

A Jeremiad

by [James Como](#) (June 2020)



Untitled, Norman Bluhm, 1961

It was a while—too long—before I realized that I distrust movements *per se* (collectivism is collectivism, no matter how often disguised as ‘communities’) but that my individualism was extreme; and at some point I realized that I was not a Conservative. I could not adjust an opinion to achieve consistency with what was mainstream Conservative thinking. So I became mildly unsettled when called one, especially since generic conservatism seemed to me to be common sense, not the stuff of a ‘movement’. I saw too that much political-speak was trend-driven, and that too often movements are merely

grandiose trends that commonly trigger some latent, frustrated impulse in the population as well as a crypto-anarchic layer of my id.

Eventually the Center—political and cultural—began collapsing. From the mid-sixties to the mid-Seventies (I'm now in my early seventies) I saw, as did just about everyone, things going to Hell; Jeremiads, micro- and macrocosmic, popped up. For me that Hell was especially marked by a lack of clarity, as though the very point of disruption was not the achievement of some worthy social goal but chaos itself. I began to wonder about the welfare of the nation.

But in doing so I realized that I lacked a conception of 'nation,' more specifically, of 'nation-state,' around which concept the world had been coagulating for nearly seven hundred years. So I read and thought and read some more. Competitors had been blood ties, sects, tribes, clans, duchies, city-states, principalities, kingdoms, and empires, frequently either over-lapping or multiplying by a sort of social mitosis. Owing to boundaries (some natural), to a gathering of demotic affinities (e.g. language), sometimes to personal loyalty, to armies and might, and now and then to a body of laws written and unwritten—the nation-state won out, more or less.

Finally I settled on the following morphology, with the stacking of strata resembling a sloppy pyramid. Starting at the apex these are:

Government: where offices and their functions are

prescribed, or very nearly so, by a founding charter, the
functionaries *per se* coming and going;

State: bureaucracies, police power, the military—here the
functionaries abide;

Society: party politics and political debate, communication
media and other technologies, patterns of work and of
habitation, civil institutions that mediate among the
various levels, and constellations of beliefs that regulate
all of these.

Nation: schooling, arts, letters, and science, popular
culture, manners, customs, mores, and knowledge of history
and geography;

Culture: attitudes towards law, duty and morality, as well
as language, religious beliefs and ritual, iconic people,
places, things, and folklore and myth: “a sodded place fit
for tilling and providing for growth.”

Each stratum has its center, and the whole suggests a
teleology, though from bottom up instead of top down. Among
other uses, the paradigm contextualizes our ills, allowing us
to assign each to this or that layer; thus might ills be
delimited, as is our public discourse. (Nasty rhetoric at the
top need not have implications for lower levels.) Also, almost
automatically, the paradigm establishes importance: the
higher, the less important, because the more easily are parts
there replaced. Disruptions occur up and down, some serious,
but always a layer above or, especially, below, keeps the ship
(to change metaphors) afloat. What matters is that disruptions
do not rise or fall—but especially fall—to other layers.

Now, in the upper reaches there has always been invective, for

example the Adams v. Jefferson nastiness during the presidential campaign of 1800. Earlier than that, though, even Washington was not immune. In 1796 Thomas Paine wrote a long accusatory screed to him that ended, "and as to you, sir, treacherous to private friendship . . . and a hypocrite in public life, the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an imposter, whether you have abandoned good principles, or whether you ever had any." Government, State, and Society went at it with hammers.

Thus, one hundred and seventy years later, Nixon's tongs in his 1950 Senate campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas ("the pink lady") were not new, and long memories would exact their revenge upon him. (Still, *her* hammer was to call *him* a Fascist, right after World War II.) Yet consider: Nixon, already reviled in 1960, could have upset the whole structure (except Culture) by blowing the whistle on the election stolen by the Kennedys, but chose not to do so. *Something mattered more.* There were stops one didn't pull out. No matter how nasty things got, *one didn't play around with lower levels of the pyramid.* Near the bottom—the base—*persuasion*, long-term, not bullying or imposition, was largely the predominant order of the day. Here, then, is a view of what followed: just another long historical cycle, perhaps, but it is ours. Yet another Jeremiad.

Amidst the development of antibiotics and analgesics, the conquest of the greatest mass murderers in the history of the species, the explosion of creature comforts previously unimaginable, the diminution of global poverty, and the social combustion of personal freedom—with it all, there came the extended family of those smiling siblings: the tilling of the soil known as The Sixties, so-called, that Age of Adolescence, of drug-celebrated Narcissism, and—little-noted—of Solipsism.

In fashion, grooming, music, personal behavior in public spaces, and mass mediated vulgarity the genie was out of the bottle, subverting components lower and lower on the pyramid. The Viet Nam War (and the Democrat convention in Chicago), along with terrifying assassinations followed by riots, crowned chaos king, undoing any psycho-collective progress achieved during the fifties in the *lower* reaches of the pyramid. Watergate simply moved the offal along.

But the most damaging event was Roe v. Wade, which made the safest place in the world potentially the deadliest—and *did so casually*, and with sanctimonious Rights Rhetoric that, among other effects, untethered language from fact (and, as it happens, from science). Having hit bottom, Society now seemed to intuit that anything goes. No longer was “obedience to the unenforceable” (Lord Moulton’s commanding phrase) commonly observed.

Sure, first William Buckley then Ronald Reagan yelled ‘stop’, and he, along with Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II, helped bring WW III (the Cold one) to an end. But note this trivial sign: nearly thirty years ago, the craven, venal Bill Clinton actually answered the question, “boxers or briefs?” Merely a symptom, of course, but can anyone imagine FDR, Truman, Ike, JFK (!), Nixon or . . . answering such a puerile, frivolous and (I recall the questioner) flirtatious question? Thereafter came those damned hanging chads. With the election of W—a minority president whose victory required a Supreme Court decision—the Nation became the scene of a street fight: a sitting president subjected to *wide-spread* personal insult and vilification, *from sources otherwise held to be objective in the culture*, as never in living memory.

Then the *coup de grace*: the start, on 9/11/01, of WW IV: entropy entered the emotional, psychological, and intellectual food supply. The Left and its media hacks *did* pull out the stops. The nastiness that followed, so derangedly anti-Bush that the *New York Times* would reveal (front page) the Bush administration's plan for tracking terrorist money, was torrential. But it was a one-way street. (Bush would take the high road and has ever since: he would not further unbalance the Culture; such was his upbringing.)

Now free, the genie strode the land, so that a president's wife and children are subjected to the most scurrilous abuse and the president to sexually foul ridicule (e.g. by Stephen Colbert, who apologized to the LGBT community for insulting . . . fellatio), remote psychoanalysis (by a 'reporter'), the charge of drug use (by the Speaker of the House), and so much more. Of course, he *is* the gift that keeps on giving: an amateur (and the fourth consecutive adolescent to hold that office) defending his enormities by claiming to have the same rights as any private citizen, entirely missing the point of public service.

But with him it was only a matter of time before we saw something new: the street became two-way, or, rather, two streets twisting as a double helix with traffic careering, like those two hotrods racing in *Rebel Without a Cause*, towards a cliff. Viz: a Senate Majority leader, when asked about his lie respecting an opposition presidential candidate, answers, "well, it worked, didn't it?" *—and he is not called on that answer*. His successor (now as Minority Leader) threatens—*by name*—two Supreme Court justices if they vote against his preference. (To which I ask, "Have you no decency, sir? Have you no decency?")

That is, for the first time in our history *Nation* and *Culture* together are simultaneously roiling, as rhetoric—previously fitted to its proper stratum—spills from the top down. Masculine virtues are toxic and sex made fungible (as the bottom half of the pyramid is eroticized); border-control is both fascism and racist nationalism (though a borderless nation is oxymoronic). I know of people who want sibling marriage, for insurance purposes, and of a woman who wants to marry her cat. Can anyone guarantee what *cannot* be next?

Self-absorption is promoted (Rights, Rights everywhere, nor anyone left to think?), especially when compared to hierarchical structures (e.g. the Church, whose self-inflicted wounds invite opprobrium); white privilege has made victims, even of people of color who prosper freely, because, we are told, this Nation is based on a Culture of racism (ill-defined), according to our Paper of Record. Too often we fail to hold each other accountable for a lack of common courtesy and unrelenting vulgarity *at the base*, but *do* demonize disagreements further up. The legalization of dangerously addictive drugs is promoted, as a whole class of such drugs is massively killing us; pornography is defended as an act of 'agency'; history has disappeared, except in movies, textbooks, and those 'projects' that distort it. Our shining city on a hill is being sacked, even as it fills, in some places, with human excrement on its sidewalks—sacked not by invading Goths but rather by the solipsists among us. Competing 'narratives' are invented and ghettoized, with everyone dwelling within one narrative ghetto only; wealth is bad; an Insider *Coup* is planned and attempted by the very agencies sworn to defend the Republic.

Meanwhile, evil people bomb us; crazy people shoot us and our children; white hate groups bemoan the good old days (feeling themselves entirely unprivileged, in fact victimized, without seeing the irony); at home Jews are targeted while abroad Christians are slaughtered; trans-national terrorist extremists (equal opportunity) proliferate; a Communist Party poisons the world.

And yet there are many more grotesqueries on the inventory of depredations, all roiling up and down the pyramid. This tsunami has led to what a neuro-psychologist friend has dubbed Cultural Traumatic Stress Disorder. Decisions are irrational, even impulsive; sadness and anger co-exist, along with resignation; our myths and rituals, along with transcendent aspirations, are mocked when not repressed; thoroughly discredited policies rise zombie-like—largely because they feel good and because those who promote them do not know history. Now, the common practice, to achieve any effect, at any level of the structure, has become to say—anything, no matter how Orwellian.

Am I too distracted by the small picture—contemporary politics, various cults of personality, tribalism, the massively misunderstood power of the very few on 'social media', various transgressions against norms—to see the big one? I think not. We have become a roller derby (as another friend has suggested): lots of movement, sporadic violence, but no teleological design: a mad rush in a circle, in our case actually a downward spiral.

Near the start of the fifth century, St Jerome wrote to a friend:

I shudder when I think of the calamities of our time . . . between Constantinople and the Alps. Scythia, Thrace, Macedon, Thessaly, Dacia, Achaea, Epirus . . . have been sacked and pillaged by the Goths and Alans, Huns and Vandals. The Roman world is falling. . . . Who will hereafter believe that Rome has to fight now within her own borders, not for glory but for life? . . . The world sinks into ruin; all things are perishing save our sins.

Then not an over-statement, but now? Closer to us is the supercilious Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay writing to Henry S. Randall, a Jefferson biographer, on May 23, 1857:

I have long been convinced that institutions purely democratic must, sooner or later, destroy liberty, or civilities or both. . . . Your fate I believe to be certain. . . . [when] your institutions will be fairly brought to the test. Distress everywhere makes the labourer . . . listen with eagerness to agitators who tell him it is a monstrous iniquity that one man should have a million while another cannot get a full meal. . . . On one side is the statesman . . . on the other is the demagogue ranting about the tyranny of capitalism. . . . Your Constitution is all sail and no anchor. . . . Your republic will be . . . laid waste by barbarians in the twentieth century as the Roman empire was in the fifth.

He may be a few decades off, but the disaster Macaulay predicted is more imminent than any climate change now upon us.

Ben Franklin intuited the dismal possibility. When a woman asked him what he had given the people at the Constitutional Convention, he famously answered, “a republic, madam, *if* you can keep it.” If. The middle word of life. Now some ask, Do we *want* to keep it? Many of us have come to believe, not only that other cultures matter, which is very fine, not only that they are superior to all of Western Civilization, which is not fine, but that the West is responsible for most global ills, which is exactly false, insulting (but who is insulted?) *and* dangerous. So, before I forget, *CCP delenda est*, seriously.

Jerome comes after Jeremiah. And then? I grew up in Harlem and in Astoria, Queens, a neighborhood marked by all sorts of small businesses – except one. There were no bookstores. Then one day there was, the Patrick Henry bookstore. So there I headed. I dimly discerned a pattern but had no name for it. I came upon *None Dare Call It Treason*, bought it, read it, and was impressed by the torrent of footnotes.

My father, an inveterate reader, was intrigued, so we visited the store together. He looked around, silently, for some fifteen minutes, and we left. “What do you think?” I asked. “What I think,” he said, “is that they’re nuts.” I was puzzled. “Well,” he said, “what would you think of a bookstore—you see them downtown—that sold books only about Communist and Socialist ideas, that only praised them, and that attacked anything that wasn’t those? This is the other side of that coin.”

I became defensive. “Have you *ever* voted for a Democrat?” I asked. “Not for president,” he answered. “But I did vote for

Vito Marcantonio.” I already knew that man’s slogan: “They can call me pink, they can call me red, but they can’t call me yellow.” He certainly was a deep shade of pink (though not a Red), and he certainly was not yellow. *And he was a Republican.* So, put aside movements, I thought—but not fundamental values like freedom, patriotism, faith and its virtues. Don’t be mean, don’t jump to conclusions about people, and—Pop’s mantra—“always be a gentlemen.”

There: it’s not as though we don’t have a starting point, small to be sure, but more evident and consequential than it seems at first blush. A necessary second step is the restoration of memory, for there lies identity both National and Cultural. We need a new Max Lerner (my all-time favorite liberal public intellectual, along with Sidney Hook), Tony Brown, Tim Russert, William Safire, William Buckley . . . As in the centuries after the fall of Rome, when monasteries kept culture alive, oases of good sense must conserve common sense, especially with *informed collective memory*.

Mostly we need *pieties*—national and, more importantly, religious: more inclusive than in an earlier period and pointing out to us a transcendent order—not merely permitted but encouraged: at the very least to serve as a tranquilizer within the public square for our collective CTSD. No, not some national religion, nor even a third Great Revival, but a collective recognition that, just as theocracy is a menace, so is a fetishized a-theocracy. (Robert Morgan’s *100 Bible Verses That Made America*, not as devotional reading but as recovered history could help.)

After all, do not people, as Samuel Johnson taught us, need to be reminded more often than instructed? (What else is History

for?) Less roller derby, more normal race; less normal race
more normal dance: a restored Center, up and down the pyramid.
Nothing mysterious, of course, merely old, and doesn't sound
like much. Never has.

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