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The great retreat: Decline of the public sphere in late twentieth-century America

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As pre-industrial society gradually yielded to modernity, politics was transformed in one country after another from the realm of elite domination into a more broadened and democratized public sphere. The rise of the nation-state in the aftermath of the French and American revolutions produced universal norms of consent, citizenship, participation, rights, and national identity. Modernity was shaped by Enlightenment ideals of rational discourse made possible by the spread of scientific and technological values, diffusion of education and knowledge, and increasing levels of material abundance. With advancing modernization, however, politics in many countries seems to have degenerated into a pale replica of democratic governance, losing much of its capacity to forge citizenship, national community, civic involvement, and common forms of identity. Signs of this historical process have been increasingly visible in the United States since the late 1970s with growing anti-statism and popular anger directed against the federal government, the rise of identity-based movements, enhanced popularity of therapeutic and various new-age indulgences, emergence of a postmodern intellectual culture, and a pervasive sense of cynicism and civil privatism that has swept through broad regions of society. Such phenomena are part of a deepening mood of anti-politics characterized by widespread alienation from the realm of state power along with a breakdown of civic culture.

Our historical understanding of politics brings into view a number of dimensions: democratic participation, community, citizenship, a framework for achieving social change. It is a legacy that goes back to the ancient Greeks and passes through a long tradition of discourse spanning the work of Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Marx, J. S. Mill, the anarchists, and diverse twentieth-century currents like democratic socialism, Western Marxism, the new left, and the Greens. Interroga-
tions of politics typically revolved around themes of power, governance, and conflicts of interest or ideology within the state system.

Emergence of the public sphere

If politics, in one form or another, refers to the arena of state power and governance, it also extends to what Jürgen Habermas and other Critical Theorists have understood as the public sphere. For Habermas, that is the realm in which public opinion is formed – a realm mediating between the larger society and the state, allowing for potential democratic control of social and political institutions. The more open the public sphere, the more it can serve as a mechanism of free association and exchange of ideas, and thus the greater its capacity to sustain the democratization of society. This function becomes all the more salient in advanced industrial countries, where the state assumes a more expanded role in production, investment, regulation, social programs, and, of course, legitimation.

According to Habermas, the idea of a distinctly expressed public opinion arose for the first time in the eighteenth century and achieved fuller expression with the development of liberal capitalism. The public sphere takes shape in a context where “the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion – that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible that democratic control of state activities.” As Habermas rightly stresses, general and open discussions regarding the exercise of political power that could be institutionally guaranteed grew out of a specific phase of capitalist development. Thus: “Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it.”

In pursuing this line of thinking Habermas follows a diverse grouping of theorists – Aristotle, Rousseau, Paine, J. S. Mill, Kropotkin, and Dewey among them – who affirmed the centrality of a dynamic public sphere for social progress. A democratic mode of exchange defined by open debates, genuine alternatives, trust, and reciprocity would be the sine qua non of freedom within community. As the Greeks clearly
understood, it was the common realm, or *polis*, that allowed for the formation of citizenship and sense of belonging outside the local or parochial sphere tied to the household (*oikos*), family, kinship relations, and locale. The notion of a fully engaged citizen stood in dramatic contrast to the provincialism of everyday life, for it was mainly in the public realm that universal values could take hold and be nurtured. Divergent experiences, interests, and goals were seen as grounded in the very logic of an open public sphere, which works against imposed or ascribed forms of political unity and consensus.

During the past two centuries, modernity has incessantly worn away the local basis of loyalties and identities in most societies. The culturally integrative role of the household has largely vanished, to be replaced by an expanded public realm within the economy, state, and other increasingly complex areas of human life. Massive institutions have come to dominate the social landscape, pushing aside or obliterating traditional sources of community that, however, may appeal even more to people who today may lack a firm sense of history and space. The ascendancy of the public over the private was made possible by urbanization, social and geographical mobility, the spread of science and technology, and popular demands for wider citizen participation. The early fusion of nationalism and liberal capitalism gave rise to a public sphere in which clear definitions of rights, procedures, and obligations could be established. Even while class, racial, patriarchal, and (later) bureaucratic forms of domination permeated the social order, an evolving public sphere did offer the glimpse of a "great transformation" where market and participatory values could coexist. Declarations, legal charters, and constitutions were framed to codify a wide range of basic freedoms and rights.

With advancing levels of industrial development, the public sphere in most Western countries evolved within a civic culture tied largely to the nation-state. The emergence of civic and participatory norms, though unevenly manifested, underpinned a plethora of quasi-democratic structures: parties, labor unions, interest groups, political machines, social movements, ad hoc popular initiatives. Of course, the appearance of *homo politicus* throughout industrialized society required more or less open and equal access to material resources, information, and the political system, but this was never close to the reality, even in the United States so celebrated by Tocqueville and others for its unique civic virtues. Still, in most of the modernized world there was a gradual broadening of the public sphere as barriers to participation were
pushed back or overturned and new groups became mobilized. By 1945, with the defeat of fascism and the eclipse of other authoritarian regimes, this historical trend was further consolidated. Universal suffrage became a reality, dynamic multiparty systems flourished, constitutional rights were established, labor and popular movements achieved new leverage, and information became more generally accessible. Expansion of the public sphere reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s with the appearance of strong left-wing parties, the new left, and a melange of progressive forces including the new social movements. The turbulence of the period forced a serious rethinking of many long-cherished institutional and ideological patterns.

Turning to the U.S. experience, the very meaning of politics has undergone far-reaching changes since the early days of the Republic. As set forth in the *Federalist Papers* and further revealed in earlier documents, the new regime was viewed as a bulwark against both elite tyranny and “mob rule” inspired by unbridled democratic passions that would, if left unchecked, veer out of control. The suffrage was limited to white, male property holders. It was a system approximating what C. B. Macpherson calls “protective democracy” – a political form designed less to encourage popular involvement than to defend the whole system of privileged interests. As Macpherson notes: “In this founding model of democracy for a modern industrial society there is no enthusiasm for democracy, no idea that it could be a morally transformative force; it is nothing but a logical requirement for the governance of inherently self-interested individuals who are assumed to be infinite desirers of their own private benefits.”

For all but a few radical democrats like Thomas Paine, democracy was little more than a “market mechanism” wherein the “voters are the consumers and the politicians are the entrepreneurs,” with voting restricted along class, racial, and gender lines.

From the middle part of the nineteenth century, however, American politics became increasingly an arena of broadened suffrage and citizenship, extended rights and freedoms, and greater conflict within a more diversified society. By the onset of the postwar era, as Alvin Gouldner observed, modernity gave rise to a culture of critical discourse made possible by the dramatic spread of higher education, a growing knowledge industry, the influence of science and technology, and eventual proliferation of social movements. Over time, a special discourse of politics took hold, grounded on a terrain of distinctly public needs, demands, and exchanges. The milieu of public language
and interaction became more open and democratized, though not without limits imposed by social hierarchies and an economic system rife with exploitation and inequality. Even taking into account the self-serving myths about American democracy that Richard Hofstadter, Howard Zinn, William Greider, and others have rightly stressed, there can be no question that the ideal of citizenship reached a level of articulation scarcely imagined in pre-industrial society.

The depoliticized culture

The explosion of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, riding the crest of the civil rights and anti-war struggles, broadened and politicized the public sphere to an unprecedented degree. Virtually all hierarchical forms of authority, from the military to the university to the family, were viewed as subject to critique and challenge. Within this milieu the very definitions of “politics” and the “public” were being reconsidered and debated. The familiar refrain within the feminist movement that “the personal is the political” suggests how far the boundaries between state and civil society had been obliterated in the minds of participants. New movements enlisted the participation of millions of citizens, urban and rural, young and old, liberal and radical.

Since the late 1970s, however, the public sphere in the United States has been shrinking steadily and dramatically. While social movements still have a presence in one form or another, they have been on the defensive in the face of a conservative ideological tide. For the most part, politics has degenerated into a combination of electoral spectacles, interest-group machinations, and bureaucratic infighting. While none of these phenomena is especially novel, taken ensemble they have become equated with a truncated party system, depoliticized citizenry, and trivialized political discourse beyond what is expected of even a minimalist liberal democracy. Politics is more and more the domain of corporate and state elites whose main ambition is to solidify their quasi-oligarchical status. As E. J. Dionne argues, to speak of a decay of politics and citizenship means that people have lost their faith in government, at any level, to serve the public interest — a situation that, while distressing, contains its own logic. Writes Dionne: “...politics has stopped being a deliberative process through which people resolved disputes, found remedies, and moved forward. When Americans watch politics now... they understand instinctively that politics these days is not about finding solutions. It is about discovering postures that offer short-term political benefits.”
Survey research demonstrates a profound decline in the general sense of political efficacy – the feeling that, when faced with a deeply-entrenched power structure, nothing the average person does or can hope to do will matter. This state of affairs has been far more debilitating for the left than for the right. As David Croteau points out, a crucial historical goal of the left has been to “socialize the state and politicize society,” which becomes impossible where the public sphere shrinks or is simply taken over by controlling interests. To the extent people internalize a sense of futility, they will view the political arena as nothing but a source of alienation and despair. In Croteau's words, “This belief often leads to a sense that social and political problems are inevitable and that resignation is the only sane response.”

Popular cynicism toward election campaigns and political debates is on the rise. Voting turnouts reached all-time lows by the 1990s, dropping beneath 50 percent in the 1996 Presidential contest, down to less than 40 percent in Congressional elections, and as low as 15 percent in many local and municipal races. The ideal of citizenship is hardly taken seriously in the United States, submerged as it is by people's seemingly more important role as consumers of packaged and advertised goods.

The decline of the party system reflects this shift: during the past few decades, according to Martin Wattenberg, the American public has gradually drifted away from the Democratic and Republican parties which, as most voters can easily detect, offer few real choices in terms of candidates and programs. Opinion polls show that by 1995 as many as 52 percent of Americans identified themselves as “independent,” a sentiment concentrated mostly in working-class, poor, and minority sectors, where normal politics is increasingly dismissed as boring and irrelevant. As Wattenberg notes, “Once a central guiding force in American electoral behavior, the parties are currently perceived with almost complete indifference by a large proportion of the population.”

The mood of anti-politics has deepened with the corruptions of the Reagan and Bush administrations, the revelations of Iran/Contra, the broken promises that are a regular feature of election campaigns, the powerful and sometimes secret influence of lobbies and PACs, and the low level of political discourse. Hoping to win over the huge “middle” of the electorate, politicians become masters of vague platitudes (family values, economic growth, personal responsibility, peace) that have no practical meaning for policy-making. The revulsion against career politicians, government agencies, the “welfare state,” and cold bureau-
crats extends across the ideological spectrum, from libertarians to laissez-faire conservatives to neo-liberals to many identity-based movements on the left. Such anti-statism is pervasive among youth and students, as a 1995 UCLA survey of 240,000 college freshmen from around the country revealed: less than one-third of the students said they keep up with political events, only 16 percent report that they ever discuss politics, and fewer students than at any time in the past 25 years want to become involved in social change. Survey director Alexander W. Astin concluded that even affluent, highly-motivated university students are "people who don't see themselves as being part of the democratic process, who don't even understand how democracy works." What Astin fails to add is that, given the very banality of contemporary American politics, it would probably have been difficult for the freshmen to view themselves otherwise.

The depoliticization of American culture signifies a widespread lack of social and psychological capacity to forge collective identities, uphold some notion of the public good, and work toward empowerment and change. It means the loss of what Antonio Gramsci stressed: politics as the connecting link between philosophy and everyday life, between history and democratic self-activity. The typical end product is a distorted sense of public self where public engagement vanishes or is reduced to an illusion. From this standpoint, the narrowing of the public sphere occurs on two levels, reflecting the perversely dualistic nature of modernity in which a rationalized corporate-state order coexists with an atomized civil society, the world depicted by Max Weber juxtaposed against the world described by Thomas Hobbes.

The context of this epochal shift is the eclipse of modern politics itself — the outgrowth of a thoroughly flawed political system that ensures high levels of public distrust and anger. Enshrouded in the great myths of American democracy is an institutional fabric tied to a syndrome of influence-peddling, false promises, tiresome but expensive campaigns, and endless propagandistic rhetoric. Urgent issues of the period — jobs, urban deterioration, decay of education and health care, the environmental crisis — get ignored, deflected, or trivialized. With the power structure needing to re legitimize itself at a time of new challenges, one of the main tasks of elites, as Mark Roelefs points out, is "to promulgate the relevant myths, including most importantly the myth of their own and their office's importance." The more that systemic rituals like voting, candidate debates, and legislative activity become diluted, the more they are trumpeted as indispensable features of modern citizenship.
Other underlying historical conditions are at work here too, including the familiar decline of Keynesian liberalism in an atmosphere of increasing social Darwinism – in part the response to intensifying global economic pressures that compel corporations and governments to "restructure" and downsize their operations. There is the continuous expansion of bureaucratic power, which undercuts the role of legislative assemblies and democratic participation in general. More significant yet is what Stanley Deetz calls "corporate colonization," referring to the penetration of gigantic industrial and financial institutions into every realm of social life: work, culture, education, the family, politics. While this trend has been visible for many decades, corporate power has taken on added dimensions with growing economies of scale, the tightening partnership between government and business, the entrenchment of the permanent war economy, and, above all, the globalization of markets and communications that further diminishes local and even national decision-making. It might be argued that the era of anti-politics corresponds to the phase of capitalist development where multinational corporations, in tandem with global agencies like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, have achieved worldwide hegemony.

Closure of the public sphere at a time of corporate colonization, however, is only part of the larger narrative. The process unfolds simultaneously at the level of mass beliefs and behavior, reflecting all the elements of a depoliticized culture. Among the various manifestations of this phenomenon is the mall culture that, in the postwar years, has affirmed the primacy of consumer over citizen through its celebration of a commodified world rooted in the proliferation of shopping centers, amusement outlets, and advertising. The drive to acquire personal and household commodities is a central feature of American society. While the mall experience was initially linked to white suburbia, by the 1990s it had become nearly universal, so that even the urban poor could partake of a capitalist system shaped by glittery images, spectacles, and material inducements of seemingly infinite varieties. An extension of the classic American dream of empowerment through individual consumption, the malls often become worlds into themselves, retreats from the stressful regimen of work and daily struggles. Thus the carving out of huge public spaces dedicated to mass consumption represents a kind of pseudo-democratic experience, substituting for that other public realm, namely politics, while validating the ethos of possessive individualism and civil privatism.\(^\text{12}\)
Transcending class, ethnic, gender, and age divisions, the mall has developed into a shared public arena built around market relations. For adults, it can be an outlet for selfhood through acquisition of clothes, electronics, cosmetics, and furniture with all the paraphernalia that goes with it, while for youth it provides an ersatz community where streams of images and spectacles allow for escape from an often mundane, boring daily life. In this as in other ways the commodity appropriates subjectivity, thus siphoning off "public" energies that otherwise might go into various forms of citizen participation.

Like mall culture, the mass media is yet another extension of corporate colonization — and yet another medium of anti-politics. Here, too, people are bombarded with an incessant flow of images, spectacles, diversions, and addictions, but in a more private setting that has a semblance of being connected to worldly events through the fascinating universe of electronics. Television fare, from sit-coms to crime programs to sanitized news and sports extravaganzas, is addictive precisely because it insulates people from workaday anxieties while ostensibly keeping them in touch with the real world outside. Through TV it is possible to observe events from a relatively detached, comfortable vantage point — everything from elections to gruesome criminal acts and bloody wars. Thus, the Persian Gulf conflict of 1991 was manifestly a televised war that Americans were able to experience vicariously, a majority of viewers apparently feeling great national pride as they watched media coverage and glorification of victory over Iraq.\textsuperscript{13} This same field of images has helped to transform electoral politics into shallow, but expensive marketing campaigns. TV has become the ultimate depoliticizing medium.

Many social commentators believe that radio (especially talk-radio) offers an antidote to the passivity induced by TV culture: more spontaneous, less formulaic, and more open to genuine interaction and debate, radio is frequently seen as a conduit of electronic populism appropriate to the media age. In a modern setting where most people feel disconnected, powerless, and angry, talk shows can offer hope for a kind of electronic public sphere in which anyone can have a voice, express a complaint, or register an opinion.\textsuperscript{14} For this and other reasons the popularity of talk-radio has skyrocketed since the late 1980s, reaching weekday audiences of more than 70 million people on 1,100 stations nationwide by 1996.
The problem is that radio, no less than TV, is controlled by huge media giants like Time-Warner and CapCities/ABC/Disney, with agendas defined by mainly conservative (and typically white male) hosts who seek, and often achieve, high ratings through bombast, hate-mongering, and superficial debates around issues like the latest celebrity scandal, gays in the military, cross-dressing, and teenage sex. The medium is replete with veiled (and often not so veiled) attacks on minorities, feminists, liberals, and environmentalists – indeed anything that hints of nonconformism. On the whole, talk-radio permits little in the way of serious exchanges around major public issues, although such potential no doubt exists. Political discourse is trivialized and narrowed despite the appearance of open, free-wheeling dialogue. Moreover, the airwaves of talk-radio are sometimes filled with hatred and contempt for public officials, for individuals, ideas, and agencies identified with the “welfare state.” Hate-radio has come into vogue in parts of the United States, providing a legitimate outlet for racist groups, militias, and religious fundamentalists. Talk shows have become a forum for assaults on social programs, affirmative action, and public education – a forum that surely contributed to the Republican electoral upsurge of November 1994. Like TV, talk-radio helps to reproduce a mass culture that is highly fragmented, provincial, and insulated from the give-and-take of an open public domain.

Both mall culture and mass media symbolize the prevailing mood of anti-politics: they reproduce to a deeply-atomized, commodified social life-world which corresponds to the mode of consciousness described by Richard Sennett in The Fall of Public Man, where citizen involvement in a res publica is effaced “by the belief that social meanings are generated by the feelings of individual human beings,” so that the common terrain of power relations and social space is obliterated.15 Sheldon Wolin refers to this development as a “crisis of citizenship,” reflected in the carving up of the public sphere by local, privatized interests.16 The point has been reached where most Americans can no longer imagine a system truly open to citizen participation, where the ordinary person might have influence. Viewed in this way, modernity is two-sided: it coincides with the spread of technology, knowledge, and expertise but also reinforces widespread feelings of alienation and powerlessness. Individuals feel engulfed by forces beyond their control – bureaucracy, government, huge corporations, the global economy. Under these conditions psychological retreat from the public sphere may seem normal enough. The problem, however, is that such firmly entrenched bastions of power will not vanish simply because they are
denigrated or ignored; on the contrary, their hegemony will simply go unchallenged.

The rebellion against "big government"

If the emergence of a depoliticized public sphere is the outgrowth of strong historical trends, it was also pushed along by social forces and popular movements that seized upon the mood of the period. One such early catalyst was the assault on the welfare state that originated with the taxpayers' revolt in the late 1970s and picked up momentum during the Reagan-Bush years, culminating in the Republicans' famous (but short-lived) "Contract with America" in 1994. In part a backlash against oppositional movements of the 1960s and 1970s, this new phase of anti-statism echoed themes with deep roots in American history: personal over collective modes of consumption, worship of the market, populist distrust of elites and bureaucracy, self-reliant individualism. The familiar revolt against "big government" was frequently couched in a libertarian discourse in which freedom is viewed as individual autonomy outside of and against the public sphere. It embraced a primacy of "civil society" tied to laissez-faire principles of free market, minimal government, and local autonomy – in other words, a radical turning-away from the ideology of Keynesian state intervention that had prevailed since the New Deal.

After California anti-tax crusaders launched the Proposition 13 campaign in 1978, an upsurge of movements on the right fed into a rapidly-growing anti-statist current that transformed the whole terrain of American electoral politics. Winning millions of adherents, these movements took many forms: libertarians, Christian fundamentalists, anti-abortion campaigns, groups, the National Rifle Association, local militias, and so forth. While usually ambivalent toward the public sphere, they nonetheless entered it and often used it to great advantage.

Yet popular hostility toward government was never just a right-wing phenomenon; it had already resonated within the new left, the counter-culture, some progressive movements, and a nascent neo-liberalism. As a general mood, anti-politics can be seen as a response to the mounting crisis of the public sector at a time when competitive pressures within the global market began to intensify. It can also be understood as a growing reaction against bureaucracy in any form. Anti-statism was further reinforced by the crisis and then eclipse of Communism around
the world – a development interpreted by many as validation of free-market capitalism and privatized consumption styles fetishized in the leading industrial nations. When the decline of European social democracy is taken into account, the waning of the entire socialist tradition becomes a watershed event for justifying the most extreme (and utopian) forms of anti-statism. In this milieu the “death of socialism” – and with it the discrediting of any government planning or regulation of the economy – is widely interpreted as a sign that state power is fundamentally corrupt and inefficient at all times and all places.

American society in the 1990s has seen the resurgence of a fiercely anti-government right-wing populism comprising not only free-marketeers and anti-tax partisans but also a bizarre variety of cults, militias, and enclave groups, mostly but not entirely drawn from the ranks of the familiar “angry white male.” Many see themselves caught up in an all-out war against an evil and oppressive federal government that taxes and regulates citizens beyond reason. Others see the national state apparatus as some kind of agency of international conspiracies, sometimes involving the United Nations. Inevitably, violent confrontations of one sort or another have taken place – the Waco standoff and conflagration at the Branch Davidian compound, the Oklahoma City bombing, the protracted holdout of the Montana Freeman, the Amtrak train derailment, and numerous others. In hundreds of lesser episodes, federal agents and employees around the country have been victims of threats, intimidation, and various hostile acts. A Gallop Poll taken in May 1995 revealed that no less than 39 percent of Americans believe the federal government constitutes an enemy of human rights. In the first ten days following the Oklahoma City events a number of federal agencies received a total of 140 bomb threats. Twice in 1994 and 1995 disgruntled citizens took employees hostage, in San Francisco and Puerto Rico, to protest shoddy treatment at the hands of government agents. Public officials at all levels are frequently the target of verbal assaults. Such manifestations of popular outrage cannot be dismissed as the irrational acts of marginals and crazies, though this element does enter the picture; far more common is the lashing out of working people who feel powerless and believe, quite rightly, that most government officials and politicians care little about their problems.

Whether this revolt against politics can have any strategic value in a period of global interdependence and worsening social crisis raises yet another set of issues. In fact, the historical meaning of contemporary anti-statism is far from clear. Here it is necessary to mention that the
neo-conservative and right-wing attack on big government has been, and continues to be, highly selective insofar as these groups would actually hope to strengthen the most oppressive and authoritarian features of the state (the military, police, prison system, controls over personal life) while tearing down those social programs that account for no more than three percent of the total federal budget. Nor is there the slightest inclination to disturb the most gargantuan and powerful institutions of all – the multinational corporations, huge financial networks, and their global extensions in the World Bank and IMF. Somehow these huge fortresses of power and wealth escape the conservative attack on “bigness,” waste, and lack of accountability. The reality is that the modern state and corporations are thoroughly interwoven, and both are integrated into the permanent war economy. In Theodore Roszak’s words: “When we talk about ‘big government’ in America, this ought to be the meat of the discussion. It is big war that created and sanctioned the big corporations. It is the big corporations that undergird big government. Big government is quite simply the American economy as our local extension of global industrialism.”

Anti-politics thus represents an abstract, ultimately duplicitous rejection of state power; retreat from the public sphere does not suggest popular mobilization against big government as such but rather an assault on just the redistributive and welfare functions of the state. Put more simply: the idea of dismantling the welfare state is really a code for lowered taxes, deep cuts in social programs, deregulation, and freeing of more resources for private consumption. The values associated with citizen participation, much less a recovery of the public sphere, have no place on this agenda. Thus the Reagan presidency, galvanized and legitimated by its strong opposition to entrenched governmental power, actually contributed to the expansion of that power year by year. Resources were poured into the military; the space program, intelligence, and law enforcement rose to record levels; taxes were increased; administrative corruption spread; and bureaucracy showed no signs of dissolving. Reagan also concocted his famous Star Wars scheme, which, if enacted, would have been the most expensive government program in history. Still, Republicans persisted in their libertarian blather about the evils of state power, always invoking “free-market” values that, in fact, have no relevance to the United States or any capitalist economy. The reality is that the much-celebrated shift back to an autonomous market, family values, local neighborhood, and individual consumption could never occur without eroding the very foundations of state-integrated corporate capitalism.
Utopianism in the new age

Since the 1960s, groups and tendencies that might loosely be called “new age” have flourished in the United States, attracting millions of people interested in spiritualism, astrology, Goddess worship, crystal healing, Eastern philosophy, reincarnation, and related pursuits. As a kind of metaphysical, romantic escape from the murky secular world of politics, it embraces yet goes beyond what Eric Hobsbawm means by the concept “millenarianism.”18 The new-age revival has roots in the sixties counterculture, which in its time drew from many earlier sources both ancient and modern. Like the utopianism of early prophets, mystics, healers, and religious missionaries, metaphysical thinking is devoted to a search for empowerment, identity, salvation, even divine intervention in a society rife with change and uncertainty. It affirms the struggle for individuality, self, and autonomy in a situation where collective forms of action may seem hopeless. And it looks for transcendent values and sources of authority in a world where external forces may appear fixed, irreversible, and awesome. Significantly too, its gaze lies essentially outside the public sphere, far removed from the difficult and brutal terrain of actually-existing politics.

One of the most comprehensive statements of new-age ideology can be found in the volume *Spiritual Politics: Changing the World from the Inside Out*, assembled by Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson. Their account is based upon a personal odyssey spanning three decades and it addresses profound issues of psychological transformation at a time of rapid change and upheaval. “Politics became all-consuming for us as activists in the 1960s,” they write. “Finally, after much soul-searching, we each in our own way took time out for a retreat, realizing we had to turn within. We had to begin the inner journey and confront our own shadows, our own darkness – instead of seeing evil only outside ourselves and blaming the government and big corporations for all our problems.”19

According to McLaughlin and Davidson, these problems cannot be solved until we begin the momentous search for an “Ageless Wisdom” they believe has been part of the planet for millions of years. The world must be made better “from the inside out,” beginning with the effort to find “karmic causes of global crises” such as poverty and ecological decay. Social change depends upon a “transmission of spiritual energy” that enables people to create their own reality by aligning themselves with “Divine Will.”20 Conflict can then be replaced by harmony. Thus:
“The old approach to politics as a dirty business dealing merely with the exercise of power is transformed into a new one that elevates governance to a science of synthesis. When the underlying inner unity of humanity is honored, it is then possible to create harmony out of apparent diversity and conflict.”^21 Society is viewed as a global entity defined by process, interconnection, and a web of relationships best captured by systems theory; there is a “constant circulation of human, planetary, and solar life forces” giving meaning to all social activity. These forces, in the end, are governed by the Divine Will, bringing profound new insights into the mystery of world events.^22 The authors conclude: “The underlying objective of the Divine Plan is to unify humanity into a subjective whole … [and provide] a regular and rhythmic progression toward unity and synthesis in all areas of life.” Indeed, it is possible to interpret U.S. history itself as having been shaped by “Divine Guidance” of a higher power.^23

These basic themes of *Spiritual Politics* resonate throughout the entire new-age tradition – from systems theory to Eastern philosophy, from astrology to Goddess worship. They also intersect with the main thrust of other currents like Gaia theology and deep ecology since, as McLaughlin and Davidson argue, the great problems of our epoch stem from the fact that people are out of touch with the “heartbeat of the Earth.” Social change, including ecological renewal on a global scale, can take place only in congruence with the “hidden spiritual causes of world events.”^24

Well-intentioned as advocates of such metaphysical politics might be, their agenda marks a profound withdrawal from the public sphere, whatever their self-defined status as architects of a “new” (and more radical) politics. One finds a turning-away from political methods and strategies, a lack of interest in any discourse that addresses the reality of broad social forces and political power. The solution to worldly problems is left to the (always vaguely-outlined) intervention of transcendental agents. It is surely no accident that, in the United States at least, the popularity of new-age currents rose just as the new social movements began to lose their momentum.

As Theodor Adorno found from studying the mass appeals of astrology in the 1950s, the flight into metaphysics can be compelling for people longing for a sense of comfort and stability in an environment where the “anonymous totality of the social process” is so overpowering that the very idea of changing the world by political means appears
terribly self-defeating, a waste of time and resources. But metaphysical escape from pressing everyday concerns, hardly unique to the modern period, can help people adapt more painlessly to the existing order of things. In the case of astrology, there is the familiar impulse to seek out higher sources of authority, hoping to find harmonious unity in the stars while knowing that human will cannot possibly create order within existing earthly confines.\textsuperscript{25} As Adorno suggests, "It means primarily submission to unbridled strength of the absolute power" – a power that is no longer human but is secure in its remote, seemingly universal and fixed character. In this way, external authority compensates for the individual's own sense of weakness and futility, a feeling of powerlessness in the face of insurmountable obstacles.\textsuperscript{26} Adorno further observes that escapism along these lines has stronger attraction where liberal ideals of freedom, individualism, and rights are no longer compatible with the hierarchical demands of large-scale organization. What Adorno detected in the 1950s seems even more relevant to the contemporary American landscape.

Adorno's thesis regarding the depoliticizing impact of metaphysics had much in common with what Erich Fromm argued in his seminal \textit{Escape from Freedom} some two decades earlier. In Fromm's view, the growth of individual autonomy that comes with modernity typically leads to loss of identity and security – a loss often resolved through a flight from personal will into submission to a higher power.\textsuperscript{27} Fromm saw this dynamic at work in the rise of European fascism, where formal political freedoms were reduced to shreds once an authoritarian, xenophobic mass psychology took hold of large populations; people chose the strength and clarity of a Fuhrer or Duce over their own fragile, anxiety-ridden individuality. Such mechanisms of escape, of course, do not always point to a fascist dictatorship. Quite the contrary: the search for millenarian or spiritual outlets, as Adorno observed, can have an even greater resonance in societies where liberal values are more deeply-ingrained. Thus, instead of a Fuhrer, the "higher power" could just as easily turn out to be a cult, guru, therapeutic movement, brotherhood of militias, or worship of a Divine Plan.

Fromm believed the psychological impulses toward escape would intensify as impersonal forces within bureaucratic mass society came to overwhelm the individual, giving rise to even greater loneliness, anxiety, and fear – especially in the midst of economic crisis. Personal integrity can seemingly be revitalized through identification with a powerful (or all-powerful) external force, as Adorno suggested in the
case of astrology. But this “submission to extra-personal ends” ultimately demands retreat from active engagement in the concrete public realm insofar as subjectivity is now transferred elsewhere. Here the self achieves a (false) sense of independence and power that is lacking in the worldly domain of material and psychological struggles. Metaphysics, like more overtly authoritarian ideologies, can give the person a feeling of catharsis that comes with submitting to the unfathomable power of “anonymous totality” referred to by Adorno. But the active self, the self of citizenship and collective subjectivity, winds up submerged in the process.

The same logic seems to accompany the phenomenon of Goddess worship, a form of spiritual politics grounded in a convergence of feminism and ecology that first gained a wide following in the early 1980s. Ecofeminism relies heavily upon metaphors and myths from the past – notably in its glorification of the early Neolithic period – that reveal women’s supposedly unique relationship to nature. Drawing on metaphysics, it embellishes vague cosmologies and such notions as “divine immanence,” but without ever linking them to specific historical conditions or social forces. There is little space for collective action in pursuit of actual feminist and environmental goals. As Janet Biehl argues: “The more radical feminists who initiated that movement recognized that the full equality of women could not be achieved without far-reaching changes in all structures of society. By contrast, ecofeminism’s sweeping but highly confused cosmology introduces magic, goddesses, witchcraft, privileged quasi-biological traits, irrationalities … and mysticism into a movement that once tried to gain the best benefits of the Enlightenment and the most valuable features of civilization for women….”

Ecofeminist denigration of the public sphere can be seen most clearly in its strong emphasis on the household, or domestic sphere, as the main source of women’s identity. Biehl shows that the ecofeminist idea of community scarcely goes beyond the oikos, which takes precedence over the polis; indeed “women’s values” take on meaning almost exclusively within boundaries of the oikos. While a vibrant domestic life can be essential to community, a basic truth has persisted over time: only in the public sphere does human interaction and decision-making with societal-wide implications take place. In romanticizing the household, therefore, Goddess worship puts forth a parochial vision of social life in which politics is either dissolved into the oikos or relegated to a male-dominated polis. In either case, the very ideal of citizenship is
ultimately broken up and destroyed.\textsuperscript{30} This “feminist” withdrawal from politics constitutes a form of inverted statism insofar as it allows the patriarchal state apparatus to wield power with relatively few impediments.

Spiritual politics amounts less to a new politics than to an end of politics where authoritarian rule and social hierarchy can easily coexist with devaluation of the public sphere. Popular struggles to overcome alienation end up channelled in ways that undermine transformative energies around collective goals. Thus “opposition” to existing values and institutions, so much a part of new-age discourse, really masks a profound cynicism and fatalism as far as prospects for social change are concerned. It indulges the same low sense of political efficacy that is so widespread throughout the culture as a whole. One function of metaphysical ideas is that they frequently nurture dreams of a flight from society in toto – dreams that, as Harold Bloom writes, have become peculiarly strong in the United States with the emergence of a “post-Christian” ethos.\textsuperscript{31} The perpetual search for harmony, cosmic unity, and Divine Intervention – realizable only outside the public sphere – marks a turning away from politics that, by the 1990s, had made a deep imprint on American society.

\section*{Localism and the enclave culture}

As Tocqueville observed, civic associations and local democracy were integral to American political life from the earliest days of the Republic. More recently, urban community-based groups following the Saul Alinsky and related models appeared by the thousands, in different guises, across the country. New-populist theorists like Harry Boyte, Sara Evans, Derek Shearer, and Lawrence Goodwyn championed these forms as the expression of a potential “backyard revolution,” while radicals like Kirkpatrick Sale and E. E. Schumacher viewed them as the inspiration for decentralized, human-scale types of community.\textsuperscript{32} Inspired by sixties movements, grassroots activism was seen as a source of new politics, extending and redefining a sense of citizenship, participation, neighborhood – and perhaps radical change. Local movements flourished around issues of urban development, tenants’ rights, health care, the environment, gender, and race relations, exhibiting great resiliency despite cycles of ebb and flow. New-populist groups and coalitions worked to defend the integrity of neighborhoods, win social reforms, and create local institutions such as medical clinics,
rent-control boards, rape-crisis centers, and bookstores. They won municipal power in a number of small cities, including Burlington, Vermont; Madison, Wisconsin; and Santa Monica, California.33

In the late 1970s there were reportedly more than 500,000 mutual-aid groups scattered throughout the United States with an estimated membership of more than five million. They survived into the conservative 1980s and 1990s, but only after adopting more modest goals and strategies. For Boyte, such groups amounted to potential agencies of democratization, embracing a recovery of civic spirit rooted in the American “citizen-advocacy” tradition. That spirit contains a “populist sensibility” tied to a “renewed vision of direct democracy coupled with a mistrust of large institutions, both public and private. Such a democratic vision [entails] a rekindled faith in the citizenry itself, a conviction that, given the means and the information, people can make decisions about the course of their lives [and] a belief that people can develop a conception of the public interest that does not deny – but rather is nourished by – specific interests. In turn, the building blocks for a revitalized ethos of citizenship are to be found in the voluntary structures of all kinds at the base of American society.”34

For all their undeniable successes, however, the Alinksy and new-populist schemes have run up against the limits of their own localist parochialism and inertia. Those new forms of empowerment and identity that have been carved out are mostly confined to the realm of neighborhood and locale. Efforts to revive citizenship frequently turn inward, attuned to a defense of turf and material interests consonant with what Allan Heskin describes as the “consumer ethic.”35 Instead of a broadened public sphere, localism of this sort tends to reinforce an ethos of fragmentation and privatism. The pursuit of human-scale democracy, motivated by progressive designs, thus moves in a defensive and insular direction, laying bare a process of conservative retreat beneath the facile rhetoric of grassroots activism.

The end result of much local organizing in the United States follows the pattern of what Sidney Plotkin calls “enclave consciousness”: the struggle for local space and identity in a world dominated by powerful interests. In an urban milieu filled with menacing outside forces, people readily come to “see their neighborhood as home territory, a familiar environment of people, buildings and space, surrounded by alien threats. Enclave consciousness is first of all a political orientation to the defense of such a place…. Thus, while celebrating community,
neighborhood households that embody the enclave consciousness also 
regularly strive to preserve privacy and social distance between them-
selves to retain their otherwise individual, apolitical character."\(^{36}\) 
Plotkin writes that modern urban protest employs collective action 
not so much to gain power or fight for social change as to create the 
space for local autonomy. As in the case of spiritual politics, one finds 
here a self-conscious effort to maneuver around the public sphere: 
"Buttressed by beliefs in its hard-earned independence, members of 
the enclave feel they owe little to the larger society."\(^{37}\)

True to their origins, many enclaves do function in such a way as to 
keep alive local dissent and opposition against the dominant interests. 
Movements dedicated to consumer, women’s, health, and tenants’ 
issues, for example, often make demands that disturb the easy tran-
quility of the status quo. But the general trajectory of local organizing 
has been toward the enclave. In Plotkin’s words: “Spirited by moral 
outrage against elite manipulation … enclave consciousness channels 
the political activism and resistance of ordinary people mainly into 
demands to ‘leave us alone.’ With its characteristically defensive, exclu-
sionary, and reactive character, the resulting politics is a ‘geopolitics of 
local community,’ in which ‘deterrence, counterforce, holding ground, 
securing borders, flanking maneuvers, and standing fast’ are ‘central 
organizing concepts.’ Each enclave becomes a mini-fortress.”\(^{38}\)

A suggestive example of enclave localism is described by Heskin in his 
book *The Struggle for Community*, which looks at the protracted camp-
paign of low-income residents in Los Angeles against a freeway develop-
ment that would have obliterated their neighborhood. The residents 
won major victories in the early 1980s: they held off the outside powers, 
saved their homes, built housing coops, and in the process established 
a sense of community. Later, however, success was accompanied by a 
 quasi-anarchistic celebration of locale that cut the movement off from 
its larger urban milieu, from other movements, and ultimately from 
the prospects of forging alliances that could give the movement politi-
cal leverage. Empowerment was confined mainly to housing issues, 
linked to the concerns of family, neighborhood, and ethnic identity 
(participants were mostly Latino). A language appropriate to collect-
tive action within the public sphere was never created.\(^{39}\)

Grassroots politics, of course, remains a significant part of any trans-
formative agenda; clearly there is no iron law favoring an enclave out-
come, but in a depoliticized culture it will be difficult to avoid. In many
ways the dilemmas of local activism go back to the origins of the American political system, which was set up to allow space for local participation apart from federal structures so that no amount of grassroots mayhem would disturb the national political system. Thus, even where oppositional groups were able to carve out a local presence, their influence on the national state was likely to be minimal owing to the complex maze of checks and balances, overlapping forms of representation, legislative intricacies, and a cumbersome winner-take-all electoral system that pushes the two main parties toward moderation. Over time, too, the national government became stronger and more bureaucratized, further reducing the scope of local decision-making and rendering much local empowerment illusory. Meanwhile, the federal state, with its expanded role in the military, foreign policy, and global economy, assumed ever greater control over people’s lives. Such realities, along with constitutional and legal obstacles to securing a national foothold, often compelled progressive movements to stress local organizing. At the same time, as Mark Kann observes, community radicalism could actually serve elite interests by siphoning off discontent and deflecting it away from the real centers of power.40

Like spiritual politics, enclave activism can be understood as a reaction against the chaos of urban life and the eclipse of public space, along with a rejection of normal politics itself. The globalizing pressures exerted on the economy and political system reinforce this trend. Collective action within the enclave has less to do with rejuvenating public discourse, making policy, and gaining levers of institutional power than with erecting barriers against outside intrusions, just as city-dwellers may look to gated communities as a way of protecting themselves against the Hobbesian features of civil society. The end result of this type of populism is a widespread turning-away from the concerns of power, governance, and citizen participation within the general community – one of the hallmarks of a depoliticized society.

The urban insurrection: Beyond politics?

Since the mid-1960s, the United States has experienced dozens of urban rebellions, from Los Angeles to Detroit, Newark, and Miami and then back to Los Angeles again in 1992, when the Rodney King jury verdict triggered the most explosive popular revolt in modern American history. These insurrections were fueled by mounting joblessness, poverty, racism, and social polarization of the sort that has come to define the
urban landscape. By the 1990s, the situation had worsened in the wake of corporate and government “restructuring” and cuts in social programs that exacerbated the process of inner-city deterioration. Capital flight away from the metropolitan centers, owing in part to economic globalization, has fed into the downward spiral of decay, conflict, and violence.\(^{41}\)

Hobsbawm’s classic analysis of the urban mob revolved around the phenomenon of Lumpen upheavals in early industrial Europe that were mostly protests against social marginalization. Mob revolts were sparked by cataclysmic events such as a drastic increase in food prices or natural catastrophes. Cities like Naples and Paris were populated by thousands of street people living on the edge of survival. Direct action in this setting tended to be more cathartic than politically effective, however, since its very celebration of spontaneity deprecatated the role of organization, ideology, and strategy – all vital ingredients of modern politics. Outlaw countercultures flourished in cities where Lumpen strata reviled all manifestations of state power as an infringement on their local space. Finding itself trapped in conditions of misery and powerlessness, the urban mob looked to militant direct action but in the end found that such action could never alter the institutional sources of its oppression. Lacking a universal discourse such as socialism, the upheavals were inchoate and detached, cut off from prospects of winning reforms or altering the power structure. Once the carnage of mass upheaval was swept away, the status quo returned intact – often more deeply-entrenched than before – condemning the city Lumpen to further poverty and despair.\(^{42}\)

The Los Angeles riots of April–May 1992 were set in motion by not-guilty verdicts for police officers accused of beating Rodney King. The verdicts were a shock to the L.A. community, especially to African-Americans who comprise nearly 40 percent of the inner-city population. Urban violence over a two-day period left huge areas of the city in shambles: merchants, residents, police, and others were caught up in a crescendo of burnings, shootings, beatings, and random forms of street violence that was allowed to run its course. At the end there were 57 dead, hundreds injured, and property damage totalling nearly five billion dollars. The upheaval was fueled by a long-festering anger that engulfed many inner-city groups, including not only gangs but ordinary blacks, Latinos, Asians, and poor whites.
In contrast to the Watts riots of 1965, this uprising spread outside the black communities to parts of Hollywood, Koreatown, and even Culver City. As for the inner city itself, social conditions had actually worsened in some areas since Watts: the gulf between rich and poor had widened. Unemployment among blacks in Los Angeles was 19.5 percent—a predicament magnified by the effects of both social and military cutbacks since the 1980s. Many neighborhoods were devastated by poverty and blight.

The urban crisis was intensified further by government neglect. Politicians were obsessed with winning back the loyalties of middle-class voters who had fled the inner cities, or who simply wanted to preserve their suburban lifestyle. Neither major party offered a sensible program for rebuilding the cities; in fact nothing was offered. As Mike Davis put it: “In the face of unemployment and homelessness on scales not seen since 1938, a bipartisan consensus insists that the budget must be balanced and entitlements reduced. Refusing to make any further public investment in the remediation of underlying social conditions, we are forced instead to make increasing private investments in physical security. The rhetoric of urban reform persists, but the substance is extinct.”

From this standpoint, it is possible to view the L.A. riots as a manifestation of class and racial protest against the harsh inequalities of a social order that the political system seems determined not to fix. Urban poor and minorities have increasingly given up on politics as a way out of the morass. The King verdict deepened that mood even further, especially among blacks. Hence many urban youth, above all, chose to express their alienation by turning to the streets—to gangs, violent behavior, and riots. Surely the realm of normal politics such as voting, party campaigns, and interest lobbying held out little appeal for people who felt totally excluded from the system of representation.

Once the ashes of insurrection had settled, it was obvious that, much like the urban mobs described by Hobsbawm, the L.A. riots left behind nothing of a political legacy. With no vision or program, no organization or strategy, the catharsis of rebellion quickly vanished. The two days of rioting seemed to be a time of spontaneous but deeply passionate anti-politics, as if the assembled masses could not be bothered with the trivia of strategies, tactics, programs, and goals. In this highly charged environment, no ideology, no general system of beliefs, would have seemed relevant. Other urban riots followed, in such far-flung
cities as Miami, Washington D.C., and Detroit, but with far less explosive outcomes. Aside from dispersed networks of gangs, these episodes likewise involved no effort to create an oppositional discourse and no struggle to forge an organization or strategy of change.

The L.A. insurrection symbolizes the altered nature of social conflict around the world in the 1990s. Only a few years into the post-cold war era, we see a dramatic rise in expressions of ethnic and religious conflict, spontaneous outbursts of violence, and nativist mobilization observable in armed militias, gangs, mobs, warlord fiefdoms, and mafias, giving new meaning to the Hobbesian concept of life in civil society as being “brutish, nasty, and short.” As Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues in his study, Civil Wars: From L.A. to Bosnia, the terrors of Pax Atomica that came with the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union were soon forgotten after the Communist demise. With powerful centrifugal forces on the increase, violence, crime, and local warfare became the everyday experiences of tens of millions of people.45 “The most obvious signs of the end of the bipolar world order,” Enzensberger writes, “are the thirty or forty civil wars being waged openly around the globe.” Tragically “no one was prepared for this turn of events. No one knows what to do. It could be that we have entered an entirely new phase of politics.”46 Or, more accurately, a new phase of anti-politics – which in fact is a central theme of Enzensberger’s book.

Reflecting on the growth of local military groups, all with access to cheap and sophisticated weapons, Enzensberger notes that today’s guerrillas and anti-guerrillas no longer operate under ideological banners. Even the pretense of noble ideals and goals is dropped in the context of simple territorial or tribal warfare. Thus: “What remains is the armed mob. All the self-proclaimed armies of liberation, people’s movements and fronts degenerate into maulauding bands, indistinguishable from their opponents ... with no goal, no plan, no idea that binds them together other than the strategy of plunder, death, and destruction.” Violence of this sort is no longer a matter of isolated terrorist groups or death squads, although these of course still exist. Now, “even ordinary members of the public are transformed overnight into hooligans, arsonists, rioters, and serial killers.”47 As in the case of the L.A. events, “violence has freed itself from ideology.”48

The “civil wars” of the 1990s have little to do with class struggle or revolution, or with any progressive ideology, and everything to do with
battles over turf, greed, drugs, and regional or ethnic identities. The mafia runs wild in Russian cities. Ethnic groups slaughter each other in Central Asia and the Balkans. Competing religious factions carry out warfare in the streets of Bombay. Gang shootings are a regular feature of daily life in many neighborhoods of L.A. Religious cults organize poisonous gas attacks in the subways of Tokyo. Mobs fight each other to protect territorial claims in Rio de Janeiro and Lima. Skinheads attack Turks in Berlin. And so forth.

As violence begets violence and chaos begets chaos, the old political symbols and codes lose their meaning. Liberalism? Socialism? Communism? Democracy? "What gives today's civil wars a new and terrifying slant," suggests Enzensberger, "is the fact that they are waged without stakes on either side, that they are wars about nothing at all.... We have always regarded politics as a struggle between opposing interests, not only for power, for resources and for better opportunities, but also in pursuit of wishes, plans, and ideas. But where no value is attributed to life - either to one's own life or to the lives of one's opponents - this becomes impossible, and all political thought ... is turned upside down."49 And so the urban mob of European history, with a modern twist, has taken on a global dimension.

**The postmodern as postpolitical**

If the urban revolt entails a flight from politics among poor inner-city residents angry over their life-situation, then postmodernism takes on a parallel meaning in the far-removed setting of intellectual and cultural work. The famous postmodern turn has its origins in the late 1970s, at a time of dashed hopes for the new left and the sharpening crisis of Marxism. It was given a strong push by the emergence of dispersed new social movements, which would later converge with the trend toward identity politics. One of the theoretical strains of European (mostly French) post-Marxism, the postmodern influence has opened up new vistas appropriate to a world of social fragmentation and political confusion, where reality came to be viewed as highly complex, ambiguous, and forever shifting. The arrogant certitude of grand theories like Marxism or Leninism, with their vast historical sweep and totalizing claims, could no longer hold up to scrutiny. Nor could the idea that social change is the function of a privileged single agency (class, party) or single representation of interests or goals. In its most extreme form, postmodernism refocused attention away from the
macro realm (national state and economy), toward a "micro-politics" grounded in the immediate, local, and more tangible elements of everyday life.

Postmodernism and its offshoots (poststructuralism, semiotics, difference feminism, etc.) have indeed reshaped much of academia, including such disciplines as sociology, history, literature, film, and communications. More than that, the theory (if that is the correct label for something so diffuse) amounts to a kind of anti-paradigm paradigm, which often refocuses debates around defining motifs of the post-Fordist order: commodification of culture, the media spectacle, proliferation of images and symbols, fragmentation of identities, the dispersion of local movements, and loss of faith in conventional political ideologies and organizations. So far as all this is concerned, post-modernism can be viewed as marking a rather healthy break with the past.\textsuperscript{50}

The problem is that the main thrust of postmodernism so devalues the common realm of power, governance, and economy that the dynamics of social and institutional life vanish from sight. Where the reality of corporate, state, and military power wind up vanishing within a postmodern amorphousness, the very effort to analyze social forces and locate agencies or strategies of change becomes impossible. In its reaction against the comprehensive historical scope of Marxism, the micro approach dismisses \textit{in toto} macropolitics and with it any conceivable modern project of radical transformation. An extreme "micro" focus is most visible in such theorists as Baudrillard who, as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner put it, in effect "announce the end of the political project in the end of history and society"\textsuperscript{51} - a stance that replicates the logic of a profoundly depoliticized culture.

Postmodern theory has been interpreted as a current fully in sync with the mood of political defeat that has overcome the left in most industrialized countries since the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{52} It is hardly coincidental that postmodernism grew into an academic fashion in the wake of failed hopes after the sixties and the later decline of popular movements in the face of a rising conservative hegemony. The crisis of Marxism and the disintegration of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe further intensified feelings of resignation on the left. The new middle strata that was the backbone of the new left and new social movements turned in larger numbers toward careers and more affluent lifestyles. Radicalism, where it persisted to any extent, took on the veneer of an "aesthetic pose." Thus, at a time of mounting pessimism and retreat,
the rhetorical question posed by Alex Callinicos scarcely demands an answer: "What political subject does the idea of a postmodern epoch help constitute?" By the 1990s even the discussion of political subjectivity or agency among leftist academics seemed rather passé.

In politics as in the cultural and intellectual realm, a postmodern fascination with indeterminacy, ambiguity, and chaos easily supports a drift toward cynicism and passivity; the subject becomes powerless to change either itself or society. Further, the pretentious, jargon-filled, and often indecipherable discourse of postmodernism reinforces the most faddish tendencies in academia. Endless (and often pointless) attempts to deconstruct texts and narratives readily become a façade behind which professional scholars justify their own retreat from political commitment. In Russell Jacoby’s words: “At the end of the radical theorizing project is a surprise: a celebration of academic hierarchy, professions, and success. Never has so much criticism yielded so much affirmation. From Foucault the professor learned that power and institutions saturate everything. Power is universal; complicity with power is universal, and this means university practices and malpractices are no better or worse than anything else.”

While multiple sites of power and resistance need to be more clearly theorized than in the past, and while Marxian fixation on class struggle, the primacy of capital-labor relations, and social totality has lost its rationale, the extreme postmodern assault on macro institutions severs the connection between critique and action. Moreover, to the extent that postmodernism embraces a notion of subjectivity that is decentered and fragmented, the very idea of citizenship gets obscured. As Philip Wexler argues, the social, legal, and political requirements of citizenship were historically founded upon universal norms of democracy, freedom, and equality, but postmodernism, which blurs everything and dissolves politics into the sphere of culture and everyday life, destroys this foundation. Once the subject melts into a murky cultural diffuse-ness, into a world of images and spectacles, the elements of citizenship simply evaporate. Various democratic ideals may be kept alive within the official ideology, mainly to legitimate the electoral ritual, but they fail to resonate with the times. As Wexler concludes: “For now, citizenship will remain the appropriate sign of post-modernism and semiotic society – a restored sign artifact that may be recycled and used so long as it does not disturb contemporary society’s profound need for super-

ficiality.”
In the splintered, discontinuous world inhabited by Baudrillard, Foucault, and kindred theorists, social bonds are weakened and the link between personal life and the public sphere is fractured. Where truth, language, and ideology are perpetually contested, nothing is settled or taken for granted. While this ethos corresponds well to an era in which emphasis is placed on local knowledge and identity movements, it is a depoliticizing ethos insofar as it blurs or dismisses macro forms of economic and political power. Where the state is either ignored or broken down into a mosaic of localized and partial entities, politics too winds up obliterated. Symbols and images become far more important than concrete struggles involving rival claims to power, economic interests, and visions of a better society.\textsuperscript{58}

In a social order where symbols and images dominate mass consciousness, the splintering of local identities coincides with the decline of political opposition. Corporate colonization is left only feebly challenged by the proliferation of local groups, by the celebration of diversity and multiculturalism that has entered into American public discourse since the 1980s. Dispersed identities, however constructed, are easily assimilated into the sphere of the all-powerful commodity, which coincides with the spread of anti-political sentiment. As communities assume what Zygmunt Bauman calls an "imaginary" character,\textsuperscript{59} identities become detached from the public sphere, and politics is allowed to descend into a spectacle. Hence the eclipse of the collective subject and the atrophy of political language that defines so much postmodern theorizing is now linked more and more to the stubborn reality of corporate domination.

**Deep ecology: From politics to nature**

The worsening ecological crisis has spawned hundreds of environmental groups and movements in the United States since the late 1960s, ranging from lobbies such as the World Wildlife Federation and Sierra Club to radical protest organizations like Greenpeace and Earth First! to the more politically-defined Greens. One of the most influential tendencies in the United States has been Deep Ecology, a broad arc of ideas associated with the writings of Dave Foreman, George Sessions, Arne Naess, and Fritjof Capra, among others, which stresses the need for a fundamental shift in human consciousness grounded in a more intimate and balanced relationship between human beings and nature. Evolving into a coherent social philosophy by the mid-1980s, Deep
Ecology calls for a massive transformation of values, attitudes, and lifestyles needed to subvert the destructive power of "modern industrial growth societies." Self-described as a biocentric outlook, it stands resolutely opposed to the Cartesian mechanistic paradigm, which clings to the values of anthropocentrism, human domination of nature, and material growth. Radical in both its analysis and claims, Deep Ecology calls for a new kind of ecological thinking, or "ecocentrism," consistent with an organic, holistic worldview along lines of the variant of systems theory set forth by Capra and others. Rebelling against the blight, violence, and social disintegration of modern urban society, the movement — diffuse in both its organizational and ideological presence — looks toward the ideal of harmony with natural surroundings that can only be realized in the countryside or wilderness.

Inspired by the counterculture of the sixties, Deep Ecology draws heavily upon many of the same impulses as the metaphysical revolt: Thoreau, Huxley, the work of Lewis Mumford and Alan Watts, Eastern philosophy, the poetry of Gary Snyder. Such impulses tell us that the modern crisis is rooted in forces much deeper than capitalism or bureaucracy or patriarchy: to understand the ecological predicament fully we must go back to the Enlightenment tradition and its glorification of rational knowledge, science, and technology, which produced an uneasy dualism between human beings and nature. From this standpoint, Deep Ecology looks beyond the "anthropocentric survival environmentalism" of crusaders like Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, and Ralph Nader, who want reforms that would improve life in the cities but go no further than a technocratic fine-tuning of the deadly growth economies. Humanity must scale down its consumption, its materialistic lifestyles, indeed its population levels to restore worldwide ecosystems; the alternative is catastrophe. This cannot be achieved, as Sessions puts it, without a global paradigm shift "from an anthropocentric to a spiritual/ecocentric value orientation."  60

Ecological crisis, according to Naess, strikes at the very heart of modern culture, especially in the United States, "because of our inability to question deeply what is and what is not worthwhile in life." 61 The main task is to carry out a thoroughgoing cultural revolution since, in Naess's words, "Our culture is the only one in the history of mankind in which the culture has adjusted itself to the technology, rather than vice-versa." The normal politics of environmentalism fails to see this and ends up with a kind of "computerized cost-benefit analysis designed to benefit only humans." 62
In Capra’s view, the solution lies in adopting a systems outlook that, consistent with Deep Ecology assumptions, sees human beings and nature as bound together within a network of connected and interdependent relations, with nature being the source of new transformative values. Basic to Capra’s understanding of the systems model is the “recognition of value inherent in all living nature.” Thus: “The reason why most of old-pardigm ethics cannot deal with these problems is that, like shallow ecology, it is anthropocentric.” The ethical framework derived from Enlightenment rationality simply cannot deal with the underlying problems of modern civilization which, most of all, “involve threats to non-human forms of life.” Capra believes that, as social crisis intensifies, the ethos of domination and control will eventually give way to a more holistic outlook “grounded in the experience of oneness of all living forms” and profoundly influenced by “Native American spirituality, Taoism, and other life-affirming, Earth-oriented spiritual traditions.”

The immediate practical meaning of all this, according to partisans of wilderness lifestyle such as the poet Snyder, is a social existence carved out of the fabric of the countryside – a “practice of the wild.” To embrace fully the concept of wilderness, people must incorporate it into their persons, take up residence in it, and live it as part of a larger ecosystem of plant and animal communities governed by a Rousseauian sense of reciprocity. As Snyder argues: “Grassroots politics is local, the politics of locale. To take up residence in a wild system is a political act.” Here Deep Ecology, with its abiding concern for local experience, social immediacy, and spiritualism, intersects with elements of postmodernism as well as new-age mysticism. Indeed at one point Sessions even refers to the new paradigm as a “postmodern, spiritual world-view.” In contrast to postmodernism, however, Deep Ecology envisions an unfolding of “planetary consciousness” that will some day be achieved through a process of global unification.

This worldview has an enormously seductive appeal, partly because it insists upon a renewal of democracy, citizenship, and public space that rekindles the spirit of thinkers like Rousseau, Paine, Jefferson, Fourier, and Kropotkin, who articulated a pre-modern vision of community. Many of the parallels with urban populist movements are striking. From time to time during the 1980s and 1990s Deep Ecology has exerted a strong influence of grassroots activism both urban and rural. On the whole, however, its trajectory has been more inward than expansive, more parochial than public in its reach – the reflection of a
kind of back-to-the-country enclave consciousness. And if its social and metaphysical attachment to nature parallels the new-age world-view, it also shares a common aversion to the mundane (and largely urban) realm of politics.

The political strength of Deep Ecology is eroded by a theory that fetishizes nature and turns it into something detached from the real, and ever-changing, conditions of social existence. The very idea of a wilderness or ecological totality separate from human presence has no basis in history, and tells us very little about the world at a time of intensifying corporate colonization. The theory sets forth a highly-reified conception of nature that imagines ecology to be a phenomenon quite apart from social structure and processes, making theoretical critique and political intervention impossible. Philosophical vision is cut off from its historical and social context, eroding the capacity of theory to grasp the dynamics of industrialism, domination, and alienation that lie at the core of the modern crisis. Inevitably, the search within Deep Ecology for a “new paradigm” of human consciousness encourages flight not only from politics but from society itself. As Murray Bookchin observes, the subjectivity required to understand and change the world must transcend the simple awareness that would detach itself from the accumulated knowledge associated with “first nature.”

This fatal theoretical cul-de-sac is clearly visible in the massive anthology, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Sessions with contributions from twenty-five other leading proponents of “new-paradigm” thinking. Nowhere in the roughly five hundred pages of text does one find any significant mention of capitalism or class relations, corporations, the global economy, or even bureaucracy, and nowhere is there any discussion of political methods and strategies beyond vague, predictable references to consciousness transformation. Despite the undeniably radical vision affirmed by Deep Ecology, there remains no language of political engagement, no effort to specify how epochal transformations might be expected to unfold in real time and space. With the alienated individual pitted against massive (but largely incomprehensible) structures of domination, Deep Ecology seems to assume that an outmoded system propped up by Enlightenment values will gradually be replaced by a whole new civilization rooted in an equilibrium between humans and nature. The change, however far-reaching it might be, would presumably be rather peaceful and painless – a simple end-run around the ugly realities of government, big business,
the military, and so forth. Such institutions would apparently wither away under the onslaught of new-paradigm values expected to spread rapidly throughout the countryside, much like Charles Reich imagined for urban society twenty-five years ago in The Greening of America.68

If deep ecologists articulated a powerful critique of Western rationalism and its norms of possessive individualism, instrumentalism, and domination of nature, their fetishized view of nature disconnects that critique from the social world in which people live and work. This suggests a number of intriguing questions: How can nature exist at the present historical juncture apart from any form of human intervention – or domination? How can clear boundaries between the social and the natural be established? How would it be possible to dismantle a complex modern urban society, and at what price? How can we arrive at an unmediated form of local communal life, within or outside of the “wild”? Turning to the crucial issue of popular consciousness: how might the vast majority of people whose lives are so thoroughly interwoven with the industrialized setting ever be convinced to accept a simple pre-industrial lifestyle, with all of its relative hardships and sacrifices? As Peter Dickens argues, the “deep greens” conception of an abstract, idealized nature inevitably gives rise to a wildly utopian, defensive, and reactive outlook that stands firmly against modernity in all its aspects – in other words, it produces an anti-politics that refuses to engage the existing public sphere.69

The ecocentric worldview of Deep Ecology harkens back to ideals long ago obliterated by modern industrialism: local community, human-scale interaction, regional autonomy, an organic relationship between humans and nature. Even leaving aside the feasibility of this project, the theory fails to confront truly difficult questions about class and power relations, gender and racial divisions – social hierarchy in general. Such questions are dismissed as if they would no longer be relevant to smaller locales connected to the rhythm and pulse of Mother Earth. Commenting on both Deep Ecology and ecofeminism, Cecile Jackson writes: “Like the broader tradition of populism they offer little analysis of conflicting interests and inequality within the community....”70

Moreover, on the premise that everything local and indigenous is good, Deep Ecology sets forth an untenably innocent view of the family and household, not to mention neighborhood and community, in a world where idealized notions of harmony and cooperation are inevitably forced to give way to the harsh realities of economic struggle, hierarchy, and everyday violence – most of it bound up with those macro
economic and political forces the theory sidesteps. The local cannot be separated from the national or global, nor does it automatically take on a more democratic or egalitarian character because of its smaller scope. The parallel here with the urban enclave is obvious, for, as Jackson notes, ecological communalism in the name of radical change often turns out to be profoundly insular and conservative.\textsuperscript{71} Moreover, as Bookchin points out, Deep Ecology – in its nature worship, its simplistic new-age platitudes, and its vague identification of “humanity” as the source of crisis – expresses the kind of anti-urban, nativistic impulse that easily accommodates itself to some of the worst features of the dominant order.\textsuperscript{72}

The systems theory that underpins Deep Ecology rests upon a belief that harmony and equilibrium are the guiding principles of both nature and society. As a statement about ultimate ideals this is hardly objectionable. The problem comes with the attempt to apply such a philosophy to a social reality that is anything but harmonious – one in fact that is permeated with hierarchy, exploitation, and conflict. The resulting disjunctures produces an outlook bereft of historical analysis and political vision grounded in actual social forces or possibilities, consonant with an ideological style that vacillates between adventurism and quietism. Thus, even where local defenders of the wilderness carry out militant action from time to time, it inevitably fails to lead to a transformative politics. Relocating to the countryside is often viewed as an “exit” from industrial society, to use Rudolf Bahro’s term,\textsuperscript{73} which also suggests a decision to withdraw from the public sphere. Such retreat converges with a nearly obsessive pursuit of local, communal, domestic lifestyles uncontaminated by oppressive external institutions. And the communal bonds secured in the rural setting are likely to be purchased at the same price as the urban enclave – an escape from politics.

**Political malaise and global challenge**

The decline of the public sphere in late twentieth-century America poses a series of great dilemmas and challenges. Many ideological currents scrutinized here – localism, metaphysics, spontaneism, post-modernism, Deep Ecology – intersect with and reinforce each other. While these currents have deep origins in popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s, they remain very much alive in the 1990s. Despite their different outlooks and trajectories, they all share one thing in common: a depoliticized expression of struggles to combat and overcome alienation.
The false sense of empowerment that comes with such mesmerizing impulses is accompanied by a loss of public engagement, an erosion of citizenship and a depleted capacity of individuals in large groups to work for social change. As this ideological quagmire worsens, urgent problems that are destroying the fabric of American society will go unsolved – perhaps even unrecognized – only to fester more ominously into the future. And such problems (ecological crisis, poverty, urban decay, spread of infectious diseases, technological displacement of workers) cannot be understood outside the larger social and global context of internationalized markets, finance, and communications. Paradoxically, the widespread retreat from politics, often inspired by localist sentiment, comes at a time when agendas that ignore or sidestep these global realities will, more than ever, be reduced to impotence. In his commentary on the state of citizenship today, Wolin refers to the increasing sublimation and dilution of politics, as larger numbers of people turn away from public concerns toward private ones. By diluting the life of common involvements, we negate the very idea of politics as a source of public ideals and visions. In the meantime, the fate of the world hangs in the balance. The unyielding truth is that, even as the ethos of anti-politics becomes more compelling and even fashionable in the United States, it is the vagaries of political power that will continue to decide the fate of human societies.

This last point demands further elaboration. The shrinkage of politics hardly means that corporate colonization will be less of a reality, that social hierarchies will somehow disappear, or that gigantic state and military structures will lose their hold over people’s lives. Far from it: the space abdicated by a broad citizenry, well-informed and ready to participate at many levels, can in fact be filled by authoritarian and reactionary elites – an already familiar dynamic in many less-developed countries. The fragmentation and chaos of a Hobbesian world, not very far removed from the rampant individualism, social Darwinism, and civic violence that have been so much a part of the American landscape, could be the prelude to a powerful Leviathan designed to impose order in the face of disunity and atomized retreat. In this way the eclipse of politics might set the stage for a reassertion of politics in more virulent guise – or it might help further rationalize the existing power structure. In either case, the state would likely become what Hobbes anticipated: the embodiment of those universal, collective interests that had vanished from civil society.
The historic goal of recovering politics in the Aristotelian sense, therefore, suggests nothing less than a revitalized citizenry prepared to occupy that immense expanse of public space. Extension of democratic control into every area of social life requires insurgency against the charade of normal politics, since the persistence of normal politics is just another manifestation of anti-politics. If authentic citizenship is to be forged, then information, skills, and attitudes vital to political efficacy need to flourish and be widely distributed throughout the population, without this, "consciousness transformation" is impossible, or at least politically meaningless. A debilitating problem with the culture of anti-politics, however, is that it precisely devalues those very types of information, skills, and attitudes.

At the same time, any process of repoliticization will have to be carried out in a context where the whole field of political activity has been fundamentally altered. One of the major effects of corporate colonization is what Ulrich Beck refers to as the "systemic transformation of the political" – the considerable loss of power in the centralized political system itself, severely reducing its capacity to plan, regulate, and intervene in effective ways. As Beck observes: "The concepts, foundations, and instruments of politics (and non-politics) are becoming unclear, open and in need of a historically new determination." Where the Hobbesian "solution" to fragmentation or extreme localism does not or cannot work owing to historical and cultural traditions, the push toward decentralization may be irreversible. Many of the conventional functions of government will be more difficult to perform according to a model where strong leaders exercise more or less unchallenged authority. Hence a truly revitalized politics will have to be more open and collective, more decentralized, and more infused with civic virtues as the conditions favoring a single center of politics erode.

To the degree commonly-possessed information and skills are integral to a rebirth of politics, there is the question as to whether, in a post-Fordist technological society, the global electronics revolution might facilitate such a process. In other words, might technology itself help empower people and thereby counter the corrosive effects of anti-politics? With the democratization of knowledge and communications made possible by instant, easy, low-cost, and widely accessible informational technology, many politicians, academics, and technical experts believe that social progress and enhanced citizen participation lie not far ahead. The claim is that a huge multimedia empire can link diverse regions of the world, plugging homes, workplaces, and schools into
a gigantic network of data and images, imparting new meaning to Enlightenment ideals long held sacred: democracy, personal autonomy, economic rationality, material prosperity.77

Yet as we acquire the unprecedented ability to move data, ideas, and symbols around the globe, it is easy to sidestep some obvious questions: who will own and control this medium, and for what purposes? What social forces are shaping informational technology such as TV, cable, film, video, and other electronic media? The answer is that ownership and control of what figures to be the most lucrative business venture of the twenty-first century — now projected to bring revenues of nearly four trillion dollars annually — are falling more and more into the hands of global communications megacorporations now staking out their claims along the information superhighway. One result is sure to be an even greater concentration of power and wealth within the multinational-dominated economy. Another could be the ideological closure of cyberspace itself.

Sophisticated informational technology already shapes most human activity in the United States and the rest of the industrialized world. Herbert Schiller writes of an “electronically organized total environment” that will, sooner or later, colonize virtually every realm of social space. And that space, according to Schiller, will be the domain of corporate interests such as AT & T, Bell Atlantic, Time-Warner, Sprint, and MCI, unless popular movements — or, more implausibly, national governments — begin to challenge this takeover.78

The entire media and communications infrastructure has in fact been global, centralized, and to a lesser extent commodified for some time. Whether in the mode of television, cable, or computers, the privileged interests have been able to set the most important electronic agendas, while the vast majority of people enter the system mainly as passive agents or customers, “choosing” and “interacting” in only the most limited sense. The system is of course a highly efficient instrument for gathering data and sending messages. But it is yet another matter for ordinary people, not to mention poor people, to register genuine choices, feelings, and critical opinions — the stuff of a democratic public sphere — within an electronic world that does so little to encourage popular inputs.79 It is possible through computer technology for individuals to build their own insular universe, reducing or eliminating the need for extensive social interaction with other human beings. In his seminal work The Cult of Information, Theodore Roszak writes that
one of the great seductions of computers is that "you can create your own universe, and you can do whatever you want within that. You don't have to deal with people." What this means, of course, is that human choice and decision-making can be isolated and dispersed, so that it is unlikely to pose a threat to existing institutional arrangements. While the informational superhighway furnishes some creative (and profitable) outlets for people within the professional and educated strata, its general political impact will probably be quite different: a strengthening of elite domination. In Roszak's words: "The bureaucratic managers, the corporate elites, the military and surveillance agencies are all able to make good use of computerized data to obfuscate, mystify, intimidate, and control. Because they overwhelmingly own the sources and machinery of data, the cult of information lends a mystique to their dominance."  

The most urgent question concerning the ascendancy – and inflated claims – of modern technological culture is: what can democracy and community mean in a setting where ongoing public intervention and decision-making are so devalued, where explosive social problems are so trivialized, where the technological enterprise itself is so commodified? If existing patterns hold, the informational utopia of cyberspace will turn out to be a depoliticized arena where choice and debate go no further than everyday consumer decisions.

So it follows that future attempts to revitalize the public sphere and reclaim politics for (and by) an empowered citizenry will face a Sisyphean battle, especially since corporate colonization, the global capitalist order, media myth-making, and "post-modern" social fragmentation are all so firmly entrenched. And the main twentieth-century ideological discourses – nationalism, liberalism, socialism, Communism – can be expected to offer few guideposts in a rapidly-changing, unpredictable field of social forces, popular struggles, and subjective human responses. The truth may be that such ideologies have in themselves contributed to the decline of political life since the 1970s. Meanwhile, the depoliticized culture that I am exploring in these pages is neither monolithic nor immune to powerful social contradictions generated within any highly-stratified order; the system is vulnerable to change, perhaps explosive change, as American society experiences further crisis and polarization. Popular movements and organizations have survived into the 1990s, even if many of them have been fully assimilated into normal politics or have become marginalized. Whether such movements can become repoliticized – whether they can enter into and help transform
the public sphere – will be the urgent question facing the United States and the world in the early twenty-first century.

Notes

5. It is not only leftists who detect a profoundly elitist, anti-democratic tendency within American politics. For a mainstream example, see Michael Lind, “To Have and Have Not,” Harper’s (June 1995).
20. Ibid., 14.
22. Ibid., 26–28.
23. Ibid., 237, 238.
24. Ibid., 421.
38. Ibid., 17–18.
41. On the linkage between globalization of the capitalist economy and urban decay, see James Petras and Morris Morley, *Empire or Republic?* (New York: Routledge, 1995), ch. 3.
42. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, ch. VII.
46. Ibid., 14.
47. Ibid., 17–18.
48. Ibid., 20.
49. Ibid., 30.
50. On the postmodern break with the past, see Barry Smart, *Modern Conditions, Postmodern Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. chs. 2 and 6.
53. Ibid., 164.
57. Ibid., 174.
59. Ibid., 200.
62. Ibid., 30, 32.
71. Ibid., 136.
75. As John Keane observes, the dialectic between civil society and state has broken down in modern society – surely one crucial element in the process of depoliticization analyzed here. See Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society* (London: Verso, 1988), 61.
80. Roszak, *Cult*, 68.
81. Ibid., 208.