this service itself is pri-
marily aimed at gratifying the self. As we see it, such a theory is not only

uncharitable and apolitical but empirically invalid; there are joys in truly serving others, in sharing, and in political action.

5. OTHER POSTMODERN ALTERNATIVES

Not all the new legitimacies contending for the core position of the postmodern era are primarily hedonistic, but they all contain a strong hedonistic element. (Hedonistic primacy is found in contemporary subcultures in two main ways: (a) "Hefnerism," which combines the commercial hedonism of late capitalism with elements of the liberation from sexual taboos;11 (b) Radical hedonism, which combines the liberation from sexual taboos with liberation from the consumer addictions.) However, it is the nonhedonistic elements of postmodern subcultures that deserve special attention. One expects that the relative weight of these elements will rise the closer the particular subculture gets to a core status. Thus, the critical, rebelling aspects of such a subculture will decline and its societal responsibility to provide a viable foundation will rise in importance.

While quite a few new subcultures can be pointed to, there seem to be three fundamental themes, which in various combinations among themselves and with hedonism fashion the major contenders for core status. The literati subculture builds meaningful life around nonpurposive, noninstrumental learning and the creation of cultural objects for noncommercial purposes. As a theory of society, it focuses on symbols rather than objects, a set of items which are not scarce. Like hedonism, the focus is on the self and the avoidance of socially useful labor. The literati subculture is less anarchic, and more self-regulating than hedonism, without being repressive. It is less libidinal, more sublimating but entails no obsessive or rigid superego assumptions. Unlike hedonism, the literati pattern legitimates self-discipline and the efforts required for educational and cultural achievement entailing some measure of cultivation, which can be given and still had.12 The literati pattern provides a basis for a less conflict-ridden, competitive, tensed society. At the same time, it offers no justification for efforts on behalf of justice or other social causes. It is not collectively mobilizing. The literati pattern is hence much more suited for a transformed society than for one which is to be transformed.

The therapeutic subculture stresses positive relations with others, on both the interpersonal and group levels. It is partially developing

12 For an elaboration of this point see *The Active Society*, Chapter 8.
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Invalid; there are joys in political action.

For the core position of the but they all contain a strong is found in contemporary merism," which combines the first elements of the liberationism, which combines the liber from the consumer addictions of postmodern sub- they expects that the relative or the particular subculture telling aspects of such a sub- this to provide a viable pointed to, there seem to various combinations among major contenders for core meaningful life around nonpur- creation of cultural objects society, it focuses on symb- which are not scarce. Like avoidance of socially useful and more self-regulating is less libidinal, more sub- rerego assumptions. Unlike id-discipline and the efforts ment entailing some mea- d still had.12 The literati hidden, competitive, tensed ation for efforts on behalf selectively mobilizing. The transformed society than 

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er Culture (Garden City, Society, Chapter 8.

around the "sensitivity" movement and the psychotherapeutic profes- sions. It differs from hedonism in its great concern with the quality of relationships and with personal growth (rather than just being), but not at the psychic cost of others. Lacking a clear theory of society and a picture of its prerequisites, while stressing the individual over society (not just a particular structure but societal constraints in general), it provides an insufficient basis for a future world. To what extent highly positive interpersonal relations can be stabilized, or, like "romantic love," are inherently unstable and even Sisyphean, is a question which remains to be answered. A greater concern with the quality of interpersonal relations than was prevalent in the modern period is probably quite feasible; however, a society whose prime business is positive interpersonal relations will not be sustained because of the tensions and frustrations this would generate.

The legitimation of therapeutic concerns is more critical and more mobilizing than the literati pattern, which extends only to the self. But its concern often ends with the small group, the immediate community, or the retrogression of society that would be necessary for these to flourish.

Finally, there is a subculture which revives the Greek ideal of the polis and puts the primacy on public (and hence political) life. We refer to it as the subculture which promotes an active society. It views the generation of public goods (justice, health, education) as the prime societal source of meaning. Thus, it seems to provide the most encompassing legitimation. For the critical, rebelling period this involves the generation of dislodging energy, needed to undo the institutions inherited from the past. For the reconstruction period, the basis for some limitation on self-indulgence and the serving of collective needs can be justified.

The chief danger here is, as state-socialism shows, that personal growth, the quality of interpersonal relations, and aesthetic values may be neglected. Hence the combination of legitimating the primacy of public life with a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships probably provides the most viable new subculture. The extent to which there is room for hedonism and aesthetics in this new world depends largely on environmental and intersocietal conditions. But utopian writing is not our purpose in this essay. We see that all four subcultures—the "purely" hedonistic, literati, "therapeutic," and "active"—challenge the core status of capitalism, modernity and nationalism. Which one will prevail or which mix is more likely, remains to be seen.