

A Long Way From Home: Automatic Culture in Domestic and Civic Life

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“And, while he accumulates material wealth in his isolation, he thinks with satisfaction how mighty and secure he has become, because he is mad and cannot see that the more goods he accumulates, the deeper he sinks into suicidal impotence. The reason for this is that he has become accustomed to relying only on himself; he has split off from the whole and become an isolated unit; he has trained his soul not to rely on human help, not to believe in men and mankind, and only to worry that the wealth and privileges he has accumulated may get lost. Everywhere men today are turning scornfully away from the truth that the security of the individual cannot be achieved by his isolated efforts but only by mankind as a whole.”
Dostoyevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*

Introduction

On the very first day of the 1990s, a modern miracle occurred: a politician spoke the truth! Granted, the speaker was someone who less than two months previously had been a repressed dissident, a playwright and ex-prisoner. But in those remarkable events in which the iron curtain fell at the very end of the 1980s, Vaclav Havel suddenly found himself to be the President of Czechoslovakia. And in his New Year's address to the nation, he uttered the unspeakable: he told Czechs how bad things really were for them as the nation faced the new decade. Not only did he speak the obvious truth which everyone knew, but which had never been spoken with public sanction before: “The previous regime, armed with a proud and intolerant ideology, reduced people into the means of production...out of talented and responsible people,

ingeniously husbanding their land, it made cogs of some great, monstrous, thudding, smelly machine, with an unclear purpose. All it can do is, slowly but irresistibly, wear itself out, with all its cogs.” Though powerfully expressed, these words only made public what everyone already believed.

The deeper truth that Havel told was that of the spoiled moral environment, which had been brought about not just by the communist overlords, but by “all of us.” All politicians know how to point the finger elsewhere, but Havel insisted that the problem could only be addressed by also pointing the finger at “us” and at oneself:

“The worst of it is that we live in a spoiled moral environment. We have become morally ill because we are used to saying one thing and thinking another. We have learned not to believe in anything, not to care about each other, to worry only about ourselves. The concepts of love, friendship, mercy, humility or forgiveness have lost their depths and dimension, and for many of us they represent only some sort of psychological curiosity or they appear as long-lost wanderers from faraway times, somewhat ludicrous in the era of computers and spaceships...” Vaclav Havel, New Year’s Day Presidential Address, Prague, Jan. 1, 1990.

Havel’s words ring with clarity for Eastern Europe, but they also describe only too well the calamity of American materialism and its spoiled moral environment. In the 1980s Americans faced new problems of homelessness, as increasing numbers of poor people, including whole families and even employed workers, found that they could no longer pay the rent. While financial institutions soared and free-market economists praised the system, ever larger numbers of Americans were forced to give up what homes they had, to trade in domestic warmth for what public shelter they could find. That the most powerful nation in the world could

virtually ignore the problem at the federal level while wasting billions of dollars in inefficient or corrupt military procurements speaks of the spoiling of the American moral environment. But a far more insidious, if less obvious, homelessness was also underway throughout households and communities, a phenomenon which could be called *moral homelessness*.

A Gallop pole, published on the same day that Havel gave his speech, reported that about three-quarters of American adults expected their personal and family lives to become better by the year 2000, and to have better financial security and job situations. Almost as many (68%) anticipated more leisure and recreation time. From the point of view of “us,” the millennium looks bright to most Americans. Yet when the question shifts from “us” to “them,” the majority of Americans who anticipate better family lives (77%) also anticipates a worsening of the divorce rate (58%), unemployment (59%), and alcohol and drug abuse (58%).¹

One wonders how it is that 89% of Americans can think it will become more difficult for parents to afford colleges for their children, and harder for people to buy a house (81%), and to afford retirement and medical care (both 79%), if the personal and family prospect is so bright. Could it be that Americans are used to saying one thing and thinking another? Or the worse problem of saying and thinking one thing while denying the other?

According to a 1975 Roper organization survey, 69% of Americans thought that “a job that is interesting” contributed an essential ingredient to the good life, whereas 45% checked off “a job that pays much more than average.” By 1989 both percentages had equalized to 61%—a full 15% more Americans believed that receiving paychecks that are “much more than average” should be a significant ingredient in the good life, while 8% less than in 1975 thought the job itself should be a significant ingredient. Similar increases among college students in the valuation of “making more money” as the chief goal of college education were also reported in

other studies. Money became an even more significant symbol of the American way of life in the 1980s. It was not simply the utilitarian purchasing power of money which was idealized, but the symbolic power of money to produce status.

These and numerous other figures confirm the resurgence of what Thorstein Veblen, writing at the height of “The Gilded Age” at the turn-of-the-century, called “pecuniary emulation” and “invidious comparison”: living according to external, abstract status markers. Moving toward the top of the heap is what matters, not what you are or even what you have but simply having “much more than the average.”

Further confirmation of the “top of the heap” syndrome can be seen in the great social structural “taffy pull” of the 1980s, in which a portion of the middle class moved upwards in socio-economic status, while a larger chunk was downwardly mobile. The American class system was pulled further apart, with the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer, and the middle class thinning out. Americans supported a massive increase in the “social welfare” of the military-industrial complex, with enormous amounts of money being poured into the military bureaucracy while monies were simultaneously drained from those programs designed to aid the poor. The interest alone on the increased military spending soon outweighed the money “saved” from decimating social welfare programs. It was a good decade to be on the dole if you were a military cog.

This reshaping of the American class system in the last decade, which all the while was being celebrated as illustrating the success of “free-market democracy,” can be viewed as the new phase of an antidemocratic system constituted by a small ruling and bureaucratic elite and a growing permanent underclass. Yet the values of materialistic consumerism did not seem to be confined to any one class. It is hard to see how a democracy can endure under such conditions, in

which rich and poor alike in America are smitten with the lure of money, and in which the pursuit of such values further exacerbates class cleavages.

Yuppies symbolized the decade of “upward bound,” a decade in which Wall Street investment gambling was idolized. State governments encouraged the get-rich-quick mentality through lotteries which attracted the money of the poor, while simultaneously condemning the get-rich-quick mentality of drug dealers. And at the top of the American heap stood Mickey Mouse: by the end of the ‘80s, the two highest salaries in America were made by Walt Disney executives—the higher of the two making what amounted to almost the upper limit of the annual household poverty income level every hour. Money, it seems, is the stuff of which the American dream is made.

This was, after all, the nation that never lost confidence in Ronald Reagan the man, even when it occasionally thought his policies had gone astray. Reagan the President may have sold the nation a bill of goods in the 1980s—socialism for the wealthy, the military and the governmental profiteers, capitalism for the poor, and a legacy of massive governmental theft and corruption—but Reagan the man was a smiling celebrity who said to feel good. And so Americans entered the 1990s feeling good, even if, to twist Havel’s words a bit: “The previous regime, armed with a proud and intolerant ideology, reduced people into the means of consumption, and nature into its tools...Out of talented and responsible people...it made cogs of some sort of great, monstrous, thudding, smelly machine, with an unclear purpose.”

The Great American Centrifuge

In the 1980s, many American cities and towns have witnessed continued erosion of downtown vitality through centrifugal tendencies which have dislocated the city in favor of what Lewis Mumford aptly called “urbanoid tissue,” such as suburban shopping malls, or through the

further dispersion of industry and suburbs. Malls are not new, but mall culture became solidly institutionalized, so that by 1987 the over 30,000 shopping centers in the U.S. generated \$586 billion in sales, or 13 percent of the gross national product, while employing almost 9 million people, or 8 percent of the U.S. labor force.² Yet malls are not only significant as major focal points of financial investment and development, but as a new way of life. Similarly, the increasing colonization of the home by high-technology throughout the 80s may also represent a continuing threat to the “centering” of family meaning.

By focusing on the effects of commercialism on home and city life, I wish to confront the problems posed by American “centrifugal” consumer culture: is it still possible to preserve human autonomy in the face of a culture which consumes personal time and energy through a plethora of “consuming devices,” or has the distraction industry finally triumphed? Do the patterns of meaning in the contemporary American home represent a continuation of traditional themes in new, high-tech clothing, or a basic transformation of values? Do the neighborhood and city remain as vital sources of community life or have they been devitalized by new residential patterns—by “urbanoid tissue?” Why does the contemporary American seem to be the helpless victim of kitsch consumerism, as portrayed every single day and night on commercial television and acted out in the patterns of everyday life?

The 1980s marked a dramatic upsurge in materialism in America, coupled, ironically, with a nostalgia for the uncomplicated, unmaterialistic “good old days” of “family values.” The increased materialism—by which I mean here consumerism and profiteerism, although I will return later to the possibilities of a more positive version of materialism—in the 1980s continued already well-institutionalized patterns of consumption, but also signaled a new phase in the incursion of the great Mammon machine into private and public life.

Electronic innovations, such as microwave ovens, compact disks, video cassette recorders, and cable television reached into the home. Indeed the 1980s continued and perhaps even speeded up a long process of the transformation of luxuries into perceived necessities. Just as indoor toilets and refrigerators, both originally introduced as luxury goods, became standard necessities in American homes by the mid-twentieth century, to be followed by televisions, the 1980s saw increasing amounts of luxury items—such as microwaves and video cassette recorders—being considered as “necessities.” Somewhat older forms, such as fast-food joints and shopping malls, absorbed greater numbers of consumers and Americans spent more time in their automobiles to reach these places.³ In fact, the ‘80s began with the prospect that the home office, through the personal computer, would achieve a far greater role in the “workplace,” and ended with the automobile—that master symbol of American culture—as the model office of the future. Through the cellular phone, the fax machine, and the computer, the auto is in the process of becoming the ideal high-tech, travelling office in the age of gridlock, as ever-increasing amounts of congested roadways reduce mobility to and from work. Taken together, all of these developments signaled an ever greater reliance on automatic, technical culture.

The term “auto” means self—hence “automobile” or self-moving—but the meanings of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” and contemporary “auto reliance” could not be more disparate. Consider the irony of business people sitting in stalled traffic, diligently working with all the conveniences of home and office: the auto-immobile.

Perhaps it would have been better if another term, originally applied to one of the earliest self-moving vehicles, had been adopted, the “locomobile.” Given the increasing amounts of time Americans are spending in these “moving places,” and given the effects cars have had in dominating and devitalizing cities through residential sprawl, workday congestion, and the sheer

roadways themselves, and given the continuing subordination of organic human purpose and habitat to the requirements of the delocalizing, centralized machine mentality, the term “locomobile” also captures the “moving craziness” of contemporary American culture.

American culture today highlights the modern battle between autonomy and the automaton. The great dream of the modern era has been to provide for and enlarge the autonomy of humankind through technical invention and control over the necessities of life. As that dream has been realized it has all too frequently revealed itself in diabolical reversal. The vast technical culture and wealth of America have not led the way toward the good life, but instead toward the goods life, toward a reified culture centered in commodities rather than citizens, toward an ultimate goal of automatic things and away from human autonomy. This is not the necessary outcome of the development of technology, but the consequence of the withering of human purpose in the face of the “magic” of technique.

As part of the larger dynamics of the modern era, American culture has transformed technique from a means to the good life to a virtual goal unto itself, with the result that Americans have increasingly seemed to be willing to sacrifice the art and practice and struggles of concrete life to the conveniences of abstract technique: to give up the active cultivation of home life to the passive consumption of TV and TV dinners, to give up multipurpose centers for civic life and local commerce to self-enclosed, privatized, behavior monitoring shopping malls, to surrender the pursuit of qualitative autonomy to the pursuit of dollars. Yet the high crime and divorce statistics, the addiction rates, the escalating political hypocrisy, the easygoing ignorance of those cultural values which are not conveniently transmitted by the media, and the widespread disparagement of serious, non-commercial, non-sporting activities, all testify to a culture in decline, not to a culture realizing enriched and rewarding lives.

The changes of the 1980s brought to new levels the centrifugal tendencies of American culture. By this I mean to say that contemporary American culture can be characterized as diverting energies outward, ever outward, and as decentering personal, domestic, and public life in the interests of a great, centralized, hedo-mechanistic system. That system has been criticized as capitalism, in which, in Marx's apt phrase, "all that is solid melts into air." Clearly many of the dynamics of capitalism, such as the idea of unlimited competition, work against democratic values, despite the benumbed belief by many Americans that capitalism and democracy are synonyms. Yet capitalism per se does not alone characterize the system, since the communist countries of the twentieth-century have also possessed similar centrifugal tendencies, displacing human qualities from private and public life for the cause of a great military-bureaucratic production machine, as Havel's words so lucidly express. Hence it is important to view American culture within the dynamics of modern culture, while recognizing its own peculiarities.

The American hedo-mechanistic system can also be seen as a variety of modern rationalistic bureaucracy, functioning, in Max Weber's words, like a "steel-hard casing" or "iron cage;" and as an avatar of what Lewis Mumford has termed "the megamachine" or "pentagon of power." These terms are meant to describe the dynamics of modern culture, and are not limited to America, though all of them help to describe the hegemony of "Americanism" in the late twentieth-century.

What I wish to claim in the limited confines of this paper is simply that the dominant values in contemporary American life express a fragmenting and exteriorized culture, which works to enhance power, prestige, and profit, while devastating the inner resources of the person, the relations of the domestic sphere, and the possibilities for a public life.

The terms centrifugal and centripetal are usually associated with Sir Isaac Newton, who used them respectively to denote physical movement away from or toward a center.

“Centrifugal” derives from the Latin verb *fugere*, to flee, and though Newton may have transformed the literal root to a metaphoric mechanical meaning, I would like to keep the literal sense in mind as well: that in the patterns of American consumer culture one sees a fleeing from the challenges of autonomy and a gravitating toward the automatic and the automaton. The objective indicators of meaning suggest selves pulled outward by the forces of commodities, away from the practical requirements of subjective cultivation, families too busy to be together or too fragile to stay together, cities corroded by the flight of people, money, and things to the periphery.

There is another term from physics which is relevant here. As Owen Barfield points out, Kepler seems to have been the first to use the ancient Latin term “focus” in its now commonly accepted sense “as the quasi-center of a geometrical figure—the focus of an ellipse—and it is thought that, in doing so, he had in mind that point in a lens or parabolic mirror, at which the sun’s rays are concentrated, so that it becomes a burning glass.” “Focus” originally was the word for hearth, and maintained this limited meaning until Kepler transformed it into a technical term of mechanics. In saying that contemporary American culture can be characterized as centrifugal, I mean to say that it has lost its focus, in the literal sense of a hearth, a warm emotional and even physical center at the heart of the household and everyday life.

Consuming Devices

America is supposed to be a land possessed of “labor saving” devices, but “possessed by” might better describe the situation. Consider automobiles, for which there are almost one for every adult. The average American woman spends 9 hours per week in the automobile, to the

average man's 11 hours, with the two hours difference due to extra commuting time for men. A recent survey found that Americans are spending more time commuting to work than a decade ago, and the widespread problems of gridlock are well known. As this labor saving device has become increasingly central to everyday life—80% of all travel in America, defined broadly as simply moving from one location to another, is by car—it has created environments which increase the time spent in autos and the average percentage of household money spent in transportation.⁴ One only need look at the lack of sidewalks in many suburbs and shopping mall entrances to see the effects of “walking deprivation culture” and the virtual dictatorship of the auto.

Similarly, microwave ovens and fast food restaurants reduce the amount of time one needs to spend cooking, but ultimately the question of “convenience” needs to confront the practice of everyday life. A colleague of mine and his wife keep an ironic diary of “time saved” with their microwave oven, add it up at the end of the year, and “give” it to themselves as an absurd holiday. Their humorous example points to the seldom acknowledged problem: is liberation from the practice of everyday living a form of autonomy or a form of alienation? Obviously both outcomes are possible, but I would like to claim that the overall trend has been toward an abstraction from the arts and crafts of everyday life.

Perhaps the ideal future of the American home can still be seen in Woody Allen's 1971 movie *Sleeper*, where domestic robots and machines control every aspect of the home, allowing the residents to spend their time in orgies, idly ignoring the bureaucratic police state while in the blissful pursuit of orgasms. *Sleeper* does for the home what Charlie Chaplin's worker in *Modern Times* did for the factory—it lampoons the tyranny of the machine in modern life.

The presumed purpose of the high-tech household in America is to transfer everyday necessities—heating, cooking, cleaning, and so forth—to machines, in order to enlarge “leisure time.” Yet leisure is itself largely a machine activity in America. Consider that the average American spent 3,000 hours consuming media in 1988, of which 1,550 hours were devoted to television, and 1160 to radio. The average American household has a television on for 11 hours per day. These numbing numbers suggest that Americans devote an enormous amount of time to the daily habit of listening and watching. Americans seemed to enter the 1980s as “joggers” and to exit as quasi-stationary “couch potatoes.” Perhaps the great tendency to sit—in autos and in front of televisions—was perhaps offset somewhat by a reported rise in the “standing breakfast,” eaten next to a kitchen counter, or by stand-up eating in fast food restaurants. But these standing and sitting patterns only testify to overly mechanized life.

If one takes random spins of the TV dial, it becomes quickly clear that American television is virtually one continuous showing of what could be titled “Rehearsals in Violence” (though I do not mean to belittle the nearly continuous adventures in sexual innuendo and commodity fetishism). The spread of cable TV has not so much changed the pattern, as merely increased the amount broadcast. To my way of thinking, Americans are willing prisoners of insensate violence and a hypocritical lasciviousness, which, while suggesting outrageous sexual activity, never shows the human body and virtually never shows unproblematic conjugal sex. The violence and ersatz titillation of television alone make it an ideal video-opiate of the people. But when one factors in the bombardment of commercials which pluck every heartstring, and news media which fasten on every human tragedy for which images can be conveyed, and raise criminal activity to the status of evening entertainment, it is clear that the images projected by American culture have assumed the appearance of a vast, collective, carnival geek show.

The problems of TV are not simply those of “image” assuming a commanding power, but of the fundamental demoralization of life in the late 20th century. Media critics frequently suggest that we need to become more critical toward advertising images, which is true enough. But the images are themselves carefully encoded moral messages, signs designed to seize the attention on a habitual basis and filled with the “morality” of instant gratification. The same state governments which tell impoverished ghetto dwellers not to use crack cocaine as an instant “fix” for life’s problems will tell them to spend their money on the state lottery to get rich quick, and then justify these schemes as a means of bringing in revenues to help the poor. How can the eye turn coldly away from the image of a baby, even if that baby is being used to sell a carpet cleaner? The images of advertising, which invade the home and pervade the public environment, are key participants in the demoralization of American life, with their never-ending epiphany that the best things in life are those qualities, commodities, and intangible human relationships which can be bought and sold.

Even more fundamentally than learning to be critical of commercials, we need to learn how to be at home with ourselves and our lives, how to carve out patterns of private conduct that preserve the autonomy of subjective life, of intimacy and family life. We need to “walk around ourselves” as Dostoevsky’s Father Zosima from *The Brothers Karamazov* puts it, on an everyday basis, cultivating habits of conduct which encourage feelingful relationships, honest self-examination, and purposeful self-discipline in the home. What would happen if one day Americans were to turn off the televisions and radios, to reflect on the silence, to work at de-automating private life?

The home does and should provide respite from the world, but in this Age of the Automaton, the incursions of the technical world have long since reached the home’s hearth,

replacing that focus of domestic life and family feelings with sterile images of life as situation comedy—"family ties"—or as an endless series of violent sexual innuendo, manned by suave secret police and accompanied by pseudo-Dionysic rock and roll. Is it any wonder that the American populace was too benumbed to care that the secret police were dominating American foreign policy during the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s, instead, actually elevating the secret policeman Oliver North into a hero? Or that the supposed President of the American people spent an inordinate amount of time in front of the television during his eight years in office, allowing his subordinates to privatize the public realm to their own self-interests? In the American morality play of the '80s, Americans gladly traded Hollywood fantasies of enormous wealth and success for reality—symbolized as much by Ronald Reagan as by the "Dallas" and "Dynasty" soap operas and the tele-evangelists who preached conservative morality while practicing libertine corruption.

Home Cooking

Until recently, one could loosely accept as a broad definition of what constitutes a family in America, "those household members gathered around the evening meal." This definition could include the traditional extended family, such as an uncle who rented a room in the attic, and, given the changing ideas of what constitutes a family today, could include non-traditional arrangements, such as unmarried couples, gay couples, and renters. Even pets might qualify. Yet such a simple and seemingly encompassing definition has become obsolete today, because the evening meal at home has fractured apart.

The pull away from "home" as a social ensemble was reported in a recent Gallop poll of November, 1989, which revealed that almost 40% of those who dine at home in the company of others watch TV, read, work, or do something other than conversation while eating.⁵ Not only

has direct conversational communication been intruded upon by distractions—mostly those of the media—and by increased absence of household members from the table, but the meal itself has been becoming less homemade, as Americans rely increasingly in prepackaged foods and restaurants. One might think that the exceptionally high rates of divorce and single parent headed families in America—the highest in the industrialized world—are the cause of this trend, yet family fragmentation is only one factor in a broader cultural context.

The same survey showed that the younger the adult, the more likely he or she is to rely on prepackaged and take-out foods, with fully one in four 18-29 year olds eating such food on a typical week night, compared to 16% of 30-49 year olds and 10% of those 50 and older. Busy-ness seems to be the key to the decline of the time invested in the meal, with both affluent families and those under 50 eating together and eating homemade meals less than other groups. Yet when one considers the vast amount of time invested in television and leisure activities by Americans of all classes, or how much food Americans of all classes waste, as revealed in archaeologist William Rathje's studies of garbage, the findings suggest that cultural habits of conduct and not only simple utilitarian time and money equations are involved. The decline of the family meal may be one further indication of a centrifugal culture displacing and dispersing domestic culture in the new American hierarchy of values and not simply the result of expedience.

The ritual of the family meal—both the craft of cooking and the art of conversation—is a potential anchor in the maelstrom of life. Yet despite studies which have shown a regular dinner hour to be beneficial to marital stability and educational achievement—for example, one factor which National Merit Scholars shared was a daily dinner hour with their families in which the

day's activities were discussed, uninterrupted—family members seem to be getting too busy to spend dinner time with and for each other.

Further signs of the double centrifugal effects of American culture upon the home can be seen in the rising number of meals eaten away from home over the past two decades and in the reduction of time spent practicing cooking in the home. Even a study by the epitome of mechanized food, Kraft General Foods, found that “there is no new new traditionalist trend. Overall, Kraft General Foods found a decline in the share of households preparing food from scratch.”⁶

We again see American centrifugal culture at work, hurling households out onto the streets in search of fast food joints and restaurants, hurling individually prepackaged foods into the microwave so that each family member has “freedom to choose” his or her own meal to share in intimacy with the TV. Nobody has to talk. Nobody has to walk. If only Walt Whitman could see how those “Democratic Vistas” of which he spoke have shrunk to the vanishing point.

The spread of the microwave oven in the 1980s—to the point where half of all households in America now contain microwaves—has not only cut the amount of time spent on cooking foods from scratch, but also radically increased the reach of prepackaged frozen and prepared foods into the home. This intrusion into the practice of cooking by the food industry is often widely regarded as a cause for celebration, a high-tech means toward those old American virtues of rugged individualism and freedom of choice. As a senior vice president of a marketing research and management-consulting firm in New York said, “Speed has truly liberated the woman. Mom no longer has to be head of house. Household members are more autonomous and providing for themselves.” A headless household is here automatically assumed to be

synonymous with increased autonomy, and the possibility that speed has simply atomized the household is never raised.

The effect of these trends has been to pull apart the family meal, either by pulling it out of the home setting or by dissembling the family meal within the home itself. The boom of the fast food industry in America has transformed the evening meal from a gathering of the family in familiar surroundings with conversation and a personal repertoire of foods into an automobile drive and direct act of consumption, frequently at “fast food” factories, or, for the more well-to-do, at “Yuppie” restaurants which spread in the 1980s, and unmediated by a personal touch—unless putting ketchup on a hamburger or being handed a wine bottle cork a few times per week is regarded as an act of autonomy. There are, to be sure, increased pressures on single-parent, impoverished and dual career families, which speed cooking and fast food can perhaps help to alleviate. Yet the unavoidable questions are whether these techniques further the craft and communion of the meal and of family life, and how much automatism a person or family is willing to tolerate in the practice of life. The survey results suggest that these questions are virtually never asked.

Perhaps things were not as bleak on the home front in the past decade as I have pictured them. The great irony in these trends is that the 1980s were also the “nutrition decade,” when Americans paid more attention to the nutritional value of food, even if the practice of the evening meal seemed to decline. The confounding nature of American life was illustrated in the fact that Americans were eating healthier diets, changing to lower fat and higher fiber foods, and reducing the consumption of alcohol even while the meal as a social institution was becoming more fragmented or leaving home. Perhaps the “pluralistic meal” symbolizes postmodern autonomy, in which women and children share in the “isolatoism” which formerly characterized the adult

male sex role. Or perhaps the increased awareness of nutrition and decreased significance of the meal symbolizes that Americans are becoming better consumers while caring less about the practice of the noncommodifiable, simple things of life. Such problems certainly do highlight the tensions contemporary families face in trading certain forms of autonomy at the cost of others.

Perhaps increased concern with nutrition suggests that the ability to recover autonomous private lives may still exist as a latent possibility. But re-focalizing the practice of the home meal for contemporary families requires the re-appropriation of the art of conversation and the craft of cooking. In families with two working parents, this would seem to require redistributing the work of cook as well, which was traditionally the woman's province.

Surveys do indicate that men—at least those under 50—have begun to cook more. In the second half of the twentieth-century in America, men exercised the “instrumental” sex role stereotype in the cooking realm chiefly as outdoorsmen barbecue chefs, and perhaps the microwave, by virtue of its status as an “instrumental” machine, allows men to cook in the kitchen without threatening the standard sex-role stereotype. Increased sharing of the cooking duties in such families would help to maintain the needed presence of feminine nurturance in the home, which need not be solely identified with women, and which has been strangely undervalued by feminists. The human presence—both food cooked with care and the engaged participation of family members in conversation and conviviality—has been withering in the face of automatic culture, as has, apparently, the family itself. But what would it take to re-focalize the practice of the home meal?

From the Walled City to the Malled City

The question of whether contemporary American society is genuinely secular or still strongly religious has engendered lively discussion in recent years. This debate often avoids the

fact that the vast majority of both secular and denominational Americans are ardent believers in the cult of consumerism. The ceremony of Christmas, in which one-quarter of the annual retail sales take place in December alone, testifies to what Americans practice, regardless of what they preach. Christmas is the chief annual ritual of consumption in American society, in which Americans symbolically bond relationships through acts of consumption and exchange, welding the ancient practice of gift reciprocity to contemporary pecuniary standards. Such acts are intuitively felt to be what “home” is all about. Christmas shopping also highlights the relation between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere in consumer society.

The past two decades have seen the explosive growth of shopping malls, outgrowths of consumer culture which have contributed to fundamental transformations of the American public sphere. I will briefly illustrate the centrifugal effects of shopping malls on American community life by focusing on South Bend, Indiana, a middle-sized city of approximately 100,000 people in a metropolitan area of roughly 250,000.

South Bend was the original proposed site of the *Middletown* study of Robert and Helen Lynd, but apparently was rejected by the private foundation which funded the study because it was “too ethnic” and therefore insufficiently “American.” Of course the presence of large immigrant communities in this middle-sized industrial city would have made it an excellent site for the study of early twentieth-century America—just as its loss of industry and population make it an excellent site to witness late twentieth-century America—but history did not happen that way. South Bend was home to the Studebaker company, which began manufacturing carriages in the nineteenth-century and cars in the twentieth-century, and which foreshadowed the decline of the American auto industry when it went out of business in 1964. At one point Studebaker employed 25,000 workers, and the loss of the plant put a great strain on the city.

South Bend is also home to the University of Notre Dame, the most famous American football university and symbolic alma mater of Ronald Reagan, who acted as the Notre Dame football player “the Gipper” in a well-known movie. One consequence of the general loss of industry throughout the Midwest was that the university had become South Bend’s largest employer by the end of the 1980s. In short, South Bend is an all-American city, suffering, like many other “rust belt” cities, from lost industries and a devitalized downtown, and seeking to redefine itself.

Like many middle-sized American cities today, South Bend is ringed by a few large shopping malls. The most recently built mall-complex is the University Park Mall, which opened in 1979 just outside the city limits, in Mishawaka, Indiana. In the ten short years of the 1980s it grew at a fantastic rate, becoming by its second year the dominant mall in the area, so that today it commands retail sales far in excess of the city of South Bend and of the other malls, and has caused severe loss of business to one of the other malls. It has spawned a vast surrounding complex with virtually continuous new construction, where one can literally see the unlimited, unplanned growth in progress. This was vividly illustrated in an interview I conducted with the director of redevelopment for the city of South Bend, Ann Kolata, who told me:

“We are getting some backlash. We hear tremendous numbers of people complaining about the traffic. It was not really good planning for entrances and exits. They basically had farm land out there, and could have controlled the way it developed, but it was not done... One of the major problems that exist, is that there is no overall community planning which crosses political boundaries.

I walked once at Christmas time with my husband [across the major road cutting through the complex] and we almost got killed, crossing at the stop light on Grape Road. The parking lots were all jammed, and we thought it would be easier to walk than to move the car and find a new parking space. We couldn’t believe how awful it was. We thought at the time it was so crowded that we would just park and walk across, but it was very inhospitable. It was not pleasant.”

The traffic crossings at this complex make no concessions to pedestrians. There are neither pedestrian markings nor cross-walk signals, and the habits of American automobile culture are so deeply ingrained that there have been no public complaints either. Users of the mall complex know that the only reason for being in the open air is to go to or from one's car. Compare this attitude with a recollection of the older South Bend given by one grandmother I interviewed, who said,

“Everyone used to go downtown then—on Saturdays or on Mondays when the stores would stay open late. We would walk downtown. And you would see your neighbors out too. It's not like now when no one knows their neighbors.”

“The quality stores were downtown. The first pizza place opened up in about 1951. I would go with friends and just have a bite at first, but after a couple of times there I really got to like pizza. Niles [a neighboring town] also moved its quality stores out of town. It's trying to build up the downtown now.”

This South Bend of 40 years ago, though representative of its time, is quite remote from today's South Bend and the contemporary American city in general, where fear of crime cautions against night-time walks to and from downtown, and where the idea that one would walk a mile or two instead of driving seems alien.

After the loss of the Studebaker plant, South Bend attempted to follow the lead of nearby Kalamazoo, Michigan, the first American city to remake its downtown on a mall plan in 1959. South Bend tried to create a downtown mall, in an effort to ward off competition from new malls around the periphery of the city but the centrifugal lure of the mall—cheap land, minimal zoning laws, brand new totalized shopping environments, limited access—proved to be too much competition for an aging downtown. Plans for a “superblock” downtown mall fell through in the late 1970s when Sears withdrew and relocated at the new University Park Mall.

Perhaps the chief reason why malls have proven so attractive to Americans in recent years is that they represent ideal environments where nothing bad ever happens, where everything is always shiny and new, and where everybody is happily consuming. It is instructive to compare ideals of shopping malls with the ideal of the city. Lewis Mumford has suggested that the city itself was the original utopia, concretely realized at the dawn of civilization:

“as Fustel de Coulanges and Bachofen pointed out a century ago, the city was primarily a religious phenomenon: it was the home of a god, and even the city wall points to this super-human origin; for Mircea Eliade is probably correct in inferring that its primary function was to hold chaos at bay and ward off inimical spirits.

This cosmic orientation, these mythic-religious claims, this royal preempting of the powers and functions of the community are what transformed the mere village or town into a city: something ‘out of this world,’ the home of a god. Much of the contents of the city—houses, shrines, storage bins, ditches, irrigation works—was already in existence in smaller communities: but though these utilities were necessary antecedents of the city, the city itself was transmogrified into an ideal form—a glimpse of eternal order, a visible heaven on earth, a seat of life abundant—in other words, utopia.”⁷

The ancient city wall held “chaos at bay” and warded off “inimical spirits,” just as the walled Medieval city, whose success may have been the initial impetus to modern capitalism, warded off potential enemies. Americans seem to have activated these ancient functions of the wall in shopping malls, which ward off that which is “undesirable.” But where the ancient wall served the life of the city, the modern mall serves itself, and privatizes the life of the city into itself. Americans have increasingly chosen to spend their time and money in walled malls instead of in cities. The ancient gods of the city and of the home have not been dispelled by modern materialism, but have been reinstated in the ever-tightening cult of American consumerism. In this new monotheism, the organic seasons of nature have metamorphosed into extended indoor shopping seasons, and the ancestor cult transformed from an act of propitiation into a declaration of consumptive independence.

Malls represent a vision of utopia in contemporary American society, promising to free Americans from crime, urban blight, and uncertainty. But they do this by alienating people from spontaneous conduct, voluntary association other than that of a consumer, and ultimately from a public life. As privatized public spaces they rigidly enforce the new American code of controlled and monitored behavior, the “culture of control.”⁸ They are not only *controlled*, but also *controlling* environments. Malls promise that the good life is to be found in the life of goods, but their reality is that they are literal embodiments of the dark side of Thomas More’s ambiguous term “utopia,” which suggests both “eutopia”—“the good place”—and *ou topos*, literally “no place.” They give ample testimony to the benumbed confusion in America that capitalism and democracy are synonymous, and to the continued atrophy of vital democracy.

A good illustration of the antidemocratic nature of malls was given in the autumn of 1987 when the manager of the University Park Mall opposed additional buses that would have enabled poor and mostly black citizens access during the busy Christmas season. Although the city bus company had approved a “holiday shopper shuttle service,” mall officials refused to allow the extra buses filled with potential consumers, because they regarded bus riders, in the words of the manager, as “downtowners” and “Westiders” who are “undesirable” at the mall. What could be more revealing of the current predicament of American cities and civic life than the use of the term “downtowners” in a pejorative sense?

These comments were disclosed in a memo from the general manager of the bus service to its board, who added that the mall’s assistant manager claimed that the mall management would publicly deny such comments. And management, the mall developing Edward J. DeBartolo Corporation of Ohio, did just that, stating that the “only reason” that holiday bus service was rejected was “due to physical limitations of parking facilities during the holiday

season,” which included “extra wear and tear” on mall roadways. One would think that such “extra wear and tear” was why those roadways were built in the first place, to bring more shoppers to the mall, but apparently poor pedestrians lack the necessary credentials of automobile ownership. At least Scrooge, in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, could honestly express his capitalistic contempt for the poor and for the spirit of Christmas giving. But the DeBartolo Corporation, which a year later would give some thirty-three million dollars of its mall-gotten gains to the University of Notre Dame for a performing arts building and classrooms, could not publicly state that malls are carefully designed and located to keep people out. As William H. Whyte has noted,

“Malls screen out people. In suburban malls this is counted as an asset. By keeping out undesirables, the malls’ guards provide regular customers with a more secure and pleasant environment.

A further self-screening factor is built into suburban malls. Since access is by car, people who don’t have cars are less likely to go there. They may go by bus, but scheduled runs are infrequent. (If they do go by bus, furthermore, they may get a very small hello. At one mall in New Jersey, the bus waiting area provides no overhead cover and no place to sit).

Much has been made of malls as the new town centers. They are not. Centers, perhaps, but not of the city. They reject many of the activities of a true center. They do not welcome—indeed, do not tolerate—controversy, soapboxing, passing of leaflets, impromptu entertaining, happenings, or eccentric behavior, harmless or no.”⁹

It is difficult to know why tremendous amounts of money can be spent building unplanned, cancerous “urbanoid tissue” which pulls South Bend and many other communities’ civic shape apart into amorphous “no places,” while it remains next to impossible to build up a vital downtown, prosperous and free from crime and blight. The centrifuge of automatic culture seems to have as powerful a grip on civic life as it does on private life.

The mall is a devitalized machine, a profit machine. It embodies the old-fashioned vision of the city of the future as a unidimensional, timeless present—a robotic “Main Street,” while

losing its own past in the ever-shifting displays of goods. These new American malls are vast, enclosed, largely depersonalized spaces lacking in *place*. As forms of human geography, it is difficult to see how such malls and inorganic mallscapes can engender what Yi-Fu Tuan has termed *topophilia*, the love of place.¹⁰ Topophilia may have been the chief motive in the original establishment of settled villages and cities, and in this sense the postindustrial, postmodern mall may well signal the advent of postcivilized, posthuman culture.

What is democracy? How might its physical form be different from antidemocratic impulses? How does it involve a genuinely public sociopolitical and cultural life? Nazi neoclassicism was a clear example of antidemocratic, imperial architecture. But what does it mean when the citizens of South Bend willingly forego a varied landscape through which runs a river that would be regarded as major in Europe, in favor of a totally bland, windowless, climate-controlled, enclosed environment reachable solely by auto or bus, a totalistic environment of consumption in which free speech can be regarded as trespassing? Shopping malls across America are in the process of introducing a closed-circuit television network, appropriately named “Mall Vision,” which will feature consumer information mixed with advertising. This innovation, taken in combination with at-home computer shopping, represents the final melting of private and public spheres into the great consumption utopia. Mall culture truly represents the “harmonious ant-hill where there are no dissenting voices,” as Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor expressed it.

We are building the new imperial palace in these shopping malls, and have willingly given up the public square on which democracy is built: only in the American version of the Chinese “forbidden city,” all consumers are admitted who can drive and exhibit the potential to purchase. The undesirables—the impoverished in particular—are not so much forcibly denied as

economically discouraged. As Emerson said already in the mid-nineteenth century: “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.” If civilization may be said to begin with the “urban implosion” of the walled-city, perhaps we may see its end in the American walled city of automobiles and motorists, commodities and shoppers: the “city” without citizens.

Home Again?

The dream of the new world, of creating a democratic civilization freed from the compulsive hierarchies and tyrannies of Western civilization, has given way to the quiet compulsions of automatic power and culture. Americans need to refocus the home and city, to offset those centrifugal energies which put the automaton in the place of the everyday practice of life. This does not mean a nostalgic retreat into an anti-technological Luddite mentality, but an honest and self-critical confrontation of the self with the alien culture America has become.

In a study I conducted of the meaning of household possessions, I found that although most Americans are surrounded by the material props of consumerism and conspicuous consumption—stereos, cars, kitchen gadgets—these things do not commonly stand out as significant when people are asked to describe their valued possessions.¹¹ Instead, objects signifying attachment or personal values and experiences rather than status, such as inexpensive family photographs, seem better able to hold the meaning of one’s life. This suggests that carving out a personal dimension in the face of centrifugal culture remains a latent possibility. Yet the overwhelming presence of centrifugal techno-culture remains central to the way Americans shape their domestic and civic lives.

Although there are some signs that Americans are concerned with the increasing mechanization of life—for example, environmentalism, healthier diets—the outlook for a turn away from further moral homelessness looks rather bleak. What would cause Americans to shut

down the inroads of brain washing advertising, which seduces children and has helped to knock the stuffing out of American politics? To overthrow the great automobile dictatorship which, in the name of time-saving utility, silently forbids walking for useful purposes? What would make American families want to steal the time from work and leisure to eat and converse together, unmolested by TV? How could local, walkable, shopping zones proliferate again in mall-infested cities and suburbs?

What is urgently needed in American homes and community life is a resistance movement, which can regulate convenience culture to serve everyday human needs and human scale. Such a movement would resist environments that foster rote uniformity and technical self-isolation by revaluing organic human autonomy over mindless, bodiless automatism. This means realizing, for example, that walking is and ought to be an integral aspect of everyday life, that one should find ways to “steal” walking activities away from the auto, especially practical walking activities which are manageable by foot, but simply more convenient by car. The renewal of walking might involve reshaping a suburban development to include sidewalks or a local grocery store. Or resisting the Power Complex could take the form of spending an entire evening by candlelight every now and then, with the family empowered to use its own resources for entertainment. Such evenings are occasionally forced on us when the electricity goes out after an electrical storm, and are many times enchanting. But to deliberately break the spell of American power culture by voluntary resistance, ah, now, there’s the rub!

Every fourth of July weekend, the city of South Bend celebrates an “Ethnic Food Festival,” and the entire downtown undergoes a ritual inversion, in which South Benders stroll at leisure amid a synesthesia of smells and sounds and sights. Many people ask why it could not be this way all the time, but as soon as the festival is over, the magic wears off and the centrifugal

mall habits resume. Yet the energy devoted to the festival and genuine civic enjoyment it produces suggest that the potential for a resistance movement is there. But it would have to confront the “spoiled moral environment” of automatic mass culture—both its demands for technical uniformity and its seeming opposite, the chaos of poverty, blight, crime—in order to revitalize the downtown.

Although planning could be instituted to refocalize the home and recenter the city, the signs, as I read them, are that Americans are quite content at present to surrender private and civic autonomy, in order to procure the conveniences of automatic culture. The great, thudding, monstrous, smelly machine of communism, of which Havel spoke, was, like the human machine which built the pyramids, based on punishment. That system is universally acknowledged as obsolete. Because today we have the great, smooth running, monstrous, deodorized machine of Americanism. As Lewis Mumford said, “Now the great improvement is that you control people by persuasion, by giving them a standard of consumption that no people has ever had before. Then, if they’re discontented, if their life seems a little hollow, you give them drugs and pornography.”¹² And, we might add, you give them “Mall Vision.”

We are closer than ever before to realizing the dream of modern life, of freeing ourselves through technical invention from the necessities of life. But such liberation has long since revealed its sterile impotence: when the servile golem outgrows the master and assumes control. A vast, invisible Frankenstein haunts the American landscape and household, wreaking TV violence and soulless emptiness: “the more goods he accumulates, the deeper he sinks into suicidal impotence.”

Our time poses a great question: shall we recover autonomy or perfect the automaton? But nobody seems to be at home to answer.

Endnotes

- ¹ Linda DeStefano, "Looking Ahead to the Year 2000: No Utopia, But Most Expect a Better Life," January 1, 1990. Gallup Poll: Mirror of America—Life in the 1990s.
- ² Francesca Turchiano, "The (Un)Malling of America," *American Demographics*, April 1990: 36-39.
- ³ John P. Robinson, "Americans on the Road," *American Demographics* Sept. 1989: 10.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Linda DeStefano, "New Lifestyles are Changing the Way We Dine." Gallop Poll: Mirror of America—Dining in America, Nov. 6, 1989.
- ⁶ Peter Hall, "The Real America," *American Demographics*, Dec. 1989: 23-27.
- ⁷ Lewis Mumford, "Utopia, the City, and the Machine," in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*. Edited by Frank E. Manuel. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967: 3-24.
- ⁸ John Gehm. *The Culture of Control: Electronic Monitoring of Probationers*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1990.
- ⁹ William H. Whyte. *City: Discovering the Center*. New York: Doubleday, 1988: 208.
- ¹⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1974.
- ¹¹ Eugene Rochberg-Halton. "Cultural Signs and Urban Adaptation: The Meaning of Cherished Household Possessions." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1979. M. Csikszentmihalyi and E. Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981. See also Part 4 of E. Rochberg-Halton, *Meaning and Modernity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- ¹² Quoted in Obituary, "Lewis Mumford, A Visionary Social Critic, Dies at 94," *The New York Times*, Sunday, Jan. 28, 1990: 30. See also Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970. For a view of the parallel problem of widespread cynicism, see Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.