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The Twilight of American Culture

by Morris Berman

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America is already past its most triumphant years. Not because of the attacks on September 11. Rather because American civilization is in its twilight phase, rapidly approaching a point of social and cultural bankruptcy.

In Morris Berman's view, at least, only casual observers can be taken in by the speed with which money and new enterprise circulate in America. Vigorous promotion of everything creates a society of "vital kitsch". America lives "in a collective adrenaline rush, a world of endless promotional/commercial bullshit that masks a deep systemic emptiness." Everything appears tremendously energetic and upbeat, but the energy is devoid of any purpose beyond the generation of that energy, the vitality celebrates nothing beyond buying and owning things. So "it is itself the cultural decline I am talking about".

The US has ways, both individually and culturally, of hiding from itself. Start with the belief that the country is the greatest and best. Go on to the love of "pap" and willingness to pay huge sums to hear that things are not really that bad in the first place and in the second that they can be quickly repaired. Then there are so many anodynes around, such as the constant outpouring of new technological toys.

Finally, the media is brilliantly adept at drowning the country in the kinds of spectacles that keep minds focused on the trivial and the sensational: O.J. Simpson's trial, Princess Di's death, Bill Clinton's sex life and CNN-style muzak.

The depressing facts are that the average American cannot spell, over 60% of adult Americans claim never to have read a book, 50% believe in UFOs, 42% cannot find Japan on a map. Deepak Chopra produces a wildly popular book encouraging Americans to "escape the prison of intellect, when most Americans have in fact never managed to find their way into this particular prison in the first place". Artists and thinkers are trapped in a society that celebrates ignorance: publishing is now little more than brand marketing. Books have been reduced to the level of "mental chewing gum". There is barely an empty space not already carrying commercial messages. "We live in a systematic suppression of silence".

There is more. The highest bastions of intellectual life have become infected with postmodernism, "a philosophy of despair masquerading as radical intellectual chic". Nothing thrives unless "inflated by hyperbole and gilded with a fine coat of fraud". There is no longer any ability to distinguish quality from garbage. Unable to think, America has become a nation where "hype is life". America's educational system "has become a gigantic dolt-manufacturing machine". Popular entertainment has been Rambofied and culture lobotomised. The gap between the rich and poor has never been greater. America's long-term willingness to pay for basic social programs is increasingly in question. The takeover of America's spiritual life by corporate/consumer values is nearly complete. An economic superstar, the United States is, in reality, a cultural shambles, an "empire wilderness"

Berman offers compelling descriptions of falling productivity, apathy, cynicism and overwhelming spiritual anomie which, in his view, herald the coming of a new dark age: “It doesn’t take an Emerson or an Einstein to recognise that the system has lost its moorings and ...(is becoming) increasingly dysfunctional”.

Worse, the privileged class tries to co-opt the challenges by incorporating the rhetoric of the discontented – ecology, multiculturalism, women’s rights – so as to give the illusion that serious changes are under way, when in fact the essential relations of wealth and power remain the same.

Such an analysis bodes ill not just for the United States but for the whole world, because the American transformation is part of a broader global transformation.

What solution does Berman have? Analysing the constraints on human social systems, Berman is sceptical of the human capacity to make wise collective decisions. He thinks that we can address the challenges of a corporate globalised McWorld only by urging scholarly-minded individuals to focus on preserving knowledge to keep alive the possibility of a cultural renewal, making comparisons to the monks of the Dark Ages who preserved the knowledge acquired by the Romans and Greeks while 600 years of plague and disintegration took place outside the monasteries.

However, Berman's “monks” will be committed to the avoidance of groupthink, whether provided by corporations or by the anti-consumer counter-culture. They will not pursue their activities for grand, heroic outcomes, but for the sense of worth and

meaning that the activities themselves contain. "The work may lead somewhere; it may not. Our job is only to give it our best shot".

Such an approach will undoubtedly appeal to some, but Berman does not seem to recognise that radically individualist cultivation of ideas for their own sake is quite different from a mutually supporting community working for love, peace and justice. He does not wish to reject group or institutional solutions out of hand, but he has obviously not come across any that make sense to him. He can therefore only retreat to the non-structural solution of a merely individual preoccupation with quality. It remains fashionable in America to propound individualist solutions even for structural problems.

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