AMERICAN SOCIAL TRENDS

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In this reading, the first of three to focus on social change, Charles L. Harper and Kevin T. Leicht address what they consider to be the most important social trends in the United States. Harper, professor of sociology at Creighton University, and Leicht, professor of sociology and Director of the Institute for Inequality Studies and Director of the Social Science Research Center at the University of Iowa, believe that we need to understand that social change occurs on various levels in society, including the micro and macro levels. In the selection below, Harper and Leicht focus primarily on the latter, social change that occurs on the macro level of society, by examining larger structural and cultural trends and countertrends in society.

You can think about social change in three ways. First, change can be significant social events, such as World War II, the assassination of President Kennedy, the suicide attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Persian Gulf War, or the breakup of the Soviet empire. Each of these events had an impact on change in contemporary America. Second, change can be macroscopic, or broad-scale social trends and cultural themes. These pervasive change processes enable you to see patterns and make more general sense out of particular historical events by revealing “underlying” patterns and directions. Third, change can occur in the spheres of social life that are closely connected to the lives of individuals, such as age groups, families, work settings, education, religion, and so on. In other words, this third perspective focuses on change in the population and social institutions.

Each of these perspectives on change has strengths and weaknesses. A focus on particular events is important but may suggest that social change is only the accumulation of particular events with no patterns or broader processes. Understanding large-scale social trends is important, but these trends by themselves tell you little about particular events or the everyday...
life encounters between individuals and social change. A focus on particular social institutions as settings for everyday life may do that, but in artificially separated “parts” that may not illuminate much about how you experience change as a whole person. A better focus would try to show the interconnections among events, broad social trends, and changing institutional settings for everyday life. . . .

A word about the time frame: We focus mainly on the recent past (from roughly 1950 to the present) because we wanted to emphasize a time period that would be familiar to you. But many of these changes—particularly the structural trends—are not unique to American society and have been taking place in many societies at least since the 1600s. You can see them as the most recent and peculiarly American manifestations of the social processes that have been a part of the emergence of contemporary urban industrial societies. We should warn you that as we come close to the present, the data about change become less clear-cut and its meaning more controversial.

Structural Trends

Structural trends have to do with changes in our relationships with other people in society and in the organizations and communities in which we participate. One trend is the growth in scale of social life. This means that people’s lives are increasingly connected with larger numbers of people in big structures, such as communities and organizations, that operate in a vast scale over large geographic areas. You can get a sense of this by comparing your life with the early life of your parents or grandparents. You probably live in a larger community, shop in larger stores for things provided by larger companies, attend larger schools, and visit or vacation over larger geographic areas than they did as young adults. Your life is certainly more regulated by a huge national government. You still live in the “small worlds” of friends and family, of course, but increasingly you have connections, direct and indirect, with anonymous people working in large organizations very distant from you.

To illustrate, consider what you are doing right now. We wrote what you are reading in Iowa and Nebraska, but it was manufactured and sold by a publishing company located in New Jersey (Prentice Hall), which is owned by a large multimedia company based in London that publishes educational books, fiction, bestsellers, and the Financial Times newspaper (Pearson). In your grandparents’ world most book companies were small independent publishers. This is but one example of the general growth in scale of our economic life. The growth in scale of social life can also be seen in the process of urbanization. Around 1900, about half of America lived in scattered small towns and rural areas. Now at least 70 percent of the population is concentrated in a handful of large urban areas that dominate the social, political, and economic life of the nation. Increasing scale means the existence and sometimes the absorption of small social systems within enormous larger ones.
A second closely related trend is the centralization of control (or power and authority, if you wish). Growth in size inevitably means the growing concentration of power to make important decisions in the hands of fewer people. You do have the freedom to make choices, but increasingly those choices are limited by the huge organizations that dominate our economic, political, and social life. They are not all-powerful, but our options about what to buy, where to work, what to do with our garbage, and how we relate to our neighbors, raise children, spend our leisure time, and get health care are increasingly controlled by large organizations remote from our everyday lives. As our example of the Prentice-Hall book-publishing company shows, the webs of organizations that control our lives are by no means easy to comprehend. “Large” no longer means that tens of thousands of employees work for highly visible companies in major cities in large office buildings. In many cases economic power is divorced from numbers of employees and fancy offices.

These trends have meant a growing participation in a common way of life in mass markets, mass media, and a mass electorate but a third trend related to these two is the increasing differentiation and specialization in social life. For example, we have not only the mass media, which assumes an undifferentiated “mass” of information consumers, but also highly specialized media, which target people with highly specialized and exotic tastes or interests. Consider, from the time that the printed matter available to most Americans was a local newspaper, a farmer’s almanac, and perhaps a Sears catalogue, the range of publications now available at the local urban bookstore or newsstand: publications for sky divers, joggers, weight lifters, vegetarians, occult religionists, survivalists, soldiers of fortune, and gourmet cooks as well as for those with an impressive variety of sexual appetites. Indeed, the variety of tastes and interests addressed by the highly specialized media is endless. The same argument can be made about the availability of highly differentiated social, religious, and recreational groups catering to specialized interests. You can also see this increasing differentiation in the realm of occupations. Where there used to be doctors, teachers, and engineers, now, increasingly, you have to know what kind of doctor, teacher, or engineer you are talking about.

Differentiation has meant that more social roles in everyday life are segmented and limited in scope: There are fewer more general, diffuse, and multifaceted roles. Perhaps such roles remain mainly in the realms of friendship, the family, and household do-it-yourselfers. Indeed, the joint trends of growth in scale and increasing differentiation probably mean that as persons we occupy increasingly narrow niches in an ever larger and more complex social system. Such differentiation (or demassification) of the media picked up velocity in the 1970s with different magazines, CD-ROMs, and cable television channels, all of which means that when people do meet face to face they may have less and less in common to talk about (Willis 1995:22).

A fourth trend is the growing interconnectedness and networked nature of social life. The importance of networks and webs of interactions has only become apparent since the middle of the 1980s. For much of the postwar era
(1950 to 1980 or so), social life was dominated by bureaucracies. A bureaucratic organization is a social system with a formal structure, clear lines of authority, and work roles that are designed for special purposes. Most people don’t like bureaucracies because they don’t recognize our individuality and treat us as numbers with cold, calculating efficiency. Yet this uncaring efficiency is precisely why they developed.

Many human interactions in modern life are still governed by bureaucracies. This is obvious if we compare the one-room schoolhouse from Harper’s parents’ era with a large suburban high school, where students and subjects are separated into different categories and everyone’s behavior, including the teacher’s, is regulated.

But since the 1980s, an interesting counterrtrend has emerged, a trend identified by the term network society (Castells 1996). Because of the Internet, cell phones, pagers, overnight package delivery, and standardized (and relatively cheap) computer software, social life increasingly is governed by webs of interaction that do not fit the description of a traditional bureaucracy. In place of a pyramid structure, narrowly defined roles, and extensive lines of authority running from the bottom of the organization to the top, decisions are made by teams of participants who collaborate on specific projects, often never meeting face to face, in environments where there are no clear “bosses” or “leaders.” The networking tools available allow for instant feedback on tasks performed in distant places around the world and also allow for extensive and direct surveillance of these activities.

Bureaucracies were created to deal with massive amounts of information and to take into account our relatively limited ability to store and use information. The hierarchy and specialized roles of bureaucratic organizations were designed to make sure that certain information was acted on immediately at the local level and that certain types of information were filtered upward to higher layers of the bureaucracy for action. The tools available in the network society automate many of these functions and eliminate many of the middle management jobs that were the staple of middle-class life. This leads us to a discussion of our next structural trend.

A fifth trend related to growth, diversity, and interconnectedness is the increase in technical complexity and sophistication. Technology is cultural in that it includes formulas for doing things related to manipulating our environment. But you can also view technology as the products of those formulas that in themselves are important and changing structural components of the environments in which we live, work, and communicate. That technology has become more complex and sophisticated needs no elaborate documentation; it is a part of the everyday life experience of most people. Consider American middle-class households—full of marvelous gadgets that may regulate temperature and humidity, wash and dry dishes and clothes, cook your food in minutes and tell you when it’s done, inform you by satellite newscast live from around the world, or warn you when burglars are about. They are “smart” devices that are efficient and productive until they break down, at which point we recognize how little we understand how such devices work— and then we call for “experts” to fix them. These experts are themselves
specialized: Some fix stoves, others TVs, and others only refrigerators or air conditioners.

Technological change has produced an increasing ability to convert environmental resources into a usable form, whether in terms of agricultural production, in industry, or in the production of energy. It means a growth in economic productive capacity. It means increasing control over the environment and an enhanced ability to store and control information. This is particularly evident in the advent of computers, which increasingly form the information matrix of society. The enhanced ability to move information and money (capital) around the world by electronic means has promoted economic integration of the nations of the world into a world market economy. For better or worse, Americans are no longer affected only by economic decisions made in New York and Chicago, but also by those made in Tokyo, Zurich, and Frankfurt.

But the true efficiency of modern technology is a complex and debatable issue. Discussions of the efficiency and cost effectiveness of advanced technology typically ignore some very real costs and consequences (which economists conveniently term "externalities"). This is particularly true when efficiency is defined in cost-accounting terms that do not include its larger economic, ecological, and social costs. American agriculture, for instance, is marvelously efficient in terms of per-acre yield. But if you factor in the costs of diesel fuel, fertilizer, pesticides, water, food processing, and transportation, it requires more than 9 calories of energy input to deliver 1 calorie of beef to your table, and even this figure doesn’t include the long-term costs of over-grazing fragile land or the health consequences of diets too rich in saturated fats (Worldwatch Institute 1994:39).

Consider another example: A nuclear power plant can produce a vast volume of kilowatt hours of energy. But it is not nearly as cost efficient when you consider the costs of the years of planning, regulation, and construction of plants as well as the costs of the disposal of nuclear wastes—not to mention the human, economic, and environmental carnage that happened at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union (the United States has had a number of near misses; Lenssen and Flavin 1996). Beyond hidden economic costs, an obvious long-range problem with complex technology is its ecological impact. Technical efficiency has given us increased productivity but also a decrease in the soil fertility in many areas, industrial pollution, acid rain, and the destruction or near destruction of many biological and natural resources.

In addition to hidden inefficiencies, modern social life requires that we manage risks (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992). More of the world’s people think about risks associated with modern social life. On one hand, certain dimensions of social life have become less risky; [recent] statistics point to longer life expectancy, more consumer choices, better and longer educations, and safer transportation, just to name a few. But our modern society creates new risks that were unimaginable in earlier times—nuclear and environmental disaster, engineering failures, natural disasters aggravated by human design failures, terrorism, new forms of crime, and new (and frightening) possibilities
for social control. The collective management of these risks occupies a good
deal of our time and energy whether we realize it or not (witness the grow­ing
employment and technological investments that go into providing secu­
rity at airports, metal detectors, security personnel, dogs that can sniff explo­sives and drugs, etc.).

The technologies at our disposal (especially cable TV and the Internet)
give the world’s difficulties an immediacy that would have been unimagin­able to either of your authors as they were growing up in the 1950s and 1970s. For many people, this information and the potential to act on it are a
form of liberation. Other observers are concerned that our personal worlds
are suffering from “technological overkill” and that we are literally “over our
heads” with information, choices, and decisions that intrude on our every­
day lives (Kegan 1994). Our technological sophistication (for good or ill)
has put us in contact with the immediate lives of others in distant parts of
the world in ways that would have been unthinkable to your parents (and
to us!).

None of these ideas about basic structural trends are really new, except
maybe some examples in the American context. In fact, classic sociological
thinkers around the turn of the twentieth century were concerned with them,
and we need to give them credit. Emile Durkheim (1893/1947) wrote exten­sively about the consequences of the “division of labor” (differentiation and
specialization) in urban industrial societies, and Max Weber (1921) wrote
about the process of bureaucratization and its problems. Ironically, as social crit­
ics of their times, they were concerned that such trends would erode local cul­ture and differences to produce a faceless “mass” of people with no local roots
or traditions. But today we think social critics worry more about excessive indi­
viduality, fragmentation of consciousness, and the fragmentation of culture as
the basis for civility (Bellah et aI. 1985; Willis 1995).

We think the important structural questions about social trends are not
whether diversity continues to exist (it does), or whether informal ties and
roots continue (they do), but rather whether the informal and traditional
lives of Americans are integrated in any meaningful way with the larger
structures of the society or whether the power and initiative to shape the
character of social life has passed decisively into the realm of distant,
large-scale organizations. Coleman (1982) has termed contemporary
America an “asymmetrical society” in which individuals become less and
less able to give direction to their lives, as “corporate actors” increasingly
gather resources and power which they devote to their own “care and
feeding.”

Changing Cultural Themes

You can’t really understand structural change without considering culture
as well. The distinction between structure and culture is important but dif­
ficult, since it is only a useful way to look at things, and every structural
trend has important cultural dimensions or themes. Cultural themes
(patterns of social attitudes, values, and beliefs) are more arguable than structural trends, since they are more subjective, variable, and unevenly shared among parts of the population. Whether you think particular culture themes are intensifying or getting weaker, there is always a “yes, but...” argument to be made. They also apply more specifically to the United States, unlike structural trends, which describe modernization processes in many societies. Even with these qualifications, different observers have drawn remarkably similar conclusions about some important themes in American culture (Bellah et al. 1985; Glock 1987; Hayes and Lipset 1993/1994; Inkeles 1979; Putnam 2000; Williams 1970; Yankelovich 1981). Some of these themes are simply the latest edition of historic American values, but others are of more recent vintage.

One cultural theme is growing cultural complexity and diversity itself, related to the growth of structural complexity mentioned earlier (e.g., in media sources, occupations). In postwar America there has been a proliferation of subcultures based on such diverse criteria as occupation, gender, ethnicity, age cohort, religion, and recreational pursuits. Thus, with varying degrees of coherence and visibility, there are distinctive cultural styles (“lifestyles”) among bikers, punkers, skinheads, yuppies, Baby Boomers, gays, and senior citizens. Cultural complexity was also amplified by increasing ethnic diversity resulting from the vast inflow of new immigrants, particularly from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

The United States was always diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and other cultural characteristics. But historically this cultural pluralism was opposed by powerful social and political pressures to incorporate or assimilate diverse cultural strands into a common American culture. The metaphor for the United States was that of the great melting pot, even though it was often an official ideal not always practiced. Public schools were viewed as instruments of national assimilation, and in the 1950s most churches sought to emphasize not so much their differences but their commitment to the common American version of the Judeo-Christian heritage (Herberg 1960). Even during the early days of the civil rights movement of the 1950s, the cultural agenda was to produce a “colorblind” society in which cultural (and economic) differences between African Americans and white Americans would vanish. In contrast, Canadians have historically been more willing than Americans to legitimate multiculturalism. The Canadian national metaphor was that of a mosaic rather than a melting pot (Lipset 1989).

A second, more recent cultural theme is an increasing toleration of cultural diversity (including multiculturalism, which is the opposite of assimilationist policies). After World War II, and particularly since the 1960s, Americans were increasingly willing to accept and tolerate diversity as legitimate. Even though no good historical data exist, it is significant that by 1989 one poll showed that only 51 percent of Americans endorsed the melting pot model of ethnic assimilation, less than Canadian levels of support (cited in Lipset 1989:187). The new streams of immigrants find increasing social support for the maintenance of ethnic enclave communities, and churches of all sorts are
more concerned with asserting their distinctiveness than demonstrating their ecumenical commonalities, as in the 1950s (Robbins and Anthony 1990).

Americans are increasingly willing to accept the legitimacy of behavioral and moral diversity (beyond ethnic multiculturalism). There is, for instance, greater support for premarital sexuality, for abortion, for women's involvement in the labor force and in the political process, for living as a single person, or for being married without having children (Thornton 1989; Yankelovich 1981). In 1924, researchers in "Middletown" (Muncie Indiana) found that 94 percent of the population agreed that Christianity was the one true religion. In a followup study in 1977, only 41 percent agreed that this was true (Caplow et al. 1982).

The trend toward greater tolerance is widespread and only partly explainable by the increasing average educational level in America. Surveys in the 1950s and the 1970s showed that not only has political tolerance increased in the country as a whole, but that even at similar levels of education there was more support for civil liberties than there was two decades earlier. Thus, 84 percent of the college graduates in 1973 were rated politically "more tolerant," compared to only 65 percent of this group in 1964 (Nunn et al. 1978). And while you would be hard pressed to argue that many forms of racial discrimination have declined, it is nonetheless true that public opinion polls have tracked a slow but steady decline in attitudinal prejudice (the belief that nonwhites are somehow inferior) among the vast majority of Americans since the 1940s (Farley 1988). In 1942, 66 percent of Americans in a national poll said that blacks and whites should attend separate schools; by 1985, only 7 percent did. In 1958, 56 percent of American Caucasians said that they would move if blacks lived next door; by 1990, only 8 percent said they would (Stanley and Niemi 1995:367).

You need to understand that pressures to conform and toleration of cultural diversity are not mutually exclusive. They have always been dual realities in the United States. Pressures to conform are still quite strong, and toleration has been less effective with racial cultural minority groups. Even so, we think that in the broadest sense pressures to tolerate cultural differences have become quite powerful and that what Americans hold culturally in common has become more ambiguous, more arguable, and less binding. Americans have shifted some distance from a common set of cultural standards toward a plurality of such standards. (For a different view, see Parrillo 1996.)

A third cultural theme is an increasing concern with individual self-gratification. In the 1970s, pollster Daniel Yankelovich observed that all national surveys showed an increase in preoccupation with the self. By the late 1970s, my firm's studies showed more than 7 out of 10 Americans (72 percent) spending a great deal of time thinking about themselves and their inner lives—this in a nation once notorious for its impatience with inwardness. The rage for self-fulfillment, our surveys indicated, had now spread to virtually the entire U.S. population. (1981:5)

Certainly this self-preoccupation is not all new. It is, rather, the old American value of individualism amplified and played in a new key. The American
Revolution asserted the priority of individual rights over the rights of groups and the state, rights most clearly articulated at that time by the English philosopher John Locke. The cultural values of Americans are today certainly more individualistic and egalitarian than those of most people in the world—moreso even than our Canadian cousins, whose nation was formed in part as a counteraction to the "egalitarian excesses" of the American Revolution (Lipset 1989). But American individualism and self-interest were historically tempered by other values (humanitarianism, social obligation, and compliance with established norms). The recent growing concern with the gratification of the self has been amplified by the widespread diffusion of the perspectives of humanistic psychology and the human potential movement during the 1960s. During the 1970s, many observers argued that individualism produced a more unrestrained self-concern. Christopher Lasch (1979) invented the term *culture of narcissism* in what was called the "me decade."

Ulrich Beck describes the increasing concern with individual self-gratification as *reflexive modernity* (Beck 1992). People around the world are, slowly but surely, increasingly free to pursue their own personal life agendas without the set of structural constraints that bind people to traditional social roles. People are increasingly aware of how others in distant places and cultures live, and they are connected via communications networks, international trade, and cultural exchanges with people whose ways of life they are free to adopt. This is a new dimension of self-gratification that goes beyond concerns about selfishness and antisocial behavior.

As with greater toleration of cultural diversity, many observers saw a dark side to amplified individualism and self-absorption. It was viewed as cutting people off from social support, leaving them often confused and lonely, sanctioning the most outrageous forms of personal greed, making them almost pathologically unable to engage in communal problem solving. When their self-preoccupation fails, they have a longing for community that cannot be fulfilled (Bellah et al. 1985; Derber 1996:9; Dolbreare and Hubbell 1996:12; Etzioni 1993; Putnam 1998; Slater 1976). Critics notwithstanding, probably most Americans continue to view modern individualism in a positive manner. In spite of misgivings, Yankelovich argued that this trend meant that "most Americans were involved in a project to prove that life can be more than a grim economic chore... (and) eager to give more meaning to their lives, to find fuller self expression and to add a touch of adventure and grace to their lives" (1981:5).

A fourth persisting cultural theme is a *belief in the effectiveness of scientific and empirical knowledge* (empirical rationality). Areas of social life governed by traditional knowledge continue to contract, while those governed by empirical, natural, rational, and technical knowledge expand (Glock 1987). Thus, for guidance about childbearing and family problems, we are more likely to turn to the empirical knowledge of child psychologists and family therapists. For economic and business decisions, we are less likely to use traditional wisdom and more likely to turn to those having empirical knowledge of the working of economic and organizational systems, such as investment counselors, economists, and trained managers. Public trust in science
and technology persists today but is probably lower than in the 1950s, when there was little recognition of their costs. Evidence from the 1980s and 1990s suggests that in spite of some awareness of problems caused by science and technology there still is a pervasive faith in science and technological fixes. Its influence persists, but Americans are deeply ambivalent about science (Olsen et al. 1992; Pion and Lipsey 1981:311).

The persistence of empirical rationality is related to secularization. Contrary to some predictions, religion and churches have certainly not withered away in America. But while the areas to which we apply scientific and naturalistic explanations have expanded, the areas to which supernatural explanations apply have contracted. Religion is increasingly a private affair and compartmentalized or set apart from public and community life (for example, from businesses and schools). While the privatization of religion is consistent with the growing cultural emphasis on individual self-development, at the same time there are powerful secularizing forces in public life (Robbins and Anthony 1990:11, 17; Roof and McKinnery 1987).

A fifth well-documented cultural theme is a pervasive decreasing trust in national leaders and social institutions. The decrease was particularly dramatic during the 1970s, when Americans became increasingly cynical about the credibility, competence, and honesty of the leaders of government, business, banks, religion, public schools, the media, and other institutions (Dolbeare and Hubbell 1996:49-51; Institute for Social Research 1979; Lipset and Schneider 1983; Pion and Lipsey 1981). It may be partly caused by critical media reporting of specific events (such as political, corporate, or military scandals or the outrageous behavior of leaders themselves). We think it also reflects a widespread belief that the interests of people are not being honestly or competently served by leaders and social institutions.

The intense public cynicism of recent decades might signify a full-blown "legitimacy crisis," a complete loss of faith in the credibility of the American system that may have drastic consequences (Dolbeare and Hubbell 1996; Phillips 1995). Other observers (Elshtain 1995; Goldfarb 1991) believe that cynicism itself is a social disease that promotes discord, silences dialogue, and fans the flames of mistrust in the public good. What do you think?

Let's summarize: We have discussed structural trends and cultural themes that are persistent but mutable. Taken together, they form two related dimensions of change that constitute a virtual definition of modernism or modernity in the United States.

Countertrends and Reactions to Modernity: Antimodernism and Postmodernism

For almost every trend and theme mentioned, we can easily identify countertrends and reactions, and often social movements seeking to promote more change, stop it, or to push things in the opposite direction. Abstractly, these are reactions to modernity. Consider: Along with the long-term growth of toleration of diversity and decline in prejudice that every public opinion
poll found in the last several decades, some see a resurgence of racism and ethnic discrimination in America. If overt racism and sexism have declined, institutional discrimination, the discriminatory outcomes in the way that many communities and organizations routinely work continue significantly (Massey 1990; Valdivieso and Davis 1988; Wilkinson 1995). Many racially controversial and highly publicized events suggest that racism continues, often in new and subtle forms. Think of the intense controversy and publicity surrounding the trials of O.J. Simpson and the police officers accused of beating Rodney King or (more recently) conflicts between police and ethnic communities in New York City.

*Symbolic* racism may play an increasing role. Public controversies about the “underclass,” crime, drugs, and public welfare are in part codes for racist attitudes and fears that cannot be openly stated. Americans support antidiscrimination laws, but public policies to address real inequalities and discrimination related to ethnic minorities, women, and gays, such as desegregation and affirmative action policies, are controversial, unpopular, and increasingly subject to political and legal challenges (Fineman 1991; Hancock et al. 1996; Leicht 1998; Puddington 1995; Steele 1990).

Since the early 1990s, the media publicized the existence and emergence of small but radical racist and anti-Semitic hate groups, such as neo-Nazis, skinheads, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Aryan Nation. By the mid-1990s, militias (often armed and dangerous) and common law courts had thoroughly rejected the laws and legitimacy of the modern American system. We emphasize that these are reactions to the pervasive structural trends and persisting cultural themes of modernity. They are reactions, for example, to the very real—but very incomplete—declines in intolerance and gains by cultural minorities in the United States. They are most intensely found among those who experience recent change in negative ways.

You can find similar cultural reactions and movements involved with the concentration of power, bureaucratization, the spread of the secular-scientific worldview, rampant individualism, and other features of modern life in America. Social movements react to modernity in American social life in two ways. Some seek to reaffirm past cultural traditions. Perhaps the most widespread and visible of such movements is the revitalization and growth of Christian fundamentalism from the late 1970s onward. A religious movement of vast popular appeal, the growing evangelical and fundamentalist churches sought to defend a traditional Christian view against the inroads of science, secularism, and modernity. It additionally sought to restore moral coherence and traditional values about family, sexuality, and civic life. (Ammerman 1987; Chalfant et al. 1994: chap. 7; Robbins and Anthony 1990; Wuthnow 1983).

Similarly, in a highly visible reaction, by the 1990s traditionalist scholars reacted to the diffusion of multiculturalism in higher education. They attacked (using the code words “politically correct”) those seeking to transform the traditional curriculum to address the needs and perspectives of women, minorities, and “non-Europeans” whose numbers had slowly increased in American higher education. Angry traditionalists found the mass
media attentive and made powerful allies among nonacademic political conservatives (Heller 1991; Stimson 1991).

There are reactions to extreme individualism and the growth in scale of social systems. In the mid-1990s, research by Robert Wuthnow (1994) found growing numbers of Americans who regularly participate in small groups. Four of ten Americans regularly participated in some kind of small group, such as Bible study groups, twelve-step groups, singles groups, book discussion clubs, sports or hobby groups, or political or civic groups. In such settings, people have found friends, received emotional support, overcome life-threatening addictions, or grown in their spirituality. They have, in other words, found community.

Other kinds of reactions seek not to restore tradition but to promote a new stage of cultural and social development beyond modernity. The New Age movement consists of diverse cultural groups that connect people interested in such things as greater “wholeness” and integrated lifestyles, attention to nonrational and inner experience, mysticism, astrology, spiritualism, reincarnation, cosmic consciousness, alternative healing and vegetarianism, ecology, and voluntary simplicity (Peters 1988; Schultz 1989). Perhaps no one accepts all of these ideas or practices, and few are aware of being a part of a cultural movement, but the ideas and themes of the New Age groups have been broadly influential. Some of their roots are in the counterculture of the 1960s, and their appeal is primarily among the middle classes. They reject or redefine aspects of modernity (the primacy of empirical rationality) but accept others (tolerance, the emphasis on self-development). By the 1990s, New Age themes were influencing the practice of religion in conventional religious denominations. But most important, New Agers celebrate the emergence of a new social and cultural pattern (or “new paradigm”) that is subtly but radically transforming and “resacralizing” the modern world (Ferguson 1980).

A similar intellectual movement more directly attacks modern society and culture. Postmodernism began among philosophers and literary critics after the 1960s and became a powerful theme among intellectuals (Foucault 1965; Baudrillard 1975; De Man 1979). Postmodernism shares some similarities with New Age spirituality but is more intellectual and political in its critique of modernism. It argues that modern technological society devitalizes life and robs humans of the subjective dimensions of experience found in myth, art, emotion, ritual, and community. Modernism is viewed as a seamless web in which capitalism, science, technology, and bureaucracy have become instruments of social control by elites. Modern societies are “objectively managed” through bureaucracy and the mass media, a process that represses and deforms the freedom, consciousness, and subjective life of persons. But recently the increasing difficulties of corporate elites in managing society, the growth of widespread alienation and cynicism about the system, and the revival of interest in fantasy and myth are recognized as signaling the decline of the modern system. In the emerging postmodern era, reality is being transformed so that people are reclaiming their subjective lives. In so doing, they are empowering themselves to live culture freely,
naturally, and artfully (Huyssen 1990; Murphy 1989). Some argue that this desire for free subjective experience will itself generate new forms of repression and consumerism as it is subverted by corporations and the electronic media (Phol 1981).

ENDNOTES

1 Sociologists distinguish among the concepts of social control, power, and authority, but those distinctions are not relevant to our concerns here.

REFERENCES


