
Chapter 11

INDIVIDUALISM IN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else, where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to Heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Must not the virtue of modern individualism, continually enlarging, usurping all, seriously affect, perhaps keep down entirely, in America, the like of the ancient virtue of patriotism, the fervid and absorbing love of general country?

WALT WHITMAN

The Lonely Crowd

DAVID RIESMAN

AN INDIVIDUALISTIC CHARACTER has been ascribed to other peoples besides the Americans — to the English, to the French, even to the supposedly lockstep Germans. Sociologist Morris Ginsberg's description of English individualism, for example, sounds quite familiar to students of the American character. "It can be seen," he wrote in 1948, "in the spirit of English law, which is a law of the liberty of the individual subject, in the strength of local government and resistance to centralization, in the stress laid

by Puritanism on the autonomy of the individual, and in a very widespread and deeply rooted impatience of compulsion and restraint."

Yet Alexis de Tocqueville realized that the word he used in 1840 to describe the basic attitude of Americans toward human life and society — the word "individualism" — was a very new one. "*Individualism* is a novel expression," he said, "to which a novel idea has given birth." This new idea, or mental attitude, arose from a new way

of life — “equality of condition” — that Tocqueville saw as the special characteristic of American society.

American democracy, as he observed it, was not bound by tradition, class lines, revered institutions, or inherited privileges. The new social condition impelled men to think for themselves — “to seek the reason of things for oneself and in oneself alone” — and to act on their own, independently of family, friends, and society. “They acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone,” he commented, “and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.”

Tocqueville would not have denied, of course, that the idea of the self-sufficient individual has a venerable ancestry in the Western world. It may be traced as far back as ancient Greece, where Pericles celebrated the individualistic spirit of the Athenians and Epicurus asserted the individual’s absolute independence of social bonds. Christianity, especially in its Protestant forms, emphasized the worth of the individual person and conscience; and British philosophers, such as Locke, Hume, Bentham, and Mill, espoused political and social individualism. Tocqueville himself noted that the Americans of the 1830s were, without ever having read his works, model followers of Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher of the autonomous ego.

What was really new and unique in the American individualism described by Tocqueville was not the idea of the self-sufficient individual. The novelty, instead, lay in the physical and social conditions for the working out of the idea. The new social context made a difference in the tempo and ease with which the idea was developed and in the high value given to it.

Tocqueville was describing individualism *in America*, and at a specific time — the Jacksonian era — when the “common man” had come to power. He recognized

that what he witnessed here was also beginning to take place in Europe — indeed, a few contemporary European writers were also using the word “individualism” to describe an emerging new social condition there. But Tocqueville saw in the American experience the model form of what was to occur elsewhere under less “classical” conditions.

Only in America could a man seriously think of withdrawing himself from society and forming “a little circle of his own,” for only here was there the physical space and the social background and attitudes that would permit such isolation. Only in America could a man simply decide to ignore tradition, the ties of the past, the bonds of kin and class. Elsewhere, in 1840, the old ways and links still counted heavily in the common culture and life. As a matter of fact, “individualism” was usually regarded by Europeans as something evil and subversive of social order, much as communism was regarded a century later in America.

The Englishman and the European, then, were expressing and, to a certain degree, living “individualism” in the new modern democratic age; but they were doing so on a stage still occupied by the monuments, institutions, rituals, and ingrained cast of mind of the past. Only the American could think — deludedly or not — that he was starting out completely anew, on a bare stage, where he could do whatever he wanted and where whatever he made was his creation alone.

It is with individualism in this context, and with its transformations, that the present chapter is primarily concerned. However, it is impossible, in discussing this special American meaning of individualism, to avoid consideration of the age-old problems of the relations between individuals and the society they make up and without which their life is dangerous, denuded, and dull. Americans have been no less aware of

these problems, which are not specifically American at all, than other peoples, and during the nineteenth century, and again in our own time, American writers have made important contributions to their clarification if not to their solution. Matters of this sort are therefore also considered in the following pages. [For a treatment of many of the matters discussed in this chapter, but from a different point of view, see Ch. 10: PLURALISM.]

I. THE AUTONOMOUS SELF AND THE SELF-MADE MAN

PURITAN OR CALVINISTIC PROTESTANTISM was one of the main early sources of American individualism. It originated in a break with ancient traditions and forms, and it emphasized individual experience and witness in religious matters. The elucidation of the corporative, conformist, and repressive character of New England Puritanism by twentieth-century historians has tended to obscure its individualist aspect. In fact, the direct experience of "regeneration" that authoritative Puritan divines preached as essential for church membership fostered a vigorous and sometimes rebellious individualism.

However, the self emphasized by Puritanism, either in its mainstream or deviationist forms, was not regarded as the prime source of value and reality. The self did not set up its own law. On the contrary, this source, for Puritanism, was a totally other being — God — and the law came to man through His word. The human self was a vehicle or instrument, not the central reality. Man was called on to serve God and fulfill His law through his individual life and work in the world.

The moral consequence of this Protestant notion of a "calling" was continual self-scrutiny and an effort to achieve perfection

— insofar as possible for sinful mortals. The serious Puritan likely as not kept a diary in which he recorded his moral successes and failures day by day, and he trained deliberately to make his mind and body serve his spiritual ends. "*Resolved*, never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can," reads an entry in Jonathan Edwards' spiritual diary, in what is perhaps a typical expression of Puritan moral calisthenics.

In Edwards' case, this energetically willed effort at self-improvement — "with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of" — was aimed at his eternal salvation and happiness. But the same effort and the same qualities — self-examination, self-control, self-denial — could be, and were, bestowed on secular tasks.

Indeed, Cotton Mather maintained, in 1701, that a Christian's "personal calling" was his particular occupation or employment in society, and that his eternal blessedness depended just as much on his proper attention to this as to his "general calling" to religious worship and belief. Hence Mather declared that "a man slothful in business is not a man serving the Lord," and called on the Christian to follow his occupation with industry, discretion, honesty, contentment, and piety.

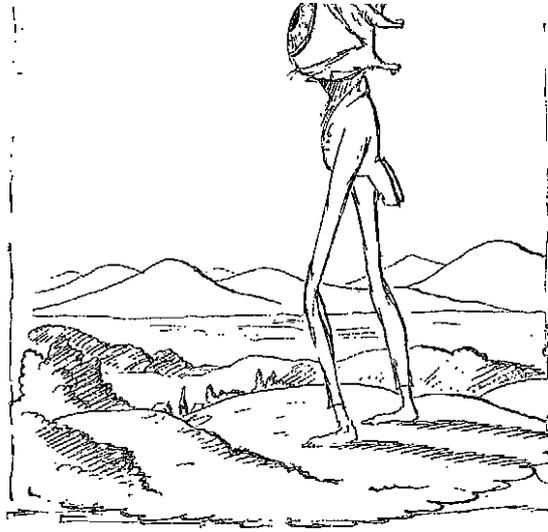
Benjamin Franklin, perhaps the most famous of all secular individualists, also entertained a "Project for Arriving at Moral Perfection," including the virtues of temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, etc. He too kept a moral account book in which he totted up his moral successes and failures, inserting asterisks to mark his lapses, and hoping for a literally clean slate. [See Ch. 22: RELIGION, for a fuller discussion of the Puritan influence on American religion and character.]

Another important strain of American individualism derived from the rationalism of

seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European thinkers such as John Locke and Montesquieu. For these philosophers of the Enlightenment, the image of man involved the notion of autonomous individuals deriving their ideas and values from within themselves, through experience and reason, entirely apart from tradition, institutions, and groups. Ideally, in this view, society is a collection of essentially separate and self-sufficient individuals. Social harmony is best obtained through a natural balance of private interests and actions, with a minimum of human institutions and government. Indeed, the less government the better: That government is best, as was often said, that governs least.

This line of thought ran from Locke directly to Thomas Jefferson. It endured, not only in the Jacksonian era but also down to the period of growing economic and social interdependence at the end of the nineteenth century. And it continued to be expressed in the electronically controlled, highly centralized industrial society of the mid-twentieth century.

The idea of the autonomous individual was established in the American mind by central experiences in the shaping period of the republic. Most important, no doubt, was the frontier experience. The frontiersman need not have read Locke and Montesquieu any more than he need have read Descartes. "Here on the edge of the forest," wrote James Russell Lowell, "where civilized man was brought face to face again with nature and taught mainly to rely on himself, mere manhood became a fact of prime importance." The conditions of the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, produced an individualistic, antisocial spirit, resistant to external control. The frontiersman could well believe that society and civilization, which he had left far behind him, were as naught beside his own resourcefulness, strength, and drive. [For further dis-



*"Standing on the bare ground, — my head
bathed by the blithe air, & uplifted into
infinite space, — all mean egotism
vanishes. I become a transparent
Eyeball."*

Nature, p. 13.

Weidner Library, Harvard University

"Emerson the Mystic"; drawing by Christopher Pearse Cranch based on Emerson's writings in "Nature"

cussion of this point, see Ch. 2: FRONTIER.]

Individualism was also sealed in the American consciousness by the experience of farming one's own land — the most common occupation in the early era, and a determining one for the American character. "We all are animated with the spirit of industry," wrote the French-bred "American Farmer," St. John de Crèvecoeur, in 1782, "which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself." Here it was possible for the transplanted European for the first time to become himself, to become a self, to become something where previously he had been nothing. [For further discussion of the influence of rural environment on the national character, see Ch. 19: RURAL AND URBAN.]

In America, the free, white individual — be he farmer, mechanic, or merchant — was able to acquire substance and property through his own efforts. America, the land of opportunity, was also the land of self-

made men. Franklin spoke of his own phenomenal rise "from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world," and such successes were duplicated many times in the following two centuries.

"Ours is a country where men start from a humble origin," wrote Calvin Colton, the Whig spokesman for business enterprise, in 1844, "and from small beginnings rise gradually in the world as the reward of merit and industry, and where they can attain to the most elevated positions, or acquire a large amount of wealth, according to the pursuits they elect for themselves. No exclusive privileges of birth, no entailment of estates, no civil or political disqualifications stand in their path; but one has as good a chance as another, according to his talents, prudence, and personal exertions. This is a country of *self-made men*, than which nothing better could be said of any state of society."

This, then, was the image of the individual man in the United States in the 1840s: a self-starter, with a chance equal to any other man's, dependent on himself alone for his achievements. It was to remain in the American mind and act as a constant lure. But it was also to meet serious difficulties and to be vigorously challenged.

Besides the influences of Puritanism, the frontier, and business enterprise, the character of many of the foreign immigrants and of the Southern landed gentry also contributed to the making of American individualism. A spirit of daring and self-reliance marked many of the "voluntary Americans" who crossed the wide Atlantic and sought freedom, dignity, and opportunity in the New World. And the individualistic character of the Southern country squires was notable, even after the Civil War, when they provided a contrast to the alleged conformity and standardization of American life.

2. INDIVIDUALITY, INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM, AND THE COMMON GOOD

THE ECONOMIC ASPECTS of American individualism have been thoroughly investigated and interpreted by twentieth-century American historians. The economic aspect can hardly be ignored, even in the case of the God-centered Massachusetts Bay Colony. ("We came here to catch fish," said one impatient listener to a spiritual Puritan preacher.) But it would also be wrong to limit the discussion to economic individualism and to neglect the frequent emphasis in our history on the value of the unique, self-determining personality — whose economic property may be considered as only one of the "properties" peculiar to himself.

According to James Madison, in 1792, a man's opinions and his freedom to speak them, his personal safety and his liberty of action, and above all his innermost conscience, are just as much his "property" as his land, merchandise, and money. They are his own, they come from him and belong to him individually. Hence, "that alone is a *just* government which *impartially* secures to every man whatever is his *own*," including his thought and expression.

The note of a unique, special individuality of mind and character was even more emphatic in James Fenimore Cooper's declaration in 1838 that "individuality is the aim of political liberty," that each man must be "left to pursue his means of happiness in his own manner," and that this pursuit "is inseparable from the claims of individuality." His pronouncement was directed against what he saw as the leveling tendency of the era, the attempt to compel all to conform to some dull, prescribed level of "tastes and information." It may be interpreted, therefore, as the protest of a moderate conservative against the egalitarian inroads of Jacksonian democracy. Yet, while this emphasis on special individuality fre-

quently was voiced by conservative, anti-egalitarian spokesmen, it had a far wider adherence.

The clearest voices were probably those of Emerson, in essays like "Self-Reliance," and Thoreau, in *Walden* and other writings. Nor should Hawthorne and Melville be forgotten. The stalwart, and also lovely, Hester Prynne has little else in the end besides her scarlet letter — but this sets her apart and makes of her not only a pariah but also a kind of heroine. *Moby Dick* is, among other things, the story of a great individualist — Captain Ahab — who is destroyed by the very freedom he seeks. And Huck Finn, Daisy Miller, and Sinclair Lewis' Carol Kennicott are individualists, too. Indeed, it should be conceded at once that the most eloquent and discriminating discussions of individualism and the problems it has posed in our American life are to be found in literary works.

Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is a veritable grab bag of stirring quotations on the theme. "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men — that is genius." "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." "To be great is to be misunderstood." Statements of the same sort are scattered throughout Emerson's writings.

Thoreau was, if anything, even more eloquent and compelling in his adjurations to his readers. "Pursue, keep up with, circle round and round your life," he urged in 1848, "as a dog does his master's chaise. Do what you love. Know your own bone; gnaw it, bury it, unearthen it, and gnaw it still." He could declare (in the essay on civil disobedience of 1849) that "any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a

majority of one already." He could say, in the same essay, that "I think we should be men first and subjects afterward." (On this point, Emerson was in full concurrence. "Every actual state is corrupt," he wrote in his essay "Politics." "Good men must not obey the laws too well.") Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) incorporated the same philosophy. "Live your life, do your work," he wrote in a famous aphorism, "then take your hat."

But it was in describing his solitary life at Walden Pond that his words became touched with fire. "I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than to be crowded on a velvet cushion." "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate." He called his existence there, in a famous statement, "life near the bone, where it is sweetest," and took for his motto the one word, reiterated: "Simplify, simplify." And he could ask, in phrases that have thrilled hundreds of young men and women of our own time: "Why should we be in such haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

Emerson and Thoreau, along with other Transcendentalists like Theodore Parker, affirmed the natural, unique, particular individual as the model man, as opposed to the conventional, imitative, "square" citizen of Concord, Boston, and other urban localities. Their emphasis was not, as was Cooper's, on a political and social order arranged according to individual levels of capacity, intelligence, and achievement; the emphasis, instead, was on getting away from all social and political orders to a "natural" order, where every man could attain his real self. "You take the way from man," said Emerson, "not to man." The traditional Ameri-

can Dream, according to William Faulkner, writing a century later, was that of a land where "every individual man" could attain individuality and be free of the old feudal hierarchies and mass-belonging of the Old World.

However, all affirmations of individuality, whether social or anarchic in tendency, lead to the problem of individual freedom — of just how, or how much, the individuality they affirm is to be free to express itself in organized human society. Some thinkers, such as Emerson in his more optimistic period, have seen the public good as the result of free, spontaneous, individual action, much as the laissez faire economists saw the public wealth being served by the unrestricted actions of individual entrepreneurs. Others, like Herbert Croly, have seen the individual good as consisting in service to the common good, in a kind of corporative, organic participation.

The traditional American liberal school of thought held that there are necessarily two different spheres of human life, the personal and the public, and that the solution of the problem of individual freedom lay in establishing the most just and prudent balance between them. Madison, for example, who affirmed the sacredness of conscience and its expression, was also one of the architects of a Constitution that sought to provide for the common welfare and public order. There could be "an excess of liberty," as well as an "excess of power" in civil government, he warned. Similarly, Oliver Ellsworth, another proponent of the Constitution of 1787, declared that "those who wish to enjoy the blessings of society must be willing to suffer some restraint of personal liberty."

On the other hand, apprehension arose among many Americans that individual rights and liberties were being disregarded or endangered by the new Constitution. To meet these fears, a Bill of Rights was

added, affirming freedom of religion, of speech and press, and of assembly and petition, the right to keep and bear arms, security of persons and homes against unreasonable searches and seizures, and various legal rights in cases at law. What these and other relevant portions of the Constitution meant in concrete cases, however, became the subject of considerable controversy.

The individual's right to whatever religious practice and belief he chooses, for example, has been considered one of the most sacred and unquestioned rights in the American system. Yet some revered apostles of religious liberty in America, including Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson, insisted that such freedom was limited by the requirements of public order, decorum, and security. And Justice Felix Frankfurter, a later libertarian, contended in a Supreme Court opinion in the 1940s that "the mere possession of religious convictions which contradict the relevant concerns of a political society does not relieve the citizen from the discharge of political responsibilities," such as the civic ritual of saluting the flag in school. Other justices, however, who constituted the ultimate majority on this issue, maintained that there was no demonstrable social interest involved that would justify the violation of individual freedom of conscience.

Many touchy questions have arisen in the course of American history to cast doubt on the traditional libertarian distinction between a personal, inner sphere of religious opinion and a public, outer sphere of civil action and obligation. For example, may a Jew, on the grounds of an overriding right of religious freedom, serve wine at Passover in a state that prohibits the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages? May Quakers, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other religious pacifists refuse to serve in the armed forces or salute the flag? Are individuals who claim to attain religious experiences

through psychedelic drugs (such as LSD) entitled to immunity from government interference under the guarantees of the First Amendment? Are Sunday closing laws an infringement of the private rights and liberties of individuals who recognize and observe another day as the Sabbath, or who observe none at all? [For further discussion of these and similar questions, see Ch. 22: RELIGION.]

As for freedom of speech and its correlate, freedom of the press, these too have been especially treasured and zealously guarded liberties. Madison argued against the Alien and Sedition Acts, in 1799, that freedom of discussion is the essential right that safeguards every other right in a free government. Yet eloquent spokesmen for individual freedom, such as Jefferson and Lincoln, when endowed with presidential power, were willing to prevent the exercise of these rights in politically embarrassing or nationally precarious situations.

Perhaps the prevailing American view has been, in Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's words in 1919, that in a free government "the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas," and that ideas and opinions should be allowed to compete freely with one another in the intellectual and political "marketplace." At the same time, this view usually has been modified by the qualification, also voiced by Holmes, that in emergencies, such as a fire in a crowded theater or a wartime crisis, there can be no absolute right of free speech and the individual's liberty must be restricted by considerations of the common good and of security.

Holmes, it is true, insisted that it must be definitely proved that an individual's expression of opinion actually presents a "clear and present danger" before he can be punished for it. In this view, a man can never be justly and constitutionally silenced in the expression of his beliefs, however heretical,

unless the intended result of such expression is criminal — *e.g.*, obstruction of military recruitment or the forcible overthrow of the government — and the intent must be proved.

Modern totalitarian movements and methods of gaining political power, as well as the power of mass communication techniques to mold public opinion, have caused some mid-twentieth-century thinkers to doubt the aptness of the "free marketplace" analogy. Walter Lippmann, for example, once one of the staunchest supporters of unrestricted freedom of speech, cautioned in the post-World War II era against "an unrestricted and unregulated right to speak," as a license for deceitful propaganda, subversion, and corruption. It can be maintained, he argued, only where there is willingness to abide by the rules of rational debate and the principles of a free society.

The tensions of the Cold War in the period after World War II fostered loyalty checks and legislative investigations of government employees, university professors, and other persons during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Such inquiries were labeled witch-hunts and inquisitions by writers like Carey McWilliams and Henry Steele Commager, but they were defended as necessary for national security by equally learned and liberal men like Morris Ernst and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. The eminent educator Alexander Meiklejohn argued that the democratic faith requires that competent professors of Communist persuasion be permitted to teach in their specialties, while Sidney Hook, a leading non-Communist philosopher and himself a one-time Marxist, argued that they should be barred, in principle, from the community of scholars, because allegiance to a partisan ideology outweighed their commitment to objective truth and learning.

The McCarthy hearings of the 1950s, with their dramatic and sometimes stormy

scenes, the Smith Act (passed in 1940 but most stringently applied after the war against the Communist Party), and the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950 (setting up a Subversive Activities Control Board) were among the main legislative actions in the Cold War restrictions of political activity and expression. The Supreme Court justices were divided on the constitutionality of the federal acts, the majority voting to uphold them on the grounds of protecting national security, the minority voting against them as violations of the First or Fifth Amendments or other constitutional guarantees of individual liberty.

The Court struggled with the question put by Lincoln a century before: "Must a government of necessity be too strong for the liberties of its people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?" President Truman, in his 1950 veto of the McCarran Act, maintained that it was precisely this suppression of individual liberties that would weaken the nation and give aid and comfort to its enemies, because the essential meaning of the American republic lies in those threatened liberties. He equated the preservation of the republic with the preservation of individual liberty.

The courts, however, as well as legislators and the general public, have continued to weigh individual rights against one another, as well as individual rights against the requirements of public safety and order. In the cases of civil rights demonstrators in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the courts had to decide between the right of free expression, on the one hand, and the rights of property owners against trespass and of communities to keep the streets and sidewalks open to traffic, on the other hand.

Similarly, in the case of fair-housing laws intended to enforce racial nondiscrimination in the sale and rental of property, a choice had to be made between the traditional freehold rights of property owners to dis-



Courtesy, Herblock, "The Washington Post"

"I'll have the law on you"; Herblock, 1958

pose of their property as they see fit and the rights of others to obtain and hold property without being subject to racial stigmas and restrictions. In addition, a choice had to be made between the rights of real estate companies to practise discrimination and the public good as interpreted by governing bodies, which asserted that the removal of discriminatory practices in housing would result in the abolition or melioration of undesirable and harmful social conditions.

The tendency of the various and sometimes apparently conflicting court decisions was probably toward the position that there are no absolute private rights, either in matters of property or of free expression, and that a prudential judgment has to be made in each case as to which right should prevail. The same position was taken regarding the conflict between personal expression and action and the demands of public order. In some cases the Supreme Court ruled that restriction of freedom of expression justified

trespass and obstruction, but in others — for example, the June 1966 ruling on civil rights demonstrators — it maintained that “no federal law confers an absolute right on private citizens to obstruct a public street” or break other laws.

A similar weighing of individual liberty against assumed social requirements has occurred in the area of literary censorship. Do writers have an unrestricted right to deal with sexual matters in a way that transcends traditional moral inhibitions or community standards and taste? Only a few authorities, most notably Justice Hugo Black, have ruled that the First Amendment flatly and unequivocally prohibits any restrictions on freedom of expression. Other jurists, including those whose decisions became milestones in the liberation of writers from legal restrictions, assumed that there were social ends and moral standards that should be balanced against their rights as individuals and the merits of their work.

Increasingly, however, the Court based its judgments on the changing attitudes toward sexual matters, and in 1957, “contemporary community standards” (Justice William Brennan’s contribution) became the touchstone of whether or not a book was obscene. Moreover, in that same decision, the Court declared that even when a work was judged obscene by these standards, it could not be prohibited if it had the slightest “redeeming social importance,” as in providing knowledge of the way human beings think, act, and speak.

A small but perhaps influential body of opinion arose at mid-twentieth century to rebut the underlying assumptions even of this libertarian view. Judge Jerome Frank, for example, declared in 1949 that “no sane man thinks that the arousing of sexual desires is socially dangerous.” And Paul Goodman contended in 1961 that pornographic literature could be morally and culturally good, for the individual and for the

community. He scoffed at the stuffy, study-room considerations of the liberal jurists, contending that art did not merely advocate opinions or reflect social reality, but moved men to attitudes and actions — that, indeed, art and speech themselves were dynamic modes of action. Goodman maintained that it was censorship, rather than pornographic literature, that “corrupts the sexual climate of the community.” [For a different treatment of some of the matters discussed here, see Ch. 23: THE ARTS.]

3. INDIVIDUALITY, CONFORMITY, AND PRIVACY

FOR AT LEAST A CENTURY AND A HALF, Americans have been notorious for combining assertions of the rights of the individual with submissiveness to the dictates of community sentiment and public opinion. Tocqueville, who remarked on the extreme individualism of the American in the Jacksonian era — he seemed to be confined “entirely within the solitude of his own heart” — also noted a striking lack of independence and individuality in opinions and manners.

Tocqueville’s explanation of this perhaps strange combination of anarchy and uniformity was that, in a democracy such as ours, the isolated individual feels puny in comparison with the great mass of his equal fellows, and feels safe and secure only when his thoughts and actions accord with those of the general “public” and its “opinion.” The result of the equality of conditions was an equality or sameness of thought and action. “The more equal social conditions become,” said Tocqueville, “the more men display this reciprocal disposition to oblige each other.” Thus individualism resulted, paradoxically, in a diminution of individuality. It was in protest against this kind of deindividualized individualism that Thoreau ran away to the woods.

Fenimore Cooper observed at the same time as Tocqueville that "of all Christian countries this is the one, perhaps, in which there is the least individuality" in the matter of "habits." Cooper's explanation of this state of affairs was in part historical, in part political. Owing to "the religious discipline" exercised in the colonial era, "private acts became the subject of public parochial investigation," and it became customary for men to live "under the constant corrective of public opinion, however narrow, provincial, or prejudiced." Moreover, "tyranny can come only from the public in a democracy, since individuals are powerless, possessing no more rights than it pleases the community to leave in their hands."

The individual who strives for freedom of thought and action in a democracy, said Cooper, has to contend not only with government authorities but also with his neighbors, who choose and influence the government. Moreover, the general public arrogates to itself "a right to inquire into and to decide on the private acts of individuals, beyond the cognizance of the law." His conclusion was that Americans probably possessed less personal liberty than any other civilized people.

Cooper's observations have the merit of reminding us that "public parochial investigations" long preceded the loyalty investigations, electronic snooping, and other twentieth-century devices of what Vance Packard called "the naked society" in 1964. "Conformity and conventionalism in matters of morals sometimes assumed aggressive form" in the nineteenth century, according to historian Henry Steele Commager. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this aggressive moralism was expressed in everything from social ostracism to the "corrective" forays of night riders in Southern rural regions.

The legal literature on "the right to privacy" began in 1890 with the classic article

of that title by Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis in the *Harvard Law Review*. But the invasion of privacy was viewed as a danger by Cooper and others as early as 1838. Cooper saw one of the main threats to privacy in the press, with "its tyranny and invasion on private rights, violating all sanctity of feeling, rendering men indifferent to character, and, indeed, rendering character itself of little avail."

He probably would have sympathized with Faulkner's complaint in 1955 against the invasion of privacy by the press as well as by government investigators — against the threats to "the individual privacy lacking which" a man "cannot be an individual and lacking which individuality he is not anything at all worth the having or keeping." The American people seemed to assume, said Faulkner, that they have "an inalienable right to violate . . . privacy in the name of the public good or interest." He referred particularly to the role of the press and of government in the cases of Colonel Charles Lindbergh, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, and Dr. Sam Sheppard, as well as his own subjection to a "personal portrait" in a national magazine article that he had begged not be written or published.

Faulkner looked back to some unidentified "moment in our history" when license had been substituted for liberty, and a callous disregard had replaced "taste and responsibility." However, a reading of Jefferson and other early nineteenth-century Americans suggests that that moment must lie far back at the dawn of our history, if it ever existed at all. Many modern working newsmen and editors would applaud Cooper's remark that "men who have designs on the favor of the public invite invasion on their privacy, a course that has rendered the community less scrupulous and delicate than it ought to be."

Prophetic warnings came from Supreme Court justices Warren and Douglas, Senator

4. THE SOCIAL SELF AND THE LONELY CROWD

SOCIAL INTERDEPENDENCE, expressed in the plethora of voluntary associations, characterized America even in the heyday of rugged individualism. Pioneers as well as businessmen were not reluctant to call in the aid of the national government in their adventures and enterprises. "Our country was born as a series of highly communal enterprises," William H. Whyte, Jr., has noted, "and though the individualist may have opened the frontier, it was the cooperative who settled it."

Yet the basic model of man continued to be that of an independent, self-reliant individual, whose characteristics and achievements were derived from himself alone; and society continued to be regarded as an aggregate of independent individuals, the groups and associations to which they belonged being considered model forms of voluntary, spontaneous cooperation among individuals. The role of government, in William Graham Sumner's words of 1883, was to provide the "conditions or chances under which the pursuit of happiness is carried on" by individuals, to see to it that everyone gets an equal chance and a fair start in the race for individual achievement.

A generation later, Herbert Hoover — himself an example of the American self-made man, having risen from poverty and obscurity to riches and fame — was reiterating this same basic philosophy. However, he qualified it by a humanitarianism and a sense of social justice that were muted or opposed by the nineteenth-century Social Darwinists, who viewed economic and social success in terms of the "survival of the fittest." Government must insure, said Hoover in his eulogy of American individualism in 1922, that there shall be a "fair division" of the products of enterprise and that the strong shall not dominate the weak. He



Courtesy, Herblock, "The Washington Post"
"It's okay — We're hunting Communists"; 1947

Edward V. Long of Missouri, and many writers and intellectuals during the 1950s and 1960s, against the violation of privacy by contemporary social and political forces. The mass media, electronic communications, loyalty checks, psychological testing, "bugging" devices, and even the reading of personal mail by government agents were in their view exposing the individual to outer scrutiny more than he ever had been before in the country's history.

However, what Packard called the rights "to a private, unfettered life" and "to have unfashionable opinions" had also been considerably infringed in previous eras, both in the United States and in other societies. Whether they were more likely to be protected in an aristocratic than a democratic society, as Tocqueville and others claimed, was another question, and a debatable one. Can an ordinary person lead a completely free and unfettered private life in any society known to man? [For further discussion of some of the points mentioned in this section, see Ch. 6: DOMESTIC TRANQUILLITY.]

called for "a greater and broader sense of service and responsibility to others as a part of individualism," and for applying the pioneer spirit and character to the vast "continents of human welfare" that stretched out before twentieth-century Americans.

Despite these "tempering" principles and qualifications, Hoover continued to preach the "ancient" American faith in the self-initiating, self-regulating individual as the originator and embodiment of human progress and civilization. Yet he was preaching traditional individualism at a time when economic and technological interdependence was an obvious fact of American social life, when, as he conceded, the United States was involved in worldwide economic and social conditions and events. Although Hoover was justly hailed as "the great engineer" and had a long record of success in the managing of men and machines, he failed to deduce from his experience the qualities of interdependence and team cooperation that were perceived in modern industry by men like John D. Rockefeller and Frederick W. Taylor.

Rockefeller, an eminently successful organizer of industrial enterprise in the post-Civil War era, judged that "individualism has gone, never to return." And Taylor, the pioneer of the new breed of efficiency engineers, who equated productivity and progress as much as Hoover did, said, as early as 1906: "The time is fast going by for the great personal or individual achievement of any one man standing alone and without the help of those around him." He predicted that in the new dispensation, each man would preserve his individuality — "his originality and proper personal initiative" — but this he defined as the performance of a particular function within the productive process, in which the individual "is controlled by and must work harmoniously with many other men."

Another interpretation of the new situation was provided by the various critics of

monopolistic capitalism in the 1880s and 1890s, such as Lester Ward, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and Henry George. The human world is not merely private, it is also social, said Lloyd, and men have a "social self-interest" that is just as sacred and even more important for human progress than the long-lauded individual self-interest.

Herbert Croly, in 1909, combined the engineering and organizational values with the vision of a community in which individuals would serve social ends disinterestedly, because the good of the community is the greater good. This is what democracy means, he insisted. It must not be made "a happy device for evading collective responsibilities by passing them on to the individual." Croly cited with approval John Jay Chapman's remark that, instead of giving "every man a chance to pursue his own ends," democracy assumes that every man "shall serve his fellowmen" and "shall think first of the state and next of himself." All this was certainly a far cry from the individualism described by Tocqueville and other commentators in the nineteenth century.

Yet, in the new age of social interdependence, the old individualism, proclaimed by Hoover in the 1920s and 1930s, continued to be propounded by politicians and businessmen in the next generation. It may have been a futilely reiterated "outworn creed," as historian Richard Hofstadter called it in 1948, or an "obsolete ideal" that had degenerated into a mere "ideology," as John William Ward said in 1960. Yet it awoke an enthusiastic response, even among persons born after World War I, as Barry Goldwater demonstrated in 1964. The old-time individualism was still good enough, in idea at least, for many of the participants in, and even some of the leaders of, a nuclear-age society.

It seems clear, however, that the new "Establishment" in American business was committed to a new version of individualism, at least within their own organizations.

The model American, in this view, was no longer the rugged individualist of old, who went off on his own and followed his own ideas without worrying much about the response of the public, or his peers, or his subordinates. He was now a "team man," high or low, who did his job in a cooperative endeavor with his "fellow workers."

At the top level, he was more a "manager," with objective impersonal skills, than a "boss," with the initiating and sometimes crudely aggressive qualities that had built great businesses in the nineteenth century. He might well be a graduate of a business-administration department in one of the better universities, or skilled in the human relations techniques made famous by Elton Mayo and other industrial researchers and psychologists. He might follow the Joseph Scanlon method of including workers in productivity decisions as well as in profit sharing.

One of the best statements of the new point of view was made by Russell Davenport and the editors of *Fortune* in 1951. *Fortune*, which has been called the house organ of American big business, usually presents a highly sophisticated and reflective view of what is going on in the business world. Like Hoover thirty years before, the editors asserted that the American system — "the permanent revolution" — was not to be characterized as "capitalism" or by any other traditional term. It was still based, they maintained, on "individualism"; but this, they hastened to point out, was an individualism that had "come of age," that was no more like the old-time individualism than the "mixed" economy of the twentieth century was like the dog-eat-dog capitalism of the nineteenth.

While the individual rights to "liberty" and "the pursuit of happiness" proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence were protected by legal and constitutional guarantees, they argued, the right to "life" requires some form of social cooperation. But

this need not mean reducing private individuals to the role of ciphers in government or corporate structures. Although in modern society "no individual is self-sufficient; each is involved with countless others in complicated relationships," yet "an individual can find opportunity for self-expression and still retain a dynamic relationship to other individuals and to their common assignment."

How does he do this? He does it "as a member of a team." This concept of the team, said the *Fortune* editors, "has the power to challenge the individual to seek his self-expression, not along purely egoistic channels, but in dynamic relationship to others, that is to say, mutually. A community is created, and through it the individual finds a higher expression of himself. A measure of giving is added to the measure of gaining. And freedom thus becomes defined in terms that cannot be referred either to laws or to dollars."

This notion of the individual as a team player was severely criticized in the 1950s as a reversal of the essential meaning and value of historic individualism, or as praising a type of individuality that is narrow and ignoble. William H. Whyte, Jr., himself a writer for *Fortune* at one time, devoted his famous work on *The Organization Man* (1956) to a refutation of the *Fortune* thesis and to a critique of the general climate of opinion out of which it arose. The ultimate harmony between the group and the individual assumed or proclaimed in such views, he declared, was just as utopian and unrealistic as that of the nineteenth-century utopian communist theorists, such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier. The new "Social Ethic," he claimed, tried to talk away the reality of the conflict between individual aspirations and social pressures by verbal magic — to convert "a bill of no rights into a restatement of individualism."

Whyte granted the necessity for cooperation in the economic and social structures of modern life, but he protested against mak-



Courtesy, Herblock, "The Washington Post"

"Okay, honey — put it on"; Herblock, 1948

ing the cooperation or "social adjustment" the main content and value of human existence. His point was that an attitude that might be effective for functioning within large-scale economic enterprises was idolized as the model human stance in all aspects of life. It is an immoral begging of the question "to assume that the ends of organization and morality coincide." If man was to remain man in America, Whyte contended, he must be encouraged to fight and suffer to become himself. The old "boss" demanded only your sweat and your physical obedience, but the "new man wants your soul."

Another important critique of the new "social individualism" was the pioneering study by David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denny, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). They saw the prevailing type of American at mid-twentieth century as automatically adjusting to the requirements of social institutions and economic processes

and yet suffering from a lack of personal fulfillment. The human problems of individuality in an urban, technological civilization, in their view, were not solved by confusing "social role" with individual character. The problems of loneliness and the disquietude it arouses are not solved by the "group participation and belongingness" that had become a stereotyped refrain among American social scientists.

Despite some qualifications in response to criticism of his work by historians, Riesman continued to speak out in a later reconsideration of individualism (1954) for the concept of a "minority of one" and against the pressures of the new type of "groupism." He maintained, as against the majority of contemporary social scientists, and in line with the more traditional liberalism, that the modern age had given men freedom from the oppressive and stifling "corporative" and "communal" group-life of past societies. He insisted, indeed, that the "impersonal" setting of detached apartment dwellers in the modern city was preferable for many persons to the "interpersonal" milieu of a small community. With perhaps an echo of the writings of E. W. Howe and Sinclair Lewis, he asked rhetorically: "What would the member of the village group or small town not give at times for the impersonal setting where he was not constantly part of a web of gossip and surveillance?" [For a discussion of the influence of conformity on character, see Ch. 1: NATIONAL CHARACTER; and for another treatment of the nineteenth-century conception of laissez faire capitalism in the writings of men like Sumner, see Ch. 15: FREEDOM OF ENTERPRISE.]

5. SOCIETY AND SOLITUDE

ANYONE WHO DELVES into the literature on "the individual versus society" comes away with an odd sense of unreality, of a Never-

Never-Land. On the one hand, there is something called "the individual," a human being who exists and derives meaning and value essentially from himself alone. On the other hand, there is something called "society," an aggregate of individual units that is somehow greater than the sum of its parts, and that supposedly determines what the units feel, think, and value. On the one hand, a monstrosity that the Greeks called an "idiot," a private person isolated from the human community; on the other hand, a cog in the social machine, a member of the Leviathan state-organism, a mere echo of the collective voice.

Are we really confined to such extreme, abstract alternatives? Are the modes of human life exhausted in these polar choices? Or are there more extensive and richer meanings of the human person, both in his uniqueness and in his fellowship with other men?

Psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and theologians in mid-twentieth-century America were struggling to break with the hoary dichotomies of individual-and-society, of self-and-group. New meanings of "individual," or rather "person," were being elucidated, and a sense of human community in terms of relations between these real, concrete persons gradually developed.

The earnest and concerned Americans working at this crucial human problem in the 1950s and 1960s were not without predecessors in the nineteenth century. Lowell's essay on Thoreau in 1868 derided the Walden-dweller's assumption — if in fact it was that — that the meaning of human life is best plumbed in isolation. "The notion of an absolute originality, as if one could have a patent-right in it," Lowell declared, "is an absurdity." In the first place, it is "the true" rather than the "out-of-the way" that is to be sought for. Besides, "originality consists in power of digesting and assimilating thoughts, so that they become part of our

life and substance." Better to be the careful and honest disciple of a sound and true school of thought than to be the popinjay originator of worthless nonsense, than merely to be "different" in order to assure oneself of one's own self-existence by the reaction one produces in others.

Lowell felt that Thoreau was not only dependent on the civilized society that he rejected for his tools, supplies, and books, but that he was also dependent on it for the meaning and value of his withdrawal from it. "This egotism of his is a Stylites pillar after all," declared the New England poet, "a seclusion which keeps him in the public eye." Concord and the outside world had to be there, as contrast and audience, to make the Walden retreat worthwhile.

He argued that Thoreau had missed something in human strength and richness by withdrawing from the society and common experience of his contemporaries. Whatever the value of "solitary communion with Nature," it could not compensate for the disengagement from "the august drama of destiny" being played out during the pre-Civil War period of Thoreau's attempt at exclusivity and exile. "Perhaps," Lowell suggested, "the narrowest provincialism is that of Self."

It should be pointed out that Thoreau himself was not unaware of the problems that he faced, and that Lowell later rather crustily emphasized. "I am simply what I am," Thoreau wrote in a letter to a friend on March 27, 1848, "*or I begin to be that.*" In fact, he did not know how to be that, wholly. And he added, in the same letter, "In what concerns you much, do not think that you have companions: know that you are alone in the world."

There was the rub — the loneliness of the man who followed his own bent. Thoreau's famous statements about originality and individuality, brave as they were and powerfully eloquent as they remain, were

not enough — for Thoreau, or perhaps for any man. He said he was not lonely in his isolated cabin beside the water, but in so saying he revealed an even greater loneliness than physical isolation can ever bring. He was lonely, he conceded, even in a crowd. “What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows,” he asked, “and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another.”

In the end he left the pond, and later could not say exactly why. He tried to, in his *Journal*, in 1851 (three years before *Walden* was published). “Why I left the woods? I do not think that I can tell. . . . Perhaps it is none of my business, even if it is yours. . . . There was a little stagnation, it may be. About two o’clock in the afternoon the world’s axle creaked as if it needed greasing. . . . Perhaps if I lived there much longer, I might live there forever.” But that could not be, he admitted. “One would think twice before he accepted Heaven on such terms. A ticket to Heaven must include tickets to Limbo, Purgatory, and Hell.”

Thoreau’s friend and mentor, Emerson, was no less aware of the profoundly difficult problems involved in the perennial human search for individuality in society, and for the good of a society made up of individuals. He titled a book of his own *Society and Solitude*; and he stated the problem with consummate art in his *Journal* in December 1834. “It is very easy in the world to live by the opinion of the world,” he wrote. “It is very easy in solitude to be self-centered. But the finished man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” And Emerson was even more astute than Lowell in describing the paradoxes of his friend’s character. In the memorial address Emerson delivered at Thoreau’s funeral, in May 1862, he quoted one of the dead man’s friends. “I love Henry,” said this

anonymous mourner, “but I cannot like him; and as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm tree.”

“Yet, hermit and stoic as [Thoreau] was,” Emerson went on to say, “he was really fond of sympathy and threw himself heartily and childlike into the company of young people, whom he loved and whom he delighted to entertain, as he only could, with the varied and endless anecdotes of his experiences by field and river: and he was always ready to lead a huckleberry party or a search for chestnuts or grapes.” The last point, indeed, seems to have been recognized by Lowell, who remarked that Thoreau “thought everything a discovery of his own, from moonlight to the planting of acorns and nuts by squirrels. This is a defect in his character, but one of his chief charms as a writer.”

Nor was Thoreau the only one of the great nineteenth-century Transcendentalists to suffer the agony of loneliness. Think of Melville, cut off in his later years from his audience, if not from his relatives and friends. Think of Longfellow, tortured after 1861 by the memories of his dead wife. Think of Emerson himself. And think of Hawthorne. Emerson was present at his funeral, too. “Yesterday, May 23,” Emerson wrote in his *Journal* in 1864, “we buried Hawthorne in Sleepy Hollow, in a pomp of sunshine and verdure and gentle winds. . . . I thought there was a tragic element in the event — in the painful solitude of the man, which, I suppose, could not longer be endured, and he died of it.”

A hundred years later, the basic human problem probably had not changed very much, although it seemed to be talked about even more often and with even more fervor than in the 1850s and 1860s. Thus, for example, the willful attempt at a forced singularity was noted as a characteristic malaise of Americans by psychotherapist Leslie H. Farber in 1966. And at the same



*I expand and live in the warm days,
like corn & melons.*

Nature: p. 73.

Weidner Library, Harvard University

"Emerson the Idealist"; drawing by Christopher
Pearse Cranch, also based on writings in "Nature"

time that the artificial, self-conscious, ego-centric "individual" was being contrasted to the real "person" by the European philosophers of interpersonal "dialogue," Bohemians, beatniks, hippies, and other social "dropouts" were exhibiting many of the traits attributed by Lowell to Thoreau. Even the sincere dissenter and opponent of majority values in American society, Riesman pointed out, found himself forced to act the "type" expected by his fellows and by outsiders.

Nevertheless, it was widely if not universally held that these attempts at originality and individuality, vain and foolish as they undoubtedly often were, sprang from a real increase in the sense of inner emptiness and alienation that was one result of the development of a machine-parts society. Men in twentieth-century America had attained a degree of functional cooperation that was far beyond the expectations even of Taylor and other apostles of modern technocracy — but it seemed that they also found it more and more difficult to share themselves with one another, or to give themselves to

any overarching goal or value. The problem of human community still remained, and, in the opinion of many commentators, it was unlikely that men could become true persons unless they solved it.

It is probably futile to look back to some pre-industrial, pre-democratic era for a model for man today. Even the contemporary examples of small-scale collective living in Israel and other places can only point to a human potential, not to a pattern for large-scale, modern, industrial society. Paul Goodman and other contemporary social planners, utopian and nonutopian, have sought for small community developments within the larger society, apart from and yet integrally a part of it; but this effort may well be futile, too.

Nevertheless, despite the somberness of critical views of the human situation at mid-twentieth century, there were some grounds for hope. The individual, in actual historical fact, was not confined to the grim alternatives of being an automatic robot or of living in a state of inner exile. The Negroes and whites who took part in the equal rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s experienced a sense of individual reality and worth, and found that their individual force, in cooperative action, had an observable effect on the immense social machine of the modern state. James Farmer, the first head of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), spoke of the "great and burgeoning sense of individual worth, released, ironically, through a mass movement," which, he claimed, had led to "a re-discovery of the individual in American society." A similar experience, though usually with less obvious and tangible results, may have been shared by the participants in the antiwar movements and the student demonstrations against college administrations in the 1960s.

By and large, the attitude of the individuals involved in these movements was essentially not anarchic and self-centered. They

were usually affirming social values that long had been emblazoned as the basic principles of American society, and they were asking that they be incorporated now in actual, concrete social life. Apart from a Dionysian minority, they were realistically aware of the social structures and the powers that impose their sanctions on individuals. They were merely demanding that the structures be used, and made over if necessary, to serve the ends of living human persons and values.

It was not clear, in the 1960s, which way the United States would turn in response to these demands, made mainly by young people, who would nevertheless be the rul-

ing generation in a few short years. It might not respond at all, or respond negatively; in that case, there might be more or less futile attempts at revolt, and probably there would be an increase in the number of Americans who would withdraw into inner seclusion or voluntary exile. However, it was also possible that the American genius for large-scale practical organization might meet the twin needs of community and privacy and solve the perennial problem in a new age.

If it did, this would be a victory, compared to which even the triumphant establishment of democracy in the middle of a wilderness would pale.