

# NO PLACE OF GRACE

Antimodernism  
and the  
Transformation of  
American Culture  
1880-1920

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**A**CENTURY AGO, THE STOUT MIDRIFF WAS A SIGN of mature success in life. Affluent Americans devoured heavy meals at huge banquets. They accepted the congratulations of after-dinner orators. The speaker announced the marriage of material and spiritual progress. His audience nodded approval. There was no limit to American abundance. There was no impediment to the partnership of Protestantism and science. The audience applauded. They rose stiffly to leave. It was an age of confidence.

Yet one must try to imagine a kernel of doubt in the mind of the banqueter, hurrying home in the gaslit dark. Despite the Promethean optimism of the official culture, a sense of human finitude persisted among the more comfortably situated as well as those on the margins of society. Maybe doubt stemmed in part from the inescapable presence of Civil War veterans—not just heroes but hollow-eyed men who had merely survived, maimed at Antietam, gone mad at Chickamauga, reminders of the tragic limits on all human aspiration. But most families did not need reminders. They knew the arbitrariness at the heart of existence: the mother and infant dead at the moment of birth, the grandfather muddling on into hopeless senility. An entire range of human experience lay beyond the boundaries of official optimism. It was no accident that an inchoate distrust of perfectionist schemes and technological cornucopias survived the death of Calvinist dogma. Americans, even the educated and affluent, could not remain at ease in the Zion of modern industrial society.

For some, what focused this disquiet was a long tradition of Puritan and republican moralism. For republican moralists, as for their Puritan predecessors, man was a depraved creature whose history was not a linear path of progress but a cyclical process of development and decline. The inevitable end of all human societies was not perfection but "overcivilization." In the late nineteenth century, the notion that America had become overcivilized occurred naturally to the intellectual heirs of Cotton Mather and Thomas Jefferson. Puritans and republicans alike had been haunted by fears of the urban "effeminacy" and "luxury" produced by material progress. The same idiom remained available in the industrial America of the 1880s.

But by the late nineteenth century, the feeling of overcivilization signified more than just a provincial revival of republican moralism. It was a sign of a broader transatlantic dissatisfaction with modern culture in all its dimensions: its ethic of self-control and autonomous achievement, its cult of science and technical rationality, its worship of material progress. During the 1880s, on both sides of the Atlantic, one begins to sense a resive desire for a freshening of the cultural atmosphere. Haltingly, half-consciously, Europeans and Americans alike began to recognize that the triumph of modern culture had not produced greater autonomy (which was the official claim) but rather had promoted a spreading sense of moral

impotence and spiritual sterility—a feeling that life had become not only overcivilized but also curiously unreal.

For the educated bourgeoisie, authentic experience of any sort seemed ever more elusive; life seemed increasingly confined to the airless parlor of material comfort and moral complacency. Many yearned to smash the glass and breathe freely—to experience "real life" in all its intensity. Groping for alternatives to modern unreality, they sometimes clung to the shreds and patches of republican tradition, but they also turned to other cultural resources as well: the literary romantic's rejection of urban artifice in the name of a rustic or childlike "simple life"; the philosophical vitalist's rejection of all static systems in the name of the flux of "pure experience"; the avant-garde artist's rejection of bourgeois respectability in the name of primal irrationality. The very effort to categorize this *fin-de-siècle* cultural ferment oversimplifies its richness and variety.

The turmoil of the turn of the century formed the matrix of antimodernism. A common current of restiveness, a common perception of modern culture's evasions and shortcomings, linked antimodernists like Henry Adams with thinkers as diverse as Ezra Pound, Georges Sorel, and Sigmund Freud. It also joined these major figures with popularizers who addressed a wider audience: simple-lifers, militarists, mind-curists, mystics. Whether they focused on premodern character or on more recent models, all these disparate pilgrims sought "authentic" alternatives to the apparent unreality of modern existence; all have spawned descendants down to our own time. Exploring the sources of antimodernism in *fin-de-siècle* cultural ferment, one uncovers social and psychic tensions which still persist and still promote unfulfilled longings for "real life." American antimodernism, in other words, provides one illuminating angle of vision on the shaping of twentieth-century American culture.

In both Europe and America, the antimodern impulse was rooted in what can aptly be called a crisis of cultural authority, which had both public and private dimensions. Americans commonly confronted the public dimensions by turning to republican tradition. For decades republican moralists had worried that a liberal polity would be unable to contain the centrifugal tendencies in an atomized market society; the unprecedented class and ethnic conflict of the late nineteenth century intensified that worry as never before. The optimistic liberal individualism of the ruling social groups, which had only recently been reaffirmed by the Northern victory in the Civil War, seemed by the 1880s to be corrupt, evasive, illegitimate. Losing cultural authority, the leaders of the American bourgeoisie reasserted their power with rifles and bayonets. The expedient was temporarily successful but ultimately unsatisfying, because more was at stake than mere power. From the republican view, the ruling class required not only more guns but moral regeneration.

If public authority seemed to be losing legitimacy, private authority

seemed on the wane as well. The internalized morality of self-control and autonomous achievement, the basis of modern culture, seemed at the end of its tether; the chief source of that morality, the bourgeois family, seemed a hothouse of suffocating repression and insoluble personal conflict. As the ethic of autonomy waned, familiar assumptions about selfhood wavered; ultimately even personal identity seemed affected by the unreality of modern existence. Worse: the religious sanction for bourgeois morality, the supernatural framework which gave life meaning and purpose, seemed to be dissolving in a haze of enlightened platitudes. As Protestantism liberalized, it accommodated itself to secular habits of mind and lost much emotional power. It was not surprising, then, that many nineteenth-century Americans craved both the authentic experience outside the bounds of Victorian respectability and the intense spiritual ecstasy of communion with God. It was not surprising that they yearned to resurrect a solid sense of self by recapturing the "real life" of the premodern craftsman, soldier, or saint.

Neither in Europe nor in America was that antimodern impulse wholly regressive. On the contrary, far from encouraging escapist nostalgia, antimodern sentiments not only promoted eloquent protest against the limits of liberalism but also helped to shape new modes of cultural authority for the oncoming twentieth century. In Europe, where discontent with liberalism was more pervasive and severe, antimodernism formed much of the emotional basis for communitarian critiques of capitalism as well as for fascist and Nazi ideology. In America, where antimodern protest was more idiosyncratic, the transformation of cultural authority was subtler and longer lasting. American antimodernism unknowingly provided part of the psychological foundation for a streamlined liberal culture appropriate to twentieth-century consumer capitalism. If in Europe liberal culture was sometimes openly rejected, in America it was more often revitalized and transformed.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the reason for this difference was that liberal culture was more firmly established in America than in Europe: its individualism was less openly challenged, its optimism more brazen and banal. Throughout much of our history, the voices of doubt have been drowned (though never killed) in a resurgent chorus of national self-congratulation. Puritan and republican jeremiads have often served to reinforce the dominant culture by reducing social conflicts to questions of individual morality and providing troubled Americans with an innocuous means of discharging half-conscious anxieties about the effects of expanding market capitalism. Periodically relieved of doubt, the fretful bourgeoisie have returned to the official belief that everything will work out in the long run. In a sense antimodernism falls into this recurring pattern of mingled doubt and reaffirmation.<sup>2</sup>

But only in a sense. The playing out of antimodern impulses was far too

complex a process to fit any schematic patterns. Above all, it is important to remember that antimodernism, despite its role in revitalizing and transforming capitalist cultural authority, was far more than a response to the effects of market capitalism; it contained a critique of modern culture applicable to all secular, bureaucratic systems, whether socialist or capitalist. The antimodern impulse stemmed from revision against the process of rationalization first described by Max Weber—the systematic organization of economic life for maximum productivity and of individual life for maximum personal achievement; the drive for efficient control of nature under the banner of improving human welfare; the reduction of the world to a disenchanting object to be manipulated by rational technique.<sup>3</sup> At its most profound, antimodernism attacked the hubris of this bureaucratic "rationality" and subverted progressive pieties of any political stripe. Yet despite this common front, the particular varieties of antimodernism were shaped by particular national circumstances. To begin to understand American antimodernism, we need first of all to explore the modern American culture which provoked it—to listen, in effect, to what was being said at the banquets.

## A Pattern of Evasive Banality: Official Modern Culture in Industrial America

At bottom the official doctrines were progressive. \* Faith in the beneficence of material progress has always been a central tenet of modern culture in America: today it survives among real estate developers, corporate planners, and unreconstructed Keynesian economists; a century ago it rang from pulpits and platforms across the nation. The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher expressed the dominant mood of self-assurance in a centennial speech at Peekskill, New York on July 4, 1876. The Revolutionary generation built a great nation, he said, but we are building a greater one. "We not only wear better heads, but we have better bellies [great laughter], with better food in them."<sup>4</sup> Beecher himself embodied the change. His father Lyman Beecher was a gaunt defender of Calvinism and republican virtue; Henry Ward was a genial, portly creature of urban comfort and affluence. His belief in progress was the stuff of banquet oratory. It was an after-dinner creed, meant to be consumed with Courvoisier and La Coronas.

\*Throughout this study, I use "progressive" to refer to a general belief in progress and "progressive" to refer to the reformers who applied that term to themselves around the turn of the century.