

## **Crowd Culture**

### **Chapter 1**

#### I. The Cultural Picture

“THE SPREAD OF DEMOCRACY WILL NOT NECESSARILY HELP US, INDEED IT MAKES OUR TASK MORE DIFFICULT. TO CALL THE MASSES INTO POWER IS TO DILUTE EXISTING CULTURE. THEY MUST BE HUMORED AND SATISFIED; ATTENTION MUST BE PAID TO THEIR INTERESTS AND TASTES AND IF THESE ARE TRIFLING, IGNOBLE AND BASE, THE LEVEL OF CIVILIZATION WILL FALL. THERE IS GOOD DEMOCRACY; THERE IS ALSO THE DEMOCRACY WHICH IS A SOCIAL ORDER IN WHICH A DEGENERATE MASS HAS NO OTHER CARE THAN TO ENJOY THE IGNOBLE PLEASURES OF VULGAR MEN.”—SIR RICHARD LIVINGSTONE

**T**he chief threat to America comes from within America.

It comes from our prevailing self-admiration, from indisposition to listen to adverse criticism of our way of life, disinclination to see ourselves as we are, an unwillingness to confess our sins which has come dangerously near to being an inability to see that there are serious faults to admit and remedy. Most Americans regard an insistence on national self-criticism as traitorous or near it. In consequence, our people as a whole have acquired and retain a false optimism about the ability of our way of life to survive and flower. Most of us have a juvenile trust in the permanence of an America whose people forget the transitoriness of the immediate and the superficiality of the obvious, pay scarcely more than a polite lip service to what the race has discovered to be changeless and humanly necessary.

By no means all of us are complacent in this fashion. There is a growing number of critics, though still only a minority of Americans belong to it, which sees not only that all is far from well in these United States but that what is wrong is more than incidental or accidental. This minority is as well aware as anyone can be of American virtues and abilities. It knows that we are competent to make, cheaply and for the most part well, almost anything we wish to make; and that we are as a nation incredibly, though not inexhaustibly, wealthy. It knows, too, that Americans are hospitable, kindly, generous, though they are usually unwilling to involve themselves, in order to assist others, in sacrifice which means pain. The minority is sure that our way of life is better than that which prevails in totalitarian countries, if for no other reason than that criticism of that which is tolerated in our land if anyone cares to go in for it, reluctantly tolerated but still tolerated.

But somehow or other more than a few of us begin to see that while wealth accumulates in these United States, man seems to decay. Corruption corrodes our political and industrial doings. In our private lives a pervading relativism, an absence of conviction about what is the good life, a willingness to seek the easy way rather than the way of integrity, blunts the proddings of conscience, takes the zest out of living, creates a general boredom. We are not a happy people; our alleged gaiety is not spontaneous. Our boredom results not only in a reluctant morality but in shockingly bad manners, which most of us do not even know are bad manners. We become increasingly truculent. Our way of life, while opulent and brash and superficially friendly, is less and less conducive to peace of mind and security of soul.

The minority which feels this way grows in numbers, in clarity of perception, in willingness to speak up even when to do so brings down on its head a clamorous scorn from those who flatter and exploit an ailing democracy and, not too rarely, mete out persecution in its name.

The critical group of patriotic malcontents is sure that what the United States must produce, if it is to manage our magnificent material achievement, is Americans who are more sane, more spiritually adequate, than the present crop. We need such Americans not only to prevent us becoming and remaining slaves here at home to an industrial and political machinery manipulated by the unscrupulous, nor merely to keep us from greedily snarling over the fruits of technology until we find ourselves at one another's throats. The critical minority knows that we must produce and educate more understanding and more spiritually adequate Americans if we are to insure even our survival as a people and protect from external attack those opportunities for freedom in an ordered society which our Founding Fathers envisioned and for which they made great sacrifices.

The minority recognizes that in the One World which is coming into being our nation cannot long secure itself from alien enemies if all it has to depend on is a continued threat to use armed force or an attempt to purchase global good will toward us. It knows, for instance, that Charles Malik, the Lebanese Minister to Washington, told the unvarnished truth in an address which he made not long ago in New York City. "In world affairs," he said, "there are two serious handicaps which it is difficult for the United States to live down. In massiveness, the old

world has a decided advantage over the new, both as to population and to sheer quantity in matter. In time, therefore, the old world will certainly overtake you on the material plane. The second disadvantage is that whereas there are cultural and racial continuities between the Soviet Union and the whole of Asia, there are no such continuities between the United States and Asia. This is one of the most destiny-bearing facts of the world situation today. The only way for America to overcome these two disadvantages is by concentration on quality.” “Can the United States develop,” Dr. Malik asked, “a type of man who sums up in his character such a quality of understanding, of humility, of truth, of humor, of moral stature, of strength and resourcefulness of mind, of pregnant ideas, of universal sympathy and friendship and love, as to enable him, by the sheer weight of his being, to overcome the disadvantages of mass and discontinuity? It has not yet dawned upon America how much is required of her to develop this kind of humanity.”

It is, of course, impossible to indict a whole nation; but by and large Americans are not today the sort of people whom Dr. Malik rightly says we need to be. Our dangerous inadequacy is due not so much to deliberate iniquity on the part of individuals as to the compulsions of a culture which shoots wide of the mark in its estimate of human values.

A culture is that complex of attitudes and resultant actions in which are embodied and revealed the prevailing aspirations and desires of that congeries of human beings in the midst of which one lives. It is exceedingly difficult for anyone to escape the pressure of public opinion. It is hard to free oneself from it

even in matters of minor and incidental importance. In a democracy like ours it is, indeed, commonly considered unforgivable to wish so to escape. But there must be those who know freedom from the clamorous crowd if there is to be any considerable improvement in the complexion of the common life. To better American character there must be those who understand the prevailing American culture; those who have discovered what ends our citizens chiefly pursue and train their children to pursue, and what means of pursuing these ends are deemed respectable. If the ends seem inadequate or the means reprehensible when viewed and evaluated in the light of the agelong history of human behavior, the patriot must reject and attack them, no matter at what risk to himself. He must refuse to swim with the current for the sake of popularity or ease.

The shrewd examination and stout resistance required make demands which are almost invariably too great for the intelligence and fortitude of the Common Man. He needs to be led by those who are more than usually percipient and courageous. Social reformation never originates with majorities. Always there must be those who have the wit and the temerity to oppose the majorities—a difficult and dangerous procedure. The least useful of would-be patriots is he who, when he knows better, uncritically conforms to the mores and condones such conformity on the ground that it is “democratic” to run with the pack whithersoever the pack desires to run. There must be those who resist our culture, the present culture of the Common Man.

One hears a great deal about “the American way of life”; but what does the phrase mean? Ask this question of the next twenty-five people you talk with

and you will get almost as many variant answers. Probably most of those you ask will never have taken the trouble to define it. Some of them will be sure to regard you with suspicion. Because you insist on knowing what the American way of life is, you are supposed to be against it, whatever it is; you are probably a Fascist or a Communist or some such reprobate. One or two may tell you to go read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, forgetting that these deal with a way of government rather than a way of life. The suggested inquiry may be full of surprises for you, may amuse you, possibly may shock you into realization of the moral confusion of the American mind.

The culture that determines our way of life is a generalization of the definitions of proper and fruitful objectives that are held by the usual American and of his actions resultant therefrom. This generalization reflects us. It reveals what notions prevail in the United States about the nature of the good life and how to come at it.

But are there not, perhaps, many cultures existing side by side in America? One hears it said occasionally that the chief problem in this country is one of cultural multiplicity. Is it not a melting pot for those who hold dear many ways of life which originated in other lands: the culture of Great Britain, that of Ireland, that of Northern Europe, that of the Mediterranean countries, that of the Near East, that of the Far East, the many cultures of Africa? This notion of various ways of life as yet not fused, or slowly fusing, once did have some foundation in fact; but this is not so any more, at least not to a significant degree. We have grown beyond the end-of-the-century comparison of many cultures

being boiled up in a caldron of Anglo-Saxon origin. The contents of the pot have been so well melted by now that points of difference have become incidental. Nor has the residuum taken on the complexion of the pot, as many thought it would. The pot itself has been melted up, largely, lost in the amalgam. Our way of life is not predominantly Anglo-Saxon, not any more; neither is it the confused and confusing sort of jumble which a half century ago many feared it would become.

Nor do we have much left of geographical diversities of culture in these United States. There was a time when it meant something to speak of the culture of New England or the culture of New York or Virginian culture or that of the Middle West or that of Texas or that of California. A few faint and accidental differences linger on here and there; but the formerly substantial variations are mostly outgrown. Life is essentially evaluated nowadays much the same way in Atlanta and Spokane; in Richmond, Virginia, and Richmond, Indiana; in Portland, Oregon, and Portland, Maine; in Chicago and Philadelphia and New Orleans; in Milwaukee and Manhattan and Miami. The country is all of a piece. This is why to many foreign visitors the United States seems to be, as one of them once put it, "a homogeneity, so united as to be monotonous."

Nor do cultures vary greatly in the United States according to occupational or class backgrounds: rural and urban and suburban, agricultural or technological. There is among us no peculiarly bourgeois culture; everyone is bourgeois. There is no proletarian culture as distinct from middle-class culture; the two have become indistinguishable. And there are only faint traces left of that culture which once characterized the older elite. Those who have a hankering for

old-fashioned patrician pleasures find it easier to go in for them mostly alone, secret drinkers of that which flows from classic springs, with just enough of the real thing in the potation to make it smell and taste a little as of yore, but adulterated with crude spirits for the sake of a popular kick. This is not the place to deplore these changes or to praise them; our present business is to understand and describe.

The children in American schools stand every day with one hand on the heart and the other stretched out toward the flag and say that they are pledged to serve an America which is "one and indivisible." This is not an aspiration any more; the oath involves only a statement of simple fact. We have moralized, unified, equalized, standardized our country from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to Mexico. This may turn out to be a blessing or it may turn out to be a curse; but at any rate it makes American life much easier for the thoughtful to examine and evaluate than was the case at the turn of the century, easier too for the unthinking to accept that which is with an unchallenging complacency. America is a very large country but its cultural pattern is single, becomes more so every day.

The way of life in any culture is revealed not by what is emotionally said or written about it by the boastful or by the scolding, but through examination of certain indexes. Among the ones usually relied on by social scientists as most revealing are the press (with its modern variants, radio and television); books and magazines commonly read; advertising; sports and recreation; music; the pictorial arts; the theater, including again the movies, radio and television;

divorce and the permanency of the home; good or bad manners, including general attitudes toward disorder and noise; education and its objectives; religion and the concern or lack of esteem in which it is held. If anyone examines such indexes dispassionately, objectively, he will speedily discover what is the American way of life in these mid-century years. He will come to understand what the pressures are which have most to do with making him and you and me and the neighbors and the children what we all are, the pressures from which there is no chance of easy escape for anyone who believes in the sovereign rightness of the multitude. To understand our culture no special shrewdness is required—only honest observations of the indexes.

Read the newspapers, for instance. There are not more than a dozen of them among the thousands of local journals which show independent character or integrity, or which indicate a reading public that it would pay one to trust with his wallet, his wife, or his good name. Observe what they regard as the news that is important, the news that deserves to be featured; how gossip and scandal and crime and sensation are played up. See, also, how like as buttons they are in the way they tell what is happening nationally or internationally, and why it is happening. Most of the extra-local news is collected and distributed by syndicated agencies, agencies which can color the material just about as their governors may desire, by virtue of which fact American opinion and action are manageable as truly as in any censor-controlled totalitarian state, perhaps more effectively than in such a state because the reader in this country thinks he is

perusing independent journals while, with rare exceptions, he is not. His suspicion of being manipulated is thereby lulled.

One interesting and typical example may be worth recalling. When Russia was Hitler's ally in World War II, the American people were told by the papers, and believed, that the Russians were little short of fiends. Suddenly Russia changed sides. For reasons not too credible either to her or to us, she became our ally. At a dinner in New York at that time, I sat next to a high-up officer of one of the great news-collecting agencies. "I suppose," I ventured, "now that the Muscovites are on our side, the American people will have to be indoctrinated so as to stop thinking of them as devils and begin to regard them as noble fellows." "Of course," he replied. "We know what our job is in respect to that. We of the press will bring about a complete and almost unanimous *volte face* in the belief of the Common Man about the Russians. We shall do it within three weeks." He was right about it. The papers, fed by the news agencies, did just that; and in less time than he said it would take we were cheering for Papa Stalin and the Politburo who were, we now felt sure, liberty-loving democrats and entirely trustworthy. What extraordinary power! As Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts and absolute power absolutely corrupts." The point here is merely to note that we are led about by the press, and with what ease.

Notice, too, how brazenly the press violates proper rights to privacy, even in cases of deep sorrow or pitiable weakness; how it encourages its readers to be Peter Prys and Peeping Toms. See especially how it vulgarizes the nobilities inherent in marriage, in birth, in death. Consider, too, how the news columns

plainly imply that next to nobody makes or sells or plans or says or does things, except for money or applause. And do not forget the page or two or three or four of what are fondly called “comic strips,” the fiction of the Common Man, whereby he and his wife and his children revel sometimes in vulgarity, more often in sentimentality, more often still in sheer inanity, endlessly drawn out. None of these degradations of journalism would be indulged in for a moment if it were not that most of our people are delighted with such stuff.

As for weekly and monthly publications, there are very few of them which a maturely self-respecting citizen, if he thought about it, would let into his house through the front door, or even the back door. Most of the few of them that are reasonably decent, including a few with honorable pasts, keep trembling on the verge of bankruptcy. The ones of these which manage to hold their own or better, have to attract circulation by mixing with material of worth and wit and wisdom a great deal of other material that is shoddy rubbish if not worse, adding sensationalism and scandal for the many to an ever-lessening provision of sanity for the few. Of one of the best of the lot—it has a prodigious circulation—it has been truly said, “In every issue there is learning and lubricity, piety and pornography, and all of it decorated with astoundingly good photographs.”

No one should make the mistake of supposing that our periodicals and their visual extensions, the radio and television, are what they are because devil-inspired publishers and broadcasters set out to degrade us. The producers and circulators, as a matter of fact, are frequently ashamed of their product but excuse themselves by saying that publishing and broadcasting are no longer to

be regarded as honorable professions. Each is to be looked at as a business. The things they put out are what they are because we, the customers, are the kind of people we are and will buy nothing more reputable, at least in large enough quantity to bring in to the owners a sure and considerable profit. They print and broadcast what will build up mass circulation and so secure advertising, from which alone comes any large return on their investments. Surely, they insist, no reasonable American can fault them for being so typically American. Is not selection and presentation of news and entertainment entitled to the benefit of such free enterprise as theirs? Would it not be foolish to disregard the public, which is made up, as Mr. Barnum once said, of "one born every minute"?

Read the papers, then, daily and weekly and monthly, and get a notion of the folks who buy them. It is these purchasers who in the aggregate are our country, our state, our city, our neighborhood. You may also get new light on what you yourself have become or are becoming.

When one looks at books, another cultural index, one may again find oneself upset in one's notion of the culture which molds us and our children, especially if one has been accustomed to believe this culture essentially healthy and only incidentally ill.

It would be foolish to aver that there are not a good many worthwhile books being written, published, read, perhaps as many as at any time in our history; but the point is that the Common Man does not read them. He reads something quite different. In former days a liberally educated minority bought books and read them; the rest, if not enlightened by letters, were not corrupt in

respect to them. They did not extol trash, and worse than trash, as reputable literature. Nowadays Demos, having learned to read, reveals an infantile taste by what he reads, the greater part of it rubbish and not a little of it garbage.

Poetry, criticism, the essay, are not to Demos' taste. Fiction is what he goes in for, and such fiction! The publishers know what Demos will buy in quantity. He and his wife seek distraction from the dullness of a daily, weekly, monthly, yearly routine that has largely depersonalized them, a diet from which the vitamins have been eliminated. What Demos and his Lady desire is escape from monotony. They are looking for stories that are essentially romantic, stories that will help them forget a probably comfortable but somehow stuffy round. They welcome almost any kind of romance.

It is not merely the sword-and-dagger variety that attracts them, or the boy-meets-girl type. Realism of the most violent and sordid kind is even more satisfyingly romantic to readers whose days are too devitalized for normal enjoyments! Even the blood-and-guts of battle is romantic to read about for those who have never had to endure it. War novels are not much read by veterans. If violence is one of the chief characteristics of a potential best-seller, another is such eroticism as will enable Demos and his Lady to get away from conventionally domestic sex and go in vicariously for a lewdness which they are ashamed, or afraid, or too emotionally tired to indulge in firsthand. They dearly love to read about sex in the raw. And if a manuscript comes along which is both brutal and lustful, it is doubly certain of a large sale.

The most popular novelist in America today, if one may judge by the number of copies sold, is a meretricious brute of a fellow, almost ludicrously savage in his substance and his style. He writes tales of a violence that is near to madness plus a degenerate sexuality. His best-selling production reaches its climax when a woman, physically beautiful and fascinatingly wicked, undresses herself, with an almost incredible particularity of lascivious description, in the presence of a libidinous and savage hero. When she is quite bare, the hero shoots her twice in the belly. As she dies, she cries, "How could you?" He replies, "It was easy." End of the book. Over 1,200,000 copies of this masterpiece have been purchased. The sale of all his books, essentially the same in plot with minor differences of decoration, has passed the 10,000,000 mark in four years. This pander is indeed an exceptionally low creature, but he is at the moment the Common Man's delight. He has lots of imitators. Many of the more suave novels of the book clubs are not much better than his. And it has some significance that with rare exception the cheap paper-bound novels which clutter up every drugstore and railway bookstall carry lurid and pornographic cover pictures, even when the books themselves are not as wholly disreputable as many of them are. Violence plus sexosity equals sales.

Our popular literature reveals that our fellow citizens desire to escape from life as it is lived among us into a dream world of brutality and carnality, desire it with a passionate intensity which makes them buy in large quantity fiction much of which is worse than disreputable. A few books even yet, few among the many that are printed, are designed to be read by literate and decent people; most of

the product of press and bindery is escapist trash. This fact certainly has cultural significance, especially in a society where the Common Man determines life patterns to the extent that he does in America.

Look at another index. Americans are immensely concerned with amusement; but their desire is not so much to amuse themselves as to be amused by someone else. Take music, for instance. Despite a growth in musical appreciation in this century which has been more than considerable, though perhaps it has not been so great as is sometimes supposed, we do not make nearly as much music today as our grandparents did. Instead, we are content to sit back and listen to someone else make music for us. Perhaps we are too lazy to sing and play instruments. Perhaps we are unwilling to go through the discipline necessary to acquire musical facility. Perhaps we are overawed by professional expertness, unaware that much more enjoyment is gained by singing or playing oneself, even though one does it badly, than from hearing it done, however perfectly. Our musical experience is largely receptive, not creative.

The same is true of other arts. We do not, for example, make or decorate our homes or the objects of common use within them, not to the extent that our grandparents did, and got great joy from it. We buy what mass producers tell us is in the best taste. It may or may not be good; but it is not ours, no matter how much we pay for it. Neither in creating nor arranging things domestic do we find much self-expression. The drama, too, we relegate to professionals whose performances we pay to look at, not often in a theater (for we have killed the

theater by extravagance and exploitation) but at the motion pictures or over the radio and television. We write or produce or act next to no plays ourselves; and most of us, and our children, would rather be caught dead than observed playing charades or reciting monologues. Even general conversation, which to be amusing always involves dramatic give and take, has become nearly a lost art.

This same misfortune has overtaken what used to be the greatest American amusement of them all, the art called athletics. We are not really a sporting people, not any more. We do not, most of us, play games; we watch them. Our idea of sport is to buy seats in a stadium and look at paid gladiators do combat while we applaud them or abuse them or wager on them. The scandals of late in what used to be, and still purports to be, amateur sport, have not been caused by wicked betting rings. There would be no betting rings, no bribery by them, if it were not for the fact that we have sunk from a sporting activity into a sporting passivity. We would rather bet on a winner than contend. As long as this remains true of us, as it was not of our fathers, athletes will be subsidized and games fixed.

Another index of culture is the degree to which profession of political principles is or is not matched by responsible action. In respect to this, the situation in America reveals a good deal. We say that we believe in the rightness of majority rule, with due protection of the rights of minorities, all this made effective by law duly enacted and enforced by elected representatives. As a matter of fact, however, a large part of our people is unwilling to participate in such government, even to the extent of casting ballots at election time. In the

Presidential contest in 1948, for example, 48,836,579 voted; but that year there was a minimum of 94,704,000 eligible to vote. Half the electorate stayed away from the polls. Similar proportion prevails when lesser or more local officers than President are being chosen. In elections for membership in Congress, the percentage of nonparticipation sometimes runs to as high as 70 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Our people apparently do not care to take the trouble to help govern themselves or to choose their governors. Or else, it may be, they feel incompetent to judge the issues at stake, never having learned at home or in school how to judge anything. Or else they are of the opinion that no party or politician is better or worse than his or its rivals, that all politicians are rascals and all party platforms dishonest. These impressions may or may not be justified. This is not the place to argue that out. The significant thing to note here is the evident popular opinion that "politics and politicians are rotten" and that the citizens generally can do nothing about it. Or else they may suppose that it does not much matter who holds office since the real governors, they feel sure, are the lobbies of pressure groups which tell the officeholders, from the President and Congress down to the most humble bailiff, what is to be done, and when, to whom and not to whom.

The evident discrepancy between political theory and political action must alarm those who believe in our kind of democracy. The cultural indication is twofold. First, it would seem that most of us have such small respect for the body politic that we do not feel it worth while to bother about who are entrusted with the making or enforcement of the laws. Secondly, it reveals that a majority of us,

a constantly growing majority, is willing to talk one way and act another, in respect to a basic human activity like government, with a nonchalance that is not even cynical.

Another index not to be ignored is the degree to which residence is stable or otherwise. If families frequently move about, there are soon too little of those mutual connections which come from neighborly interrelationships.

What is a civilized man? By derivation of the word, he is one who lives and thinks in a city. The Greek city, the medieval city, the American city as it was before industrialization brought about huge agglomerations of urban population, was a community, a constant group of families each of which, and each of whose members, had a stake in the common welfare and was not permitted to forget it. Such a city was large enough for reasonable self-expression but small enough for public influence on behavior. One had not merely to obey the statute law or go to jail, but also the customs, the unwritten law, or be sent to Coventry. For a city to function, its population has to be not too great, and stable from year to year, if possible from generation to generation.

The late W. N. Guthrie used to say there was no civilized man or woman in New York City who had not been civilized somewhere else, in a small town on the plains, in the ghetto in Warsaw, on a southern plantation, somewhere like that. New York, he maintained, could civilize nobody for, while in that megalopolis there is opportunity to express oneself all over the map, there is next to no neighborhood opinion to exercise correction. There are, in fact, no neighborhoods, only frequently migrating human units, anarchs, so lonely that

they will gladly follow any demagogic quack who pretends to be friendly. This was exaggeration, but not greatly so. With us the *mores* are no longer determined by mutual consent among friends. They are built up mechanically and anonymously; and because they are what they are, they no longer help as of yore. We still more or less obey statute law; we pay little heed to unwritten customs of mutual dignity, or even of decency. This is now true not only in such monstrosities as New York or Chicago or Detroit or Los Angeles or Houston but in much smaller places. Thanks to the frequent migration of vast segments of our people, all our cities have ceased to civilize, have ceased to be communities.

In such a situation it is not unnatural that individuals should live more and more each for self, with less and less consideration for the comfort, even for the safety, of the people next door or the family over the way. One does not know their names. Why bother to learn? They will soon be moving, or one will move oneself. After years of this there remains in America little regard for the rights of others to privacy or peace. Let the radio blast. Let the children yell. Throw the rubbish where you will. The sanctity of property, either communal or personal, becomes nobody's proper concern. In New York City, for example, children in 1951 caused wanton damage to school property—windows, fences, tile, furniture, equipment, works of art—which it cost the taxpayers over \$500,000 to replace.<sup>2</sup> Such vandalism is matched, in proportion to population, in hundreds of other municipalities. As for private property other than one's own, litter it, maul and deface it, walk off with it, make it necessary for the owners to keep it under

lock and key; while open lawns and flower beds have become a nostalgic memory for many who once lived in a civilized fashion.

No such degeneration could happen if we were not a restlessly migratory folk. This index reveals a fundamental weakness in our way of life, one which cannot be ignored.

It does not seem too necessary further to conduct a guided tour into American culture. The indexes are at hand for anyone to use. It is only necessary to insist that they must not be disregarded by him who would see what our way of life is actually like. Let us not make the mistake of supposing that American culture of today is the culture of America a hundred years ago or fifty or twenty or ten. Nor is it the culture of the few which matters. It is the culture of the many that is American culture. This is the age of the Common Man. We may admire him as the only true gentleman or reject him as a stupid bounder or, with greater justice, look on him as one whose economic emancipation has gone on faster than he has been able constructively to assimilate it. However we regard him, we must know him for what he is. This is where the indexes help. What the Common Man's culture is worth, is another question.

What opinion of all this is held today by the small but growing critical minority of whom we were speaking at the beginning of this chapter? That minority is fairly well persuaded that no culture such as the indexes reveal will produce the kind of men and women who can long keep our people happy or our country competent to survive in the world as it is coming to be.

The first thing that strikes this critical minority, as it looks at the whole cultural picture, is that ours is a nation of new-rich people, well washed, all dressed up, rather pathetically unsure just what it is washed and dressed up for; a nation convinced that a multitude of material goods, standardized, furiously and expensively advertised by appeals to greed and vanity, will in themselves make life worth the living. Because we are new-rich, we overvalue possessions. Almost any individual who makes a great deal of money very rapidly supposes that mere possession of wealth is evidence of worth. He also is apt to imagine that with his means he can buy happiness. These mistakes usually seem folly to the old-rich, to one who was born to property, whose father and mother were bred with it. Such a one knows that merely because he or his friends have it, is no sign that they are worth it, but quite commonly the contrary. He has learned through experience that money is not in itself very valuable stuff. Happiness, which is what all men desire, cannot be purchased; it is an illusive something not for sale. The old-rich know these things well enough, but the new-rich rarely discover them until they too have grown accustomed to possessions. So it seems to be with our society. We go in, almost without question and in all classes, for the sordid nonsense of supposing that externalities possessed ennoble the owners, that a full fist invariably indicates a fine spirit.

The second conviction on which our culture is based seems to be this, that animal appetites are mighty and to be sacrificed unto if we would enjoy a satisfactory existence; and the chief of all the appetites is sex. Our stage, our music, our dancing, our books and magazines, our advertising, our dress, strike

strenuously an exaggerated note of sex appeal. We have even devised a popular moral philosophy based upon the supposition that, if one refuses to indulge sexual appetites, he or she is in danger of the madhouse. No reputable psychiatrist gives such advice to his clients; but we go for our psychology not to him but to the editor of the tabloid newspaper. No one will deny that sex is important; but it is not so centrally important as most of us seem to suppose. Man is a sexual animal; but he is a great deal more than that.

Our culture, in the third place, seems based upon a conviction that to be comfortable is utterly indispensable if man is to fulfill his destiny. It occurs only to exceptional people that the whole cult of comfort is petty, ignoble, unworthy of human nature, absurd. All too few ask whether it can possibly be that, since our primeval ancestors crawled from the slime of the sea, first the animal world and then the human race have struggled on, at cost of travail and pain and tears and death, merely that modern man may sit down and be comfortable.

The fourth impulse back of our cultural endeavors and achievements seems to be a ridiculous notion that whether a man be good or bad, wise or foolish, matters less than that he should conform to pattern. The pattern to which we are expected to conform is that set by the overgrown and depersonalized megalopolis. We shall say more later on about the growth of this conformity. And fifth, our crowd-mindedness renders us suggestible, manipulatable, easy meat for almost any propagandist who is willing to flatter, to encourage animality, to promise ease and opulence with a minimum of labor expended to get them, and freedom from responsibility.

“Well, what of it?” someone asks. “If the culture we have is the culture we like, then it is what we like. Where is the harm as long as we approve of ourselves, which we most certainly do? And are not the other nations envious of us for the very things your critical minority calls our defects?” A word or two about each of these questions may be in order.

Do other peoples envy us? The answer, as may be discovered by any open-minded traveler, is that they have little or no desire to become like us in anything except technological know-how. They usually regard us otherwise with condescension mixed with dread that somehow or other we may overthrow what they regard as a better way of life and degrade them to our cultural level. This is no exaggeration. Not only is it so in Western Europe; it is the mood in Russia, in most of Asia and the Near East, in Latin America from the Rio Grande to Cape Horn. They look on our concern for size, speed, new models every year, as more than a little childish. They consider our effulgent and stentorian advertising both wasteful and ridiculous. They know too much about our restlessness. They see how our very mass production is preventing the joys of craftsmanship. They laugh at our hysterical enthusiasm for sports in which we take no part. They deplore our indifference to ideas and our disrespect for continuity and tradition. They sense in us tremendous power without our having any clear notion of what we desire to do with that power. They are afraid of us more than they admire us. They love us not. Is it conducive to a proper happiness or to our safety, that we should be held in such general disesteem?

“Where is the harm,” the other question puts it, “if what we are suits us?”

The harm lies in this, that down the ages no people whose compelling culture has been based on greed for goods, on avidity for sensation, on search for enervating comforts, on conformity to a type set by subhuman urbanization, on a divorcement of the people from the soil, on eager response to the flatteries of propagandists, ever has managed to exist very long. Our wrong emphases are acids which dissolve the social cements. Unsureness about what life is for eventually brings about ineffectiveness in all departments of living, after a while even in technological proficiency. Then, to cure an alarming disorder, in rides the Man on Horseback with plausible oversimplifications.

If we are to rescue America from Americans, we shall have to raise up a new generation which will live less immaturely. This can happen only if Demos recovers from his present self-applauding jamboree, only if once more he comes to know the comparative values of human living as the race has learned them down the millennia. As we stand revealed by candid examination of the indexes, our culture is childish. If we go on as we are, we shall not produce the kind of citizens necessary for America’s continued happiness or safety. We shall not bring forth “a type of man who sums up in his character a quality of understanding, of humility, of truth, of humor, or moral stature, of strength and resourcefulness of mind, of pregnant ideas, of universal sympathy and friendship and love.” If we and our children must live out our days in the sort of culture that the indexes indicate, can anything be done by us and for us in the

circumstances? If nothing can be done to arrest disintegration, then how can those of us live happily who know what it means to be effectively human?