

Utopia Deferred?
Individualism & Patronage in America

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I. Introduction

I stand before you as a British Social Anthropologist who has turned his attention away from those so-called “primitive” societies that occupied so many of my predecessors in the 19th and 20th Centuries, to reflect on the United States of America. My focus tonight is on the contradiction between an entrepreneurial spirit of innovation and the enervating influence of institutional power-blocs - the gap between myth and reality - reflecting on that that means for the American polity.

This could, of course, be misconstrued as an act of atavistic imperialism. Especially when I reveal that my first teacher at Cambridge – G. I. Jones –started in the Colonial Office, working as a District Officer in Eastern Nigeria. As a practicing anthropologist at Cambridge he would periodically be called upon by our government to return to the colonies to help them cope with the natives who were becoming unduly restive.

There is, of course, no comparison with my own endeavours. It is true, though, that in collecting material for my ethnographic study of the USA, I found examples of that old tension between the Mother Country and her Colony. A particular favourite is this exchange following the presidential election crisis of 2000. It started with a *Notice of Revocation of Independence* that appeared on the internet, addressed to the citizens of the USA:

In light of your failure to elect anybody as President and thus to govern yourselves and the free world, we hereby give notice of the revocation of your independence. Her Sovereign Majesty Queen Elizabeth II resumes monarchical duties over all states, commonwealths and other territories. Tax collectors from Her Majesty’s Government will be with you shortly to ensure the acquisition of all revenues due ... backdated to 1776.

A retaliatory strike arrived almost immediately, with a declaration annexing the British Isles to the US:

In light of your indecision over joining a common European currency, your dissatisfaction with the European Union, your bickering with European Governments and the fact that you already almost speak our language and refuse to speak any other, you are to be annexed as a State of America. Your state code will be GB. Zip codes will be assigned to replace your old postal districts. The state capital will be Stratford-upon-Avon which is a lot prettier than London.

Now, as every anthropologist knows, there are hidden and uncomfortable truths lurking behind every joking relationship, and the fact that I'm starting in this manner betrays the fact that I have some concerns that my talk will be received in the wrong spirit. It might have been a mistake to call a book about America *The Cracked Bell* – this has led one neo-conservative friend to accuse me of writing “anti-American stuff”. But there isn't an anti-American bone in my body.

2. Preamble

The great American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz has written that “one of the advantages of anthropology as a scholarly enterprise is that no one, including its practitioners, quite knows exactly what it is.” We suffer from an identity crisis, struggling to say how we differ from sociology, psychology, history, political science, and philosophy. But what appears to be unique about the discipline is **ethnographic fieldwork**, where we attempt to gain a holistic, humanistic, qualitative understanding of society and culture, and then share that understanding with others. It should be dispassionate and the anthropologist must approach his subject with humility, because ultimately we are trying to make sense of our wider humanity.

The Cracked Bell aims to provide an impressionist portrait of contemporary USA - the word *Zeitgeist* doesn't feature in the book, but the idea of capturing the spirit of the age is fitting. But I approached my subject as a Social Anthropologist, arriving as an outsider to spend time living, working, looking, listening, questioning, and reflecting on American society in an attempt to make sense of it.

It is, of course, reckless and challenging to apply this approach to a country as large and complex as the United States. Instead of a village of 300 people, I chose a nation of 300 million; instead of conducting “micro-sociology” in a relatively homogeneous unit like a tribe, I have attempted to embrace a multi-faceted and

almost infinitely variegated nation in the belief that it is possible to talk about America possessing a distinctive cultural identity.

But I am not the first to do so. The inspiration for conducting my research came from reading *The Americans* by Geoffrey Gorer, published in 1948. Gorer belonged to a remarkable movement associated with Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, who started a programme at Columbia University in 1947 called “Research in Contemporary Cultures”. More than 120 scholars came together to discuss cultures as diverse as Syria, France, Japan, Great Britain and the United States; this group sprang in turn from an initiative supported by the Office of Naval Research to contribute to cultural understanding in order to meet the crisis of World War II. This American movement, dating back seventy years, was at the forefront of the shift in anthropology from a focus on so-called primitive societies to the study of the West.

Gorer's endeavour particularly appealed to me because of the parallels in his story and my own. Here was a British anthropologist who had conducted his doctoral research among Tantric Buddhists in the Himalayas; and who had then taken up a war-time posting to the British Embassy in Washington DC, using this as an opportunity to reflect on the American character. I too had worked as an anthropologist in the Himalayas, studying the Tantric Buddhist Newars of Nepal; and now I was taking up a post in the British mission on Massachusetts Avenue at a time when the capital city felt and behaved as if it was on a war-time footing. As these links in the chain were revealed, I felt inspired and compelled to follow Gorer's example and his commitment to helping the world comprehend the United States.

My Findings

So the research that led to *The Cracked Bell* originated in a wish to create a dispassionate, objective view of contemporary USA. I discovered a society filled with conflict and contradiction – the “Unsettled States of America”; and my attention was drawn to seven varieties of paradox:

- **Identity.** The riddle of *e pluribus unum* ("Out of the Many, One") where the myth of the liberated citizen of the republic clashes with the reality of social (especially racial) divisions.

- **Consumerism.** The mystery of American commerce, where God and Mammon have united in a Temple of Trade.
- **Belief.** "Culture War" between creeds, signifying a confusion of ideas and images about sacred and profane, ancient and modern, Good and Evil.
- **Frontiers.** An illusion of wilderness in a tamed landscape, sustaining the eternal search for new frontiers.
- **War.** The paradox of a peace-loving warrior-state marshalling massive forces to defend freedom.
- **Justice.** The conundrum of "liberty under the law", spawning conformity, intolerance and an austere attitude to crime and punishment.
- **Power.** The contradiction between an entrepreneurial spirit of innovation and the enervating influence of institutional power-blocs.

You can see a more detailed reflection on consumerism and justice in the paper given at the Elliott School at GWU last night, which will be posted on the website www.thecrackedbell.com

There are, I recognise, many explanations for the cultural dissonance encountered in my research. But as I explored these contradictions in greater detail I discovered a common denominator: the ideal of **freedom** appeared as a unifying feature behind all of these paradoxes. Today, the idea of Liberty has acquired such totemic power in America, it feels taboo to question its enduring value. But if there is an underlying challenge in this essay, it is this: has the dominant ideal of liberty in the USA expanded to the point where it is undermining the society that it defines?

According to poll data, "Personal Freedom" - the opportunity to make one's own choices and priorities in life - features second only to religion as the overriding personal value in America. Freedom is expressed in the most commonplace of objects: the 1 cent coin bears the word in large letters. The greatest national icons are, of course, the Statue of Liberty and that Bell with its inscription from Leviticus. The "Charters of Freedom" (Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, its

Amendments, and the Bill of Rights), are enshrined in the Rotunda of the National Archives and have an emblematic or totemic status. The documents are barely legible, but the faded script on fragile parchment has the symbolic allure of Holy Relics. Visitors walk reverentially past dim-lit cabinets containing the documents, pressing their noses to the armour-plated glass to pay their respects; and this shrine plays its part in the theatre of democratic governance, as when, in May 2009, President Obama stood before the charters when describing the values that underpin his foreign and national security policies.

The remarkable evolution of the ideas underpinning America's dominant focus on freedom has been charted by Michael Kammen (*Spheres of Liberty*) and by Yehoshua Arieli (*Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*). Arieli has described the development in America of a distinctive attitude towards the individual and the community. There was a belief from the early days of the Republic in the merits of *laissez faire* - that slogan of economic liberalism which champions private initiative and production over state interference and taxation. The phrase was introduced into the English language by Benjamin Franklin and George Whatley in *Principles of Trade* (1774), and *laissez faire* sentiment shines out from the writings of Crèvecoeur, who argued that the United States had become the most perfect society in the world [in his Letter entitled "What Is An American" (1782)]:

We are all animated with the spirit of industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself. ... Here man is free as he ought to be.

The view took root that *laissez faire* would dissolve economic, social, and political privileges, leading to the liberation of human activities in a free society where there was equal opportunity for all. As the 19th Century progressed, the British philosopher Herbert Spencer was held in special esteem by many Americans, since his strain of what some call Social Darwinism appealed to those promoting freedom of the individual.

The Entrepreneur and Inventor

In a nation whose roots rest in revolution, the word "New" carries immense symbolic freight, and the idea is inextricably linked to freedom. New art and new music make liberty manifest in the Land of the Free; spiritual salvation is defined as being Born-

Again; and innovation is used indiscriminately to raise foot-fall in the malls. It may be an oxymoron to refer to a tradition of innovation, but the USA has it. Images of invention, creativity, "the latest fashion", "ground-breaking design", and "continuous improvement" are woven into the cultural fabric. This tradition is symbolized in the "Great Seal" – dating back to 1782 - that appears on every dollar bill: its Latin inscription speaks of "A New Order of the Ages", and its image of an unfinished pyramid is said by the U.S. Department of Treasury to signify that the USA will always grow, improve and build.

European observers have emphasized this feature of the American spirit for many years. For Geoffrey Gorer, American society is endlessly ingenious in transforming things to our use, enjoyment and profit. He, in turn, echoed the observations of Tocqueville who had written, a century earlier that Americans think about nothing but ways of changing their lot and bettering it. Most recently, Harold Evans has written what amounts to a hagiography, celebrating the adaptive genius of Americans as "inventiveness put to use". He starts with John Fitch (steamboat) and ends with Page and Brin (Google); and along the way, we encounter such luminaries as Eli Whitney (cotton gin), Sam Colt (pistol), Cyrus McCormick (mechanical reaper), the Wright brothers (airplane), Henry Ford (car), and Philo T. Farnsworth (TV).

But it is Thomas Edison in particular who has attained mythical standing in the nation, upheld as the archetype of America's spirit of innovation. He was granted 1,093 patents in his life-time, and also patented a number of memorable quotations including the oft-cited line that "genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." His can-do ethos was exemplified in his words to employees working on developing the electric light bulb: "The trouble with other inventors is that they try a few things and they quit. I never quit until I get what I want."

Today, Edison's papers have been methodically catalogued and preserved by Rutgers University. There are also shrines to his memory at the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, New Jersey; the Edison Winter Home in Fort Myers, Florida; the Edison Birthplace Museum in Milan, Ohio; and the Thomas Edison House in Louisville, Kentucky. A recent biography produced for American school-children describes him as the greatest inventor in American history:

Edison amazed people with the first practical electric light-bulb. The phonograph was another of his successes. He invented a movie camera

and projector, and was one of the first people to produce movies. Edison also did much more. He invented the business of inventing. He brought together teams of scientists and engineers. He used them to solve problems [and] in doing so, Edison introduced the idea of the modern research laboratory, which many companies use today.

It is indeed the case today that most innovations registered as patents are corporate, generated by companies, universities, and government departments rather than by individual inventors (although individual creativity combined with great team-work still underpins the process). The records of the US Patent Office for 2006 are typical in showing that only 15,247 patents - out of 102,343 - went to independent American inventors. The US Government regularly features in the Top Ten of American organizations registering new patents; in 2005 it received 696 utility patents, ranking it eighth in the table behind corporations like Micron, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Microsoft, and Texas Instruments; these companies embody a tradition of corporate Research and Development, dating back to the creation of DuPont and Kodak Research Laboratories in 1911.

America also celebrates the entrepreneur - that player on the economic stage regarded by Joseph Schumpeter as an inherent revolutionary, destroying old, traditional social structures. "The USA is entrepreneurial heaven," President George W. Bush asserted in February 2007. "A great place to take risks and realize your dreams". Government statistics show that about 10% of the U.S. workforce owns a business. This in itself is not significant: agricultural societies in the Old and New Worlds (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, New Zealand, Ireland) have higher rates of self-employment, reaching up to almost 20%. But a striking feature of the American Way is the generation of new business. In 1996-2005, for instance, new businesses were launched by an average of 437,000 people a month.

It is interesting to note the entrepreneurial bias in the migrant community - inspired by the American Dream. The Current Population Survey shows that in 2005, 350 out of every 100,000 immigrants started a business each month compared to 280 out of 100,000 native-born Americans. More detailed research has shown that in a quarter of all technology and engineering companies started in the United States from 1995 to 2005, at least one key founder was foreign-born - most from India, United Kingdom, China, Taiwan, Japan and Germany. Nationwide, these companies produced \$52 billion in sales and employed 450,000 workers in 2005.

But we now need to stand back before this paper becomes little more than a hymn of praise to the American Way. Innovation may have been institutionalized, but there is surely some disconnection between the independent inventor or entrepreneur and the corporate business enterprise. The instincts of the first are revolutionary; those of the latter are conservative. Any corporation must inevitably be drawn into the process of legitimizing, promoting and preserving its interests, and this leads it to seek to influence channels of political power. It was, indeed, President Bush himself who flagged up - in that talk about entrepreneurial heaven - that all wasn't sweetness and light in Paradise. While he praised the spirit of American innovation, he also launched a passionate condemnation of its nemesis: the practice of "pork-barrel politics" - where legislators appropriate federal funds to benefit vested interests.

We must move away, then, from the Utopian vision of a New Order, to explore the world of power and politics before reflecting on the implications, for America, of the distance between the two.

Power-Blocs

Power has been described as the transformative capacity of people to change their social and material world. It is rarely, if ever, the property of an individual: it corresponds to our ability to act in concert – to channel Social Capital to bring benefits to a minority.

The gang represents one example of Social Capital at work in 21st Century America, deriving its authority from a combination of physical and symbolic force. There are over 30,500 gangs nationwide, with 800,000 members or more, and in studies like *A Rainbow of Gangs* by James Diego Vigil, anthropologists have sought to understand their internal dynamics, where deep insecurity drives a young underclass to join these groups where they gain status for themselves.

Then - at the other end of the social spectrum - there are the college-based Honor - or "Greek" - and secret societies. Membership of Honor Societies is said to represent [according to "Greek Life", found on the web-site of the University of California]:

- 3% of the US population;
- 30% of Fortune 500 executives;

- 30% of Congressmen and women;
- 40% of all US Supreme Court Justices;
- 42% of all Senators;
- 48% of all US Presidents.

Other societies have gained a particular reputation for secrecy. Examples include Yale's Skull & Bones, The Seven Society at the University of Virginia; Spades (in Auburn University, Alabama); Order of the Bull's Blood (Rutgers, New Jersey), Mystical Seven Society (Wesleyan University, Connecticut), Burning Spear (Florida State University, FSU), and Machine (at the University of Alabama).

Periodically I was told, even by rational public servants, lawyers or financiers, that a certain individual has gained preference and advancement through affiliation to a secret society, and there are numerous examples - in books, on air, and in OpEd commentaries - of these fears being voiced. Let me be clear, I am not advancing these conspiracy theories myself. What is important from an ethnographic point-of-view is that the suspicion exists, casting light on levels of mistrust and insecurity at work in society.

For Artevia Wilborn, writing in 2006, these societies fight to control the political makeup of their universities in pursuit of power, with the networks continuing to operate in the arena of adult politics: "[L]ike the members of Skull and Bones," she writes, "these secret societies members on public university campuses go on to powerful positions in local, state, and federal government, they become successful business men, and continue the ever connecting web of power."

In this vision, secret societies become a nursery for power-brokers preparing for a life of political machinations in the country at large, being described by one commentator as "hotbeds of future success." This reinforces a deep antipathy towards "big" government that is already well-embedded in the country.

The Pew Research Center found that in 2007 only a third of Americans agreed with the statement "Most elected officials care what people like me think". There is a popular mythical image of the Executive as a sinister machine spying on its own citizens to advance the interests of a powerful and shadowy cabal. Hollywood has regularly tapped into this vein, with films like *All the President's Men* (1976), *The*

Bourne Ultimatum (2007), and *Enemy of the State* (1998) - with its tagline "It's not paranoia if they really are after you!"

Anthropologists can, of course, contribute to this paranoia. In a book entitled *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*, (New York, Basic Books 2009), Janine R. Wedel examines a social networking phenomenon that she terms "flex nets". The author's concern is with private companies undertaking work on behalf of government - IT and data management, conduct of military operations, and drafting of official documents. This has created ambiguous, shadowy organizations that are, she claims "reminiscent of the unaccountable parts of governments observed in transitional Eastern Europe". She has written in a separate essay:

By controlling policy agendas through their not-quite-state, not-quite-private activities, while making new rules in pursuit of their own interests, the Neocon core has demonstrated the potential of flex nets to concentrate and perhaps even expand unaccountable state power. ... [T]he group has demonstrated the potential of flex nets to short-circuit the rules of accountability and to undermine democratic institutions." (288)

There is, of course, a long-standing opposition to "Big Government" by self-styled champions of freedom and the individual. For Llewellyn H. Rockwell Jr. (President of the Mises Institute), writing in June 2005, it is a profound political paradox that the US government has become "larger, more consolidated, more powerful, and more intrusive than it has ever been in its history". Now we have the Tea Party Movement, spearheading a nation-wide outcry against excessive government spending and taxation.

This isn't new. "With practically no exceptions," Geoffrey Gorer observed in the 1940s, "Americans regard their own government as alien; they do not identify with it, do not consider themselves involved in its actions, feel free to criticize and despise it."

In recent years, as many of you will be aware, a school of political science has emerged to explain why government decisions are so often so unsatisfactory. The New Institutionalists argue that public bureaucracy is destined and designed to be ineffective, given the nature of the American democratic process. Interest groups are

out for themselves, and legislators have electoral incentives to do their bidding, according to Terry Moe, Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota.

But alongside the ineptitude of bureaucracies, there is the potentially corrupting influence of patronage. It may be impossible to prove the truth behind all the conspiracy theories, but the dominant place that patronage holds on America's political stage is incontrovertible.

Patronage and Corruption

Anthropologists are familiar with societies - such as those of the Mediterranean - where patron-client relationships underpin political structures (see references to Blok, Campbell, Gellner and Gupta in the book-list). Those who enjoy power advance friends and supporters, partly to bring benefit to a mutual interest-group, partly to reward past favours, and partly to ensure access to trustworthy allies while navigating the treacherous waters of state-craft.

The surprise for me was to find patronage playing such an important role in the USA. It is found at all levels of polity: at the local level, city mayors and county executives will appoint citizens to serve on Boards Committees and Commissions. In Texas, for instance, the Governor is likely to make 3,000 appointments in the course of a four-year term. In California, the Governor's office issues periodic announcements of postings to such varied bodies as the California Air Resources Board, the Building Standards Commission, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing and even the Tehama District Fair Board of Directors. In 2006, President George had a larger, more elaborate court around him than that of King George in 1776; and this has not changed with Obama's arrival in the post. Some 9,000 Government appointments are made by the President. They are listed in the "Plum Book" - The United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions - which identifies all posts in the Federal Government that are subject to non-competitive appointments.

The "earmark" - vociferously condemned by George W. Bush in the speech referred to earlier - has become another emblem of political power-broking. At its crudest, a legislator intervenes in the process of distributing federal funds by shoe-horning money into projects that will promote either favoured interest groups or his personal standing within his constituency. There is no doubt that earmarks can be used for corrupt purposes: the case of Randy "Duke" Cunningham represents a blatant example. Cunningham represented California's 50th District (in San Diego) as a

Republican member of the House of Representatives from 1991 to 2005. He was also a member of the House Appropriations and Intelligence Committees. In March 2006, Cunningham was sentenced to over eight years in prison after he pleaded guilty to accepting at least \$2.4 million in bribes and multiple federal charges. A notable piece of evidence was the so called "bribery menu" where Cunningham had set out - on a sheet of Congressional stationary - how much he expected in kickbacks from his co-conspirators in the defence sector for earmarks pushed through Congress: he wanted a yacht worth \$140,000 for the first \$16 million in government contracts, and \$50,000 for each million thereafter.

The Office of Management and Budget tries to keep track of earmarks, maintaining a web-site that allows the "pork-barrel" element of Bills to be scrutinised. In 2005, for instance, 13,492 earmarks were registered in appropriations bills, totalling almost \$19 billion; according to Tom Gavin, a spokesman for the White House budget office, this had fallen to 9,192 earmarks totalling \$11.1 billion for 2010 (although "Taxpayers for Common Sense" assert that there has been some massaging of the figures, especially around subventions to the Army Corps of Engineers). A further 6,335 multi-year earmarks have been linked to Authorization Bills in recent years, amounting to over \$23 billion. Conservatively, the annual "pork-barrel" expenditure between 2000-2009 amounted to \$20bn.

The "lobbyist" plays a key role in the process of bargaining – or “pulling and hauling”- that takes place between interest groups and sources of power. Reference is often made to the “revolving door” between Capitol Hill, the Federal Triangle and K Street (where most lobbyists are located). There are more than 13,000 lobbyists work in Washington D.C., outnumbering law-makers 24-1; prominent interest groups involved in hiring their services include the National Rifle Association, the Petroleum Institute, the Aerospace Industries Association, the Association of Realtors, Health Insurance Plans, and the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

These organizations, and hundreds more, often have substantial resources at their disposal: in July 2005, for instance, the Center for Public Integrity reported that the pharmaceutical industry had spent \$800 million promoting its interests over the previous seven years (\$675m on lobbying; \$87m on campaign donations to federal candidates and political parties; and \$10m given to advocacy groups): during this same period, Congress and Government agencies are said to have weakened

federal oversight of the industry, strengthening patent protections, granting tax credits and generally protecting the industry's interests at home and abroad.

Public distaste for lobbyists is a manifestation of a broader disquiet about the potentially corrupting influence of "big business". There is a surprising antipathy to the establishment of business dynasties and the incorporation of wealth - as if this in itself represents an echo of the British aristocracy that America rejected at the time of the Revolution. Periodic scandals reinforce the point, and can be seen as a corruption of that American ideal of the inventive entrepreneur. Enron was voted "America's Most Innovative Company" by *Fortune* for six consecutive years, posting revenues of \$111 billion in 2000. It was declared bankrupt a year later, with its books reflecting systematic, institutionalized, and highly inventive fraud.

As early as the 1840s, Governor Shunk of Pennsylvania attacked "Corporations" for generating wealth by circumventing what he called "the American law of distributions"; to avoid the creation of an aristocracy, Shunk argued, the founders of the republic had abolished laws of primogeniture and entail, with all descendants receiving an equal portion of any inheritance. Corporations, much to his chagrin, had taken on the guise of artificial persons who never died, holding and accumulating property perpetually.

This antipathy to dynastic wealth is aired today by contemporary opinion-formers such as Irwin Stelzer (founder and president of National Economic Research Associates) who advocates a 100% inheritance tax: if you believe in affirmative action, he says, you should level the playing field by ensuring that everyone starts from the same line. And Warren Buffett, chairman of Berkshire Hathaway and the second richest man in the world, has memorably argued that the elimination of estate tax leads to the command of the country's resources passing to people who didn't earn anything: "It's like choosing the 2020 Olympic team by picking the children of all the winners at the 2000 Games," he has said.

The sense of disquiet about the impact this has on social mobility has been voiced most recently by Nicholas D. Kristof in the *New York Times* - published on 17 November 2010 under the headline "A Hedge Fund Republic?" He likens inequality in the United States that in Argentina six decades ago, with 1 percent of the population controlling 24 percent of American income. He also argues that the top 1

percent of Americans owns 34 percent of America's private net worth, whereas the bottom 90 percent owns just 29 percent. He concludes:

One of America's greatest features has been its economic mobility, in contrast to Europe's class system. This mobility may explain why many working-class Americans oppose inheritance taxes and high marginal tax rates. But researchers find that today this rags-to-riches intergenerational mobility is no more common in America than in Europe - and possibly less common. I'm appalled by our growing wealth gaps because in my travels I see what happens in dysfunctional countries where the rich just don't care about those below the decks. The result is nations without a social fabric or sense of national unity. Huge concentrations of wealth corrode the soul of any nation.

Following the recent credit crunch and ongoing debt crisis, there are new targets for public disquiet - notably the finance houses of Wall Street and what is regarded as an unholy alliance that they have with Big Government. The TARP bail-out and the public ownership of financial institutions provide evidence for some that the American Dream is turning into a nightmare.

Concluding Remarks

Anyone who listens to the American nation at dialogue with itself will discern a tension between two systems. The lionization of the entrepreneur and inventor fits with a philosophy of individualism that was, in many ways, the basis of American political thought.

But resources and influence are transmitted along power-lines in the United States, no less than they were in the city-states of medieval Italy, the mud palaces of Yemen, and the commissariats of the Soviet Union. From an anthropological perspective, the rites of Phi Beta Kappa, the pork-barrel antics of Congress, the political patronage of the Plum Book, the extravagant hospitality of the lobbying industry, even the territorial gangs in Los Angeles, appear as familiar features of political practice found in many traditional societies – the shock is to find how prevalent these are in a modern 21st Century democracy.

Given the established creed of the American Way, there is a disconcerting disconnect between this passion for liberty, renewal and individualism and the political realities reflected in the formation of interest-groups, power-blocs and elites. This, I found, has created a sense of melancholy - of utopia deferred – that is now turning to anger in the rhetoric of Tea Party activists as they call for a second American Revolution.

An optimist might call for perspective, arguing that a revolutionary feature of American polity has been the democratization of power-blocs. Through voluntary associations, the many have a chance to enjoy benefits of privileged minorities. The levers of power aren't restricted to the princes, bishops, landed gentry or burghers of the Old World. There is a multiplicity of interest-groups - the farming lobby, the union, and the corporation; eco-warriors, gay rights activists and hunting enthusiasts - each there to argue, lobby, and sponsor those in authority to direct resources or policies in their favour.

This may be true, but I have to admit to feeling – as a dispassionate observer – rather less optimistic. The competing narratives of virtuous Innovator and vilified Power-Bloc reveal – for me - something profound about America's self-image, expressing an irreconcilable difference between the free individual and the wired elite. It seems a contradiction in terms, but I have reached the conclusion that the behaviour (real or imaginary) that is reviled by champions of freedom in America – the worst excesses of interest-groups and power-blocs, and the corrupting influence of secret societies – is amplified and reinforced by a cultural narrative that places such emphasis on liberty itself.

Sidney Hook put it this way in *The Paradoxes of Freedom* (1962):

“All too often the meaning and associations of the specific historical freedoms won by the American Revolution have become absorbed in the penumbral emotive overtones of the words, which then function as slogans and thus get in the way of clear thought. The term becomes a fetish, and is invoked by groups who want diametrically opposite things.”

We should not be surprised, then, that one group of ethnographers has chosen to describe contemporary USA as *The Insecure American*.

I am not the first Briton to explore these issues. Herbert Spencer - the poster-child of those 19th century advocates of freedom and individualism – shocked his supporters on his one visit to America. In an interview that appeared in the New York newspapers on the morning of October 20 1882, he argued that while the republican form of government was the highest form, it required the highest type of human nature – “a type,” he argued, “nowhere at present existing.” This led to the following exchange with his interviewer:

Q. But we thought, Mr Spencer, you were in favour of free government in the sense of relaxed restraints, and letting man and things very much alone – or what is called *laissez faire*?

A. That is a persistent misunderstanding of my opponents. Everywhere, along with the reprobation of government intrusion into various spheres where private activities should be left to themselves, **I have contended that in its special sphere, the maintenance of equitable relations among citizens, governmental action should be extended and elaborated.**

One hundred years later, a great American philosopher was still seeking to resolve this dilemma. In works like *A Theory of Justice*, *Political Liberalism* and *The Law of Peoples*, John Rawls has sought to construct a better balance between liberty, equality and justice. For Rawls, Justice is the first virtue of social institutions: a shared conception of justice establishes the bonds of civic friendship; and a public conception of justice constitutes the fundamental charter of a well-ordered society. Of course, he writes, “existing societies are seldom well-ordered in this sense, for what is just and unjust is usually in dispute. Men disagree about which principles should define the basic terms of their association.” This led him to develop the notion of “justice as fairness” - something that he also hoped could form the foundations of a “realistic utopia”.

There are no simple answers. British society is currently wrestling with its own questions of equity. Indeed, if I was to write an ethnographic monograph on the UK, I think its subtitle would be *The Afflictions of Fairness!* But I have surprised myself – as a lover of freedom – by wondering if the values of liberty that dominate the American

Way are generating conditions that undermine freedom: reinforcing the formation of elites and delivering forward propulsion to power-blocs. When selfishness and insecurity come together, the outcome is rarely benign.

So this is the question I leave you with. On the basis of what you have heard tonight, and on the basis of what you yourselves have observed, is America experiencing *utopia deferred*; is the nation descending into *dystopia*; or are there opportunities for creating some version of John Rawls' *realistic utopia*?

Tristram Riley-Smith

Presented to the Ash Center, Harvard Kennedy School

1 December 2010

Annex 1
Suggested Reading

Ackerman, Bruce (2010) *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic* Harvard University Press

Arieli, Yehoshua (1964) *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of the History of Liberty in America, Harvard University Press

Berger, Peter L. (1970) *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

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