Pursuit of Loneliness

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derived from and shaped by the dominant status of the past and the mass media: status control primarily because some of its ideals have been given to it a greater degree than one might expect—but the mass media is unsatisfactory. Having achieved the god (wealth, power, fame) America finds that something was still missing. Our national literature abounds with stories of the successful lawyer, politician, actor.

Slater's essay (divided into six chapters) on the breakdown of American culture is not so broad as I may have indicated—perhaps fortunately, since the complete context of a culture (its economic and political roots and consequences) is too complex a thing to explore conveniently in one book. Instead, he concentrates almost totally on one thrust of the American value system: individualism, materialism, and concomitant aspects of the economy and politics.

His point of departure is a rare assertion: that America has in fact pushed individualism too far. This seems to contradict the numerous social critics who have derided Americans for their conformity and sheeplike behavior, as a purely task-oriented nature of militant radicals. But while some compromises between the cultures are possible, "he compound structure of the Old Culture," the two books are highly complimentary. Slater deals with a few other American traits: e.g., violence, and what he calls the avoiding tendency . . . hide a problem and it goes away; run from it if you can't hide it. (He points out that America was built by "runaways" from all over the globe and wonders whether this might account for the apparent tendency Americans have for self-deception.)

Such are the outlines of Slater's diagnosis. His prognosis is more vague: the non-viability of the culture doesn't mean it can't persist in some form, reacting violently to irritants like the racial left and the blacks. Jack London saw nothing in the American character to preclude fascism, nor does Slater.

What of "New Culture"? Already, Slater notes, many of its manifestations (such as hair) are being co-opted wholesale; in the task-oriented nature of militant politics he sees a mirror image of the "Old Culture" achievement drive. But while some compromises between the cultures are possible, "he never or later a moral issue is at stake," and then it is war — of a sort. Charles Reich, in The Greening of America in the New Yorker put forth the concept of a "peaceful revolution," wherein, almost without knowing it, old culture adherents would absorb new culture values. Such is possible, though one might argue institutional structures will prevent it.

At this point, Slater leaves us, not with answers, but with further questions. What would a new culture do with human aggression in a allegedly non-competitive society? And, what of the New Left revolutions? If it is in its sort of revolution that takes place (in whatever future far or near), "Having made the world safe for the flower people will he be likely to relinquish it to them?"

English: Pursuit of Loneliness

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