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CHRISTOPHER LASCH

*Optimism or Hope? The Ethic of Abundance and the Ethic of Limits**

Almost forty years have passed since C.P. Snow advanced his famous thesis of the "two cultures," according to which modern societies are deeply divided between a scientific culture and a humanistic one. The gulf between the two, according to Snow, had grown so wide by the mid-fifties that scientists and humanists could no longer understand each others' work or talk to each other about any matters of importance. Humanists' ignorance of science was particularly striking and deplorable, according to Snow, and educators had an obligation to overcome it by every possible means.

In spite of Snow's plea for the reunification of academic culture, the gap between science and the humanities remains as wide as ever. But it is by no means the most important of the cultural divisions that our society has to contend with. After all, scientists and humanists share a common commitment to free inquiry, the unimpeded circulation of ideas, and the virtue of open-mindedness. They believe, for the most part, that they owe their primary allegiance to an abstract ideal of truth and not, say, to their country or their fellow-citizens, much less to God. They believe it is their duty to pursue ideas wherever they may lead, without regard to their moral or political consequences. They oppose any form of censorship or any other limitation on free speech. Their ideal is one of absolute openness, free and unrestricted access to everything, unrestricted publicity. Everything is or ought to be subject to investigation, in their view; nothing should remain hidden or unspoken. Our intellectual elites have declared war on reticence. In their minds, honesty is by all odds the best policy, which they construe to authorize an ethic of unlimited disclosure.

These values have come to be widely shared by scientists and humanists alike; but they are not widely shared in our society as a whole. Today the important split is not between science and the humanities but between those who live and work in the culture of

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unlimited inquiry and those who live in a very different world defined in considerable part precisely by the inescapability of limits. For vast numbers of Americans, limits are a necessary and even desirable fact of life — limits on human freedom, on human capacities, on the power of reason to eradicate everything that is mysterious in the universe. Whether it is because they live in straitened circumstances (if not in actual poverty), because they have not been subjected to advanced study, because they live a long way from the centers of metropolitan culture, or simply because they are caught up in the practical business of supporting families and raising children and find it difficult, therefore, to take a purely abstract and theoretical view of existence, millions of Americans do not share the heady vision of unlimited possibility that informs the culture of elites — the culture of advertising and mass media no less than the culture of academic inquiry. Ordinary people are far more familiar with constraints than with the superabundance of choices and "alternative lifestyles" that allegedly defines the modern condition.

In a journal of family sociology, I came across an article published some years ago which illustrates the difference between the two cultures, as I have characterized them — between the culture of possibility and abundance and the culture of limits and constraint. The article is entitled "Underutilization of Medical-Care Services by Blue-Collarites." The point of the article, as the title indicates, is that working-class people ought to spend more time in doctors' offices. The authors argue that social classes in America are divided, among other ways, by contrasting conceptions of the body. "It is as though the white-collar class thinks of the body as a machine to be preserved and kept in perfect functioning condition, whether through prosthetic devices, rehabilitation, cosmetic surgery, or perpetual treatment, whereas blue-collar groups think of the body as having a limited span of utility: to be enjoyed in youth and then to suffer with and to endure stoically with age and decrepitude." One might suppose that working-class realism should be morally preferable to the upper-class conception of the body as a machine requiring "perpetual treatment." The authors of this article, however, draw the opposite conclusion. A stoic acceptance of bodily decline, they argue, reflects a "damaged self-image."

The fierce debate about abortion reveals the same conflict of opposing cultures, opposing value systems. Many observers are

puzzled by the emergence of abortion as a major issue, seemingly out of proportion to its intrinsic importance. The explanation is simple: abortion has become a major issue because it dramatizes, more clearly perhaps than any other issue, the widening gap between the two cultures. Kristin Luker's study of the abortion controversy shows that it originates not in abstract speculation about the rights of the unborn but in opposing value systems. For the pro-choice forces, it is irresponsible to bring children into the world when they cannot be provided with the full range of material and cultural assets essential to successful competition. It is unfair to saddle children with handicaps in the race for success: congenital defects, poverty, or a deficiency of parental love. Teenage pregnancy is objectionable to advocates of legalized abortion not because they object to premarital sex but because adolescents, in their view, have no means of giving their offspring the advantages they deserve.

For opponents of abortion, however, this solicitude for the "quality of life" looks like a decision to subordinate ethical and emotional interests to economic interests. They believe that children need ethical guidance more than they need economic advantages. Motherhood is a "huge job," in their eyes, not because it implies long-range financial planning but because "you're responsible, as far as you possibly can be, for educating and teaching them . . . what you believe is right — moral values and responsibilities and rights." Women opposed to abortion are not convinced that financial security has to be seen as an indispensable precondition of motherhood.

"The values and beliefs of pro-choice [people] diametrically oppose those of pro-life people," Luker writes. Pro-life activists regard motherhood as a demanding vocation and resent the feminist disparagement of housework and motherhood. They agree that women ought to get equal pay for equal work in the marketplace, but they do not agree that unpaid work in the home is degrading and oppressive. What they find "disturbing [in] the whole abortion mentality," as one of them puts it, 'is the idea that family duties —rearing children, managing a home, loving and caring for a husband — are somehow degrading in women." They find the pretense that "there are no important differences between men and women" utterly unconvincing. They believe that men and women "were created differently and . . . meant to complement each

other." Upper middle-class feminists, on the other hand, see the belief in biologically determined gender differences as the ideological basis of women's oppression.

Their opposition to a biological view of human nature goes beyond the contention that it serves to deprive women of their rights. Their insistence that women ought to assume "control over their bodies" evinces an impatience with biological constraints of any kind, together with a belief that modern technology has liberated humanity from these constraints and made it possible for the first time to engineer a better life for the human race as a whole. Pro-choice people welcome the medical technologies that make it possible to detect birth defects in the womb, and they cannot understand why anyone would knowingly wish to bring a "damaged" child, or for that matter an "unwanted" child, into the world. In their eyes, an unwillingness to grant such children's "right not to be born" might itself be considered evidence of unfitness for parenthood.

For people in the right-to-life movement, this kind of thinking leads logically to full-scale genetic engineering, to an arrogant assumption of the power to make summary judgments about the "quality of life," and to a willingness to consign not only a "defective" fetus but whole categories of defective or superfluous individuals to the status of non-persons. A pro-life activist whose infant daughter died of a lung disease objects to the "idea that my baby's life, in a lot of people's eyes, wouldn't have been very meaningful. . . . She only lived twenty-seven days, and that's not a very long time, but whether we live ninety-nine years or two hours or twenty-seven days, being human is being human, and what it involves, we really don't understand."

Perhaps it is the suggestion that "we really don't understand" what it means to be human that most deeply divides the two parties to the abortion debate. For liberals, such an admission amounts to betrayal not only of the rights of women but of the whole modern project: the conquest of necessity and the substitution of human choice for the blind workings of nature. An unquestioning faith in the capacity of human intelligence to solve the mysteries of human existence, ultimately the secret of creation itself, links the seemingly contradictory positions held by liberals — that abortion is an "ethical private decision" and sex a transaction between "consenting adults"

but that the state might well reserve the right to license pregnancy or even to embark on far-reaching programs of eugenic engineering.

The uneasy coexistence of ethical individualism and medical collectivism grows out of the separation of sex from procreation, which makes sex a matter of private choice while leaving open the possibility that procreation and childrearing might be subjected to stringent public controls. The objection that sex and procreation cannot be severed without losing sight of the mystery surrounding both strikes liberals as the worst kind of theological obscurantism. Opponents of abortion, on the other hand, believe that "God is the creator of life, and . . . sexual activity should be open to that. . . . The contraceptive mentality denies his will, 'It's my will, not your will.' "

The national debate about family policy — a debate that is often intertwined with the abortion issue but distinct from it — provides another example of the conflict of two cultures, the one eager to complete the revolution of rising expectations, the other devoted to a last-ditch defense of the "forgotten American." Parents who see moral guidance as one of their principal tasks are not interested in the issues that figure so prominently in the media and the official pronouncements of policy makers: whether the definition of the family should be broadened to include any "two or more persons who share values and goals, and have commitments to one another over time," whether family ties can be strengthened without interfering with individual freedom, whether employers should be required to set up day-care programs, whether the cost of day care should be borne by the public or the private sector. What interests parents who take their moral responsibilities seriously is whether it is possible to raise children properly in a society that teaches children to be ill-mannered, greedy, and endlessly demanding. The official debate about family policy has nothing to say about the moral corruption that surrounds us and makes child-rearing so difficult. It has come to focus more and more narrowly on the question of what to do with children when their parents hold down full-time jobs. Experts and opinion-makers speak a different language from the language spoken in the kitchen. The official language is abstract and allegedly objective. It avoids value judgments about whether two parents are better than one or whether one type of family is better than another. At the same time, it implicitly approves recent social trends by

playing them off against an abstract image of the so-called "traditional" family. It dismisses talk of the family's decline as an expression of "nostalgia" for the traditional family. The family always "adapts" to changing conditions, according to the official discourse, and only hide-bound conservatives confuse adaptation with decline. Those who lament the loss of family values really want to put women back in the kitchen.

The unofficial conversation about families — the conversation that takes place at the grass roots and seldom gets into the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* — turns on the question, as Barbara Whitehead puts it, of "how parents can do a decent job of raising their kids in a culture that is unfriendly to parents and children." In a recent issue of the newsletter published by the Institute for American Values, Whitehead has issued a "report from the kitchen table" — from the real kitchen, that is, not from the ideological kitchen that serves merely as a symbol of women's oppression. In the real kitchen, men and women are talking about the difficulty of teaching their children the difference between right and wrong. They "see themselves," in Whitehead's words, "in a struggle for the hearts and minds of their own children." It is a struggle they seem to be losing, because they are no match for the television set, the school, and the street, all of which encourage children to want more than is good for them, to resent interference with their personal freedom, and to prefer immediate gratification to steady work that promises solid enjoyment later on. "Parents talk about the pressure on their grade-school children," Whitehead reports, "to buy $65 Reeboks and $45 stone-washed jeans. Single mothers feel their pressure intensely — a number feel that life would be easier if their children could wear uniforms to school." The culture of consumption undermines their authority as parents. "What hurts their ability to raise their kids, they say, is materialism. . . . This is not simply a pocketbook issue — it's an issue of basic values. . . . For the parents I met, the state of the culture is a kitchen table issue."

Whitehead met only a hundred lower-middle-class families, to be sure — hardly enough to amount to a statistically significant sample. By official standards, her report is deplorably unscientific. Instead of collecting statistics, she kept her eyes and ears open. She noticed, for example, that the parents she talked to tried to arrange their working lives so as to leave their children in the care of a parent,

a relative, a friend, or a neighbor. Their aversion to institutional day care reflects their belief that "raising children involves transmitting values." They resent the time lost to their jobs — time they would prefer to spend with their children. They believe, "with virtual unanimity," that their most important responsibilities are material support and moral guidance, but they have to devote so much time and energy to the first of these responsibilities that they fail to achieve the second. For these parents. the conflict between getting a living and teaching sound values to their children is "far more painful," as Whitehead puts it, than we have been led to believe and "does not invite an easy optimism." Nor do these parents share the official optimism about the family's capacity to adapt to a new set of social conditions. "In the official language, the family isn't getting weaker, it's just 'changing.' Most parents I met believe otherwise."

In the official discourse on families, comparisons with the past are discouraged by the habit of referring everything in the past to an abstraction known as the "traditional" family. Real families, however, have real memories. "We had to make our own fun because we didn't have the material things." "If the TV broke or something, we would go out in the woods and build a fort. If the TV or VCR broke down now, they wouldn't know what to do." "I lived in the neighborhood. Up the street were aunts, down the street were uncles, cousins. . . . Everybody was very family oriented so that the family was your greatest influence, with the church and the school. Not like that today; the media play a great part in it. And does everybody want to be influenced by the media, especially if you are raising children?" Ordinary people, it appears, are not afraid to consult their memories — their own memories, not the abstract and stylized images of the past that are manufactured for them by the media, the policy establishment, and (too often) by professional historians of the family. "The remembered past," Whitehead observes, "is not a dusty artifact of the good old days; it is an important and vital social resource."

Having examined two of the most explosive issues in the contemporary politics of culture — and a further exploration would have to consider a whole range of "social issues," including busing, affirmative action, the Equal Rights Amendments, the death penalty, gay rights, school prayers, the pledge of allegiance, and judicial lawmaking — we are in a position to make some broader general-

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izations about the progressive, enlightened culture that many Americans find so compelling and many other Americans find so threatening. The first point that has to be made is that it is a "liberal" or "progressive" culture only in the very general sense that its adherents take a benign view, on the whole, of the possibilities for social progress. Although the New Right has managed to discredit liberalism by identifying it with opposition to family values, the attitudes in question are shared across a broad spectrum of opinion, which includes the managerial wing of the Reagan-Bush coalition as well as the liberal wing of the Democratic party. The conflict of cultures is much more a class conflict than a party conflict. The two cultures do not coincide with party labels. They coincide more closely with the division between lower-middle-class people and the members of a new managerial and professional elite, often described simply as a "new class," which tends to be highly critical of middle-class values but not necessarily liberal in its politics.

The new class is distinguished by its control of the means of knowledge and communication. It is entrenched in the universities, in the education and welfare bureaucracies, in the big industrial laboratories, in the advertising and public relations industries, and in the mass media. Its power and influence rest on its ability to generate both the technical know-how and the shared symbols that are required by a complex industrial system and to administer the bureaucratic organizations, both public and private, in which specialized knowledge is turned into products, policies, and ideology. The new class does not consist exclusively of literary intellectuals or welfare bureaucrats, as the New Right would have us believe; nor is it necessarily opposed to capitalism, even though it condemns bourgeois culture along with other expressions of "traditional" morality. In itself, it is neither for nor against capitalism. It can serve a capitalism that no longer depends very heavily on the work ethic, the postponement of gratification, or sexual repression; but it could equally serve a social democratic state that was prepared to impose strict controls on the free market in order to promote the democratization of consumption. It does not particularly care, as a class, what methods are used to bring about a high level of consumption. What it cares about is consumption as an end in itself. It sees material abundance as the prerequisite of a good life. Its vision of abundance includes emotional and spiritual abundance as well,

conceived as a wide array of "lifestyles" among which people are free to choose, like shoppers in a supermarket.

The new class views life as an experiment. The word "lifestyles," one of its favorites, conveys this experimental conception of existence. According to the new class creed, people should be free to "create their own values" — another revealing phrase, which implicitly repudiates absolute standards of right and wrong, standards inherited from the past, in favor of standards tailored by individuals for their own purposes. Permission to experiment with values extends to children. Parents should not inflict their own morality on their offspring. In a rapidly changing world,, "traditional" values are quickly outmoded: what was good for one generation may not be good for the next. The assumption that values are like consumer goods, subject to changes of fashion, makes the new class ethic admirably suited to the needs of a consumer economy organized around the production of planned obsolescence. It is an almost unavoidable part of that ethic, however, that consumer goods ought to be distributed as widely as possible. In its quintessential form, the ideology of endless possibility contains a certain democratizing impulse. If abundance is the basis of a good life, everyone ought to have equal access to it. If capitalism fails to provide that access, new class intellectuals may be attracted to some other system that promises to democratize the fruits of modern productivity.

As heir to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the new class is impressed not only by the seemingly unlimited productive capacity of modern industrialism but by scientific and technological advances that have enhanced human control over nature and even over human biology. These advances are seen as the product of organized intelligence freed from superstitious awe of the universe and from every form of compulsion or constraint — intellect unfettered by scruples about interference with natural forces, the negative consequences of biological engineering, or the excessive power that advanced technology confers on those who control it. Progress, as the new class sees it, depends on experimentation, in the course of which old methods and theories and moralities give way to those better calculated to get results. Nothing is permanent; everything is open to investigation, revision, supersession.

The culture of the new class is best described as a culture of critical discourse, in the words of Alvin Gouldner. It rests on an

exaggerated respect for educational credentials, a refusal to accept anything on faith, a commitment to free inquiry, a tendency to question authority, and a belief in tolerance as the supreme political virtue. At their best, these qualities describe the scientific habit of mind in the broadest sense of that term — the willingness to submit every idea, no matter how distasteful or attractive, to critical scrutiny *and to suspend judgment until all the relevant evidence can be* assessed. "Nothing is sacred to them," Gouldner wrote in *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, "nothing is exempt from reexamination."

As this observation may suggest, however, the critical temper can easily degenerate into cynicism. It can degenerate into a snobbish disdain for people who lack formal education and work with their hands, an unfounded confidence in the moral wisdom of experts, an equally unfounded prejudice against untutored common sense, a distrust of any expression of good intentions, an ingrained irreverence, a disposition (the natural outgrowth of irreverence and distrust) to see the world as something that exists only to gratify human desires. The positive and negative features of this worldly, skeptical, and critical mentality are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to assign them (as C.P. Snow, Daniel Bell, and others have tried to do) to sociologically distinct sectors of the knowledge class — the good qualities to the scientists and the technicians, the bad ones to literary intellectuals and ideologues. Both the virtues and the defects of the new class spring from the habit of criticism, which, unleavened by a sense of its own limits, soon reduces the world to ashes.

For the same reason — because the enlightened virtues carry with them a long list of enlightened vices — it is no more possible to accept left-wing theories of the new class than to accept right-wing theories. According to the left, all the evils attributed to the new class can be blamed on capitalism instead. But although capitalism cannot be absolved (as we have seen), neither can it be made to carry the whole indictment of modern culture. Capitalism was itself the product, in part, of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. Its material achievements rested on the technology made possible by modern science. The "spirit of capitalism," mistakenly traced by Max Weber to the Protestant ethic, derived far more directly from the sense of unlimited power conferred by science — the intoxicating

prospect of man's conquest of the natural world. Scientific inquiry also served as a model for the distinctive conception of history associated with the promise of universal abundance. Just as each advance accomplished by the critical intelligence was destined to be superseded by the next, so the definition of human needs and wants was thought to expand as those needs and wants were progressively satisfied. The insatiability of curiosity and desire appeared to give the idea of progress a solid foundation in psychological and historical observation.

One last feature of the culture of critical discourse remains to be explored, if only very briefly. It has made "optimism" and "pessimism" the principal categories of public debate, the reference points against which all opinions about the direction of social change are measured. For those who believe in the limitless capacities of human intelligence, "pessimism" is the deadliest sin, worse even than intolerance. It would not be quite correct to say that the culture of critical discourse is incorrigibly optimistic; the point is that it is incapable of imagining any alternative to optimism except despair. It is unacquainted with the concept of hope, which is not at all the same as optimism. Optimism is the state of mind encouraged by a belief in progress. It is a kind of cheerful fatalism, which assumes that we are carried along on an irresistible flood of innovation. It finds its clearest expression in those conventional images of the future disseminated by the advertising industry, in which everyone owns a private airplane and machines do all the work. Optimism is an opiate, not only because it lulls us into a false sense of security but because we administer it to ourselves, often quite explicitly and self-consciously, as the antidote to depression. As the terrible twentieth century draws to its close and we confront the possibility of greater terrors in the twenty-first, the belief in progress is sustained not by any objective evidence but by the belief that the only alternative is "to abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

But hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice: a conviction that the wicked will suffer, that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Some such conviction kept alive the hope of emancipation among slaves in the old South, as Eugene D. Genovese and others have made clear. It would be absurd to attribute to the slaves a belief in progress, on the grounds that they hoped for the

promised land of freedom. It was Christianity, Genovese argues, that "gave them a firm yardstick with which to measure the behavior of the their masters, to judge them," and to articulate a "promise of deliverance as a people in this world as well as the next."

Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. It derives from early memories — no doubt distorted, overlaid with later memories, and thus not wholly reliable as a guide to any factual reconstruction of past events — in which the experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge it. Such experience leaves as its residue the unshakeable conviction, not that the past was better than the present, but that trust is never completely misplaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointments.

My intention here has been to clarify the nature of contemporary cultural conflict — to explain the two cultures to each other rather than to make a case for one over the other. Nevertheless I cannot suppress my own preference — a more elaborate defense of which will have to wait for another occasion — for a culture of limits and hope as against a culture of optimism and abundance. If we distinguish hopefulness from the more conventional attitude known today as optimism — if we think of it as a character trait, a temperamental predisposition rather than an estimate of the direction of historical change — I think we can see why it serves us better, in steering through troubled waters ahead, than a belief in progress. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst. The worst is always what the hopeful are prepared for. Their trust in life would not be worth much if it had not survived disappointments in the past, while the knowledge that the future holds further disappointments demonstrates the continuing need for hope. Believers in progress, on the other hand, though they like to think of themselves as the party of hope, actually have little need of hope, since they have history on their side. But their lack of it incapacitates them for intelligent action. Improvidence, a blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best, furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through even when they don't.