

SUSAN SONTAG

Styles of Radical Will



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What's Happening in America (1966)

[What follows is a response to a questionnaire sent out by the editors of *Partisan Review* in the summer of 1966 to a number of people. The questionnaire began: "There is a good deal of anxiety about the direction of American life. In fact, there is reason to fear that America may be entering a moral and political crisis." After more along these lines of understatement, contributors were invited to organize their replies around seven specific questions: 1. Does it matter who is in the White House? Or is there something in our system which would force any President to act as Johnson is acting? 2. How serious is the problem of inflation? The problem of poverty? 3. What is the meaning of the split between the Administration and the American intellectuals? 4. Is white America committed to granting equality to the American Negro? 5. Where do you

think our foreign policies are likely to lead us? 6. What, in general, do you think is likely to happen in America? 7. Do you think any promise is to be found in the activities of young people today?

My own response, reprinted below, appeared in the Winter 1967 issue of the magazine, along with contributions from Martin Duberman, Michael Harrington, Tom Hayden, Nat Hentoff, H. Stuart Hughes, Paul Jacobs, Tom Kahn, Leon H. Keyserling, Robert Lowell, Jack Ludwig, Jack Newfield, Harold Rosenberg, Richard H. Rovere, Richard Schlatter, and Diana Trilling.]

Everything that one feels about this country is, or ought to be, conditioned by the awareness of American *power*: of America as the arch-imperium of the planet, holding man's biological as well as his historical future in its King Kong paws. Today's America, with Ronald Reagan the new daddy of California and John Wayne chawing spareribs in the White House, is pretty much the same Yahoooland that Mencken was describing. The main difference is that what's happening in America matters so much more in the late 1960's than it did in the 1920's. Then, if one had tough innards, one might jeer, sometimes affectionately, at American barbarism and find American innocence somewhat endearing. Both the barbarism and the innocence are lethal, outsized today.

First of all, then, American power is indecent in its scale. But also the quality of American life is an insult to the possibilities of human growth; and the pollution of American space, with gadgetry and cars and TV and box architecture, brutalizes the senses, making gray neurotics of most of us, and perverse spiritual athletes and strident self-transcenders of the best of us.

Gertrude Stein said that America is the oldest country in the world. Certainly, it's the most conservative. It has the most to lose by change (sixty percent of the world's wealth owned by

a country containing six percent of the world's population). Americans know their backs are against the wall: "they" want to take all that away from "us." And, I think, America deserves to have it taken away.

Three facts about this country.

America was founded on a genocide, on the unquestioned assumption of the right of white Europeans to exterminate a resident, technologically backward, colored population in order to take over the continent.

America had not only the most brutal system of slavery in modern times but a unique juridical system (compared with other slaveries, say in Latin America and the British colonies) which did not, in a single respect, recognize slaves as persons.

As a country—as distinct from a colony—America was created mainly by the surplus poor of Europe, reinforced by a small group who were just *Europamiide*, tired of Europe (a literary catchword of the 1840s). Yet even the poorest knew both a "culture," largely invented by his social betters and administered from above, and a "nature" that had been pacified for centuries. These people arrived in a country where the indigenous culture was simply the enemy and was in process of being ruthlessly annihilated, and where nature, too, was the enemy, a pristine force, unmodified by civilization, that is, by human wants, which had to be defeated. After America was "won," it was filled up by new generations of the poor and built up according to the tawdry fantasy of the good life that culturally deprived, uprooted people might have at the beginning of the industrial era. And the country looks it.

Foreigners extol the American "energy," attributing to it both our unparalleled economic prosperity and the splendid vivacity of our arts and entertainments. But surely this is energy bad at its source and for which we pay too high a price, a hypernatural and humanly disproportionate dynamism that flays everyone's nerves raw. Basically it is the energy of

violence, of free-floating resentment and anxiety unleashed by chronic cultural dislocations which must be, for the most part, ferociously sublimated. This energy has mainly been sublimated into crude materialism and acquisitiveness. Into hectic philanthropy. Into benighted moral crusades, the most spectacular of which was Prohibition. Into an awesome talent for uglifying countryside and cities. Into the loquacity and torment of a minority of gadflies: artists, prophets, muckrakers, cranks, and nuts. And into self-punishing neuroses. But the naked violence keeps breaking through, throwing everything into question.

Needless to say, America is not the only violent, ugly, and unhappy country on this earth. Again, it is a matter of scale. Only three million Indians lived here when the white man arrived, rifle in hand, for his fresh start. Today American hegemony menaces the lives not of three million but of countless millions who, like the Indians, have never even *heard* of the "United States of America," much less of its mythical empire, the "free world." American policy is still powered by the fantasy of Manifest Destiny, though the limits were once set by the borders of the continent, whereas today America's destiny embraces the entire world. There are still more hordes of redskins to be mowed down before virtue triumphs; as the classic Western movies explain, the only good Red is a dead Red. This may sound like an exaggeration to those who live in the special and more finely modulated atmosphere of New York and its environs. Cross the Hudson. You find out that not just *some* Americans but virtually all Americans feel that way.

Of course, these people don't know what they're saying, literally. But that's no excuse. That, in fact, is what makes it all possible. The unquenchable American moralism and the American faith in violence are not just twin symptoms of some character neurosis taking the form of a protracted adolescence, which presages an eventual maturity. They constitute a full-grown, firmly installed national psychosis, founded, as are all psychoses, on the efficacious denial of reality. So far it's

worked. Except for portions of the South a hundred years ago, America has never known war. A taxi driver said to me on the day that could have been Armageddon, when America and Russia were on collision course off the shores of Cuba: "Me, I'm not worried. I served in the last one, and now I'm over draft age. They can't get me again. But I'm all for letting 'em have it right now. What are we waiting for? Let's get it over with." Since wars always happen Over There, and we always win, why not drop the bomb? If all it takes is pushing a button, even better. For America is that curious hybrid—an apocalyptic country and a valetudinarian country. The average citizen may harbor the fantasies of John Wayne, but he as often has the temperament of Jane Austen's Mr. Woodhouse.

To answer, briefly, some of the questions:

1. I do *not* think that Johnson is forced by "our system" to act as he is acting: for instance, in Vietnam, where each evening he personally chooses the bombing targets for the next day's missions. But I think there is something awfully wrong with a *de facto* system which allows the President virtually unlimited discretion in pursuing an immoral and imprudent foreign policy, so that the strenuous opposition of, say, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee counts for exactly nothing. The *de jure* system vests the power to make war in the Congress—with the exception, apparently, of imperialist ventures and genocidal expeditions. These are best left undeclared.

However, I don't mean to suggest that Johnson's foreign policy is the whim of a clique which has seized control, escalated the power of the Chief Executive, castrated the Congress, and manipulated public opinion. Johnson is, alas, all too representative. As Kennedy was not. If there is a conspiracy, it is (or was) that of the more enlightened national leaders hitherto largely selected by the Eastern-seaboard plutocracy. They engineered the precarious acquiescence to liberal goals that has prevailed in this country for over a generation—a

superficial consensus made possible by the strongly apolitical character of a decentralized electorate mainly preoccupied with local issues. If the Bill of Rights were put to a national referendum as a new piece of legislation, it would meet the same fate as New York City's Civilian Review Board. Most of the people in this country believe what Goldwater believes, and always have. But most of them don't know it. Let's hope they don't find out.

4. I do not think white America is committed to granting equality to the American Negro. So committed are only a minority of white Americans, mostly educated and affluent, few of whom have had any prolonged social contact with Negroes. This is a passionately racist country; it will continue to be so in the foreseeable future.

5. I think that this administration's foreign policies are likely to lead to more wars and to wider wars. Our main hope, and the chief restraint on American bellicosity and paranoia, lies in the fatigue and depoliticization of Western Europe, the lively fear of America and of another world war in Russia and the Eastern European countries, and the corruption and unreliability of our client states in the Third World. It's hard to lead a holy war without allies. But America is just crazy enough to try to do it.

6. The meaning of the split between the Administration and the intellectuals? Simply that our leaders are genuine yahoos, with all the exhibitionist traits of their kind, and that liberal intellectuals (whose deepest loyalties are to an international fraternity of the reasonable) are not *that* blind. At this point, moreover, they have nothing to lose by proclaiming their discontent and frustration. But it's well to remember that liberal intellectuals, like Jews, tend to have a classical theory of politics, in which the state has a monopoly of power; hoping that those in positions of authority may prove to be enlightened men, wielding power justly, they are natural, if cautious, allies of the "establishment." As the Russian Jews knew they had at least a chance with the Czar's officials but none at all with

marauding Cossacks and drunken peasants (Milton Himmel-farb has pointed this out), liberal intellectuals more naturally expect to influence the "decisions" of administrators than they do the volatile "feelings" of masses. Only when it becomes clear that, in fact, the government itself is being staffed by Cossacks and peasants, can a rupture like the present one take place. When (and if) the man in the White House who paws people and scratches his balls in public is replaced by the man who dislikes being touched and finds Yevtushenko "an interesting fellow," American intellectuals won't be so disheartened. The vast majority of them are not revolutionaries, wouldn't know how to be if they tried. Mostly a salaried professoriat, they're as much at home in the system when it functions a little better than it does right now as anyone else.

7. A somewhat longer comment on this last question.

Yes, I do find much promise in the activities of young people. About the only promise one can find anywhere in this country today is in the way some young people are carrying on, making a fuss. I include both their renewed interest in politics (as protest and as community action, rather than as theory) and the way they dance, dress, wear their hair, riot, make love. I also include the homage they pay to Oriental thought and rituals. And I include, not least of all, their interest in taking drugs—despite the unspeakable vulgarization of this project by Leary and others.

A year ago Leslie Fiedler, in a remarkably wrongheaded and interesting essay titled "The New Mutants," called attention to the fact that the new style of young people indicated a deliberate blurring of sexual differences, signaling the creation of a new breed of youthful androgens. The longhaired pop groups with their mass teenage following and the tiny elite of turned-on kids from Berkeley to the East Village were both lumped together as representatives of the "post-humanist" era now upon us, in which we witness a "radical metamorphosis of the Western male," a "revolt against masculinity," even "a rejection of conventional male potency." For Fiedler, this new

turn in personal mores, diagnosed as illustrating a "programmatic espousal of an anti-puritanical mode of existence," is something to deplore. (Though sometimes, in his characteristic have-it-both-ways manner, Fiedler seemed to be vicariously relishing this development, *mainly* he appeared to be lamenting it.) But why, he never made explicit. I think it is because he is sure such a mode of existence undercuts radical politics, and its moral visions, altogether. Being radical in the older sense (some version of Marxism or socialism or anarchism) meant to be attached still to traditional "puritan" values of work, sobriety, achievement, and family-founding. Fiedler suggests, as have Philip Rahv and Irving Howe and Malcolm Muggeridge among others, that the new style of youth must be, at bottom, apolitical, and their revolutionary spirit a species of infantilism. The fact that the same kid joins SNCC or boards a Polaris submarine or agrees with Conor Cruise O'Brien *and* smokes pot and is bisexual and adores the Supremes is seen as a contradiction, a kind of ethical fraud or intellectual weak-mindedness.

I don't believe this to be so. The depolarizing of the sexes, to mention the element that Fiedler observes with such fascination, is the natural, and desirable, next stage of the sexual revolution (its dissolution, perhaps) which has moved beyond the idea of sex as a damaged but discrete zone of human activity, beyond the discovery that "society" represses the free expression of sexuality (by fomenting guilt), to the discovery that the way we live and the ordinarily available options of character repress almost entirely the deep experience of pleasure, and the possibility of self-knowledge. "Sexual freedom" is a shallow, outmoded slogan. What, who is being liberated? For older people, the sexual revolution is an idea that remains meaningful. One can be for it or against it; if one is for it, the idea remains confined within the norms of Freudianism and its derivatives. But Freud *was* a puritan, or "a fink," as one of Fiedler's students distressingly blurted out. So was Marx. It is right that young people see beyond Freud and Marx. Let the

professors be the caretakers of this indeed precious legacy, and discharge all the obligations of piety. No need for dismay if the kids don't continue to pay the old dissenter-gods obeisance.

It seems to me obtuse, though understandable, to patronize the new kind of radicalism, which is post-Freudian and post-Marxist. For this radicalism is as much an experience as an idea. Without the personal experience, if one is looking in from the outside, it does look messy and almost pointless. It's easy to be put off by the youngsters throwing themselves around with their eyes closed to the near-deafening music of the discothèques (unless you're dancing, too), by the longhaired marchers carrying flowers and temple bells as often as "Get Out of Vietnam" placards, by the inarticulateness of a Mario Savio. One is also aware of the high casualty rate among this gifted, visionary minority among the young, the tremendous cost in personal suffering and in mental strain. The fakers, the slobs, and the merely flipped-out are plentiful among them. But the complex desires of the best of them: to engage and to "drop out"; to be beautiful to look at and touch as well as to be good; to be loving and quiet as well as militant and effective—these desires make sense in our present situation. To sympathize, of course, you have to be convinced that things in America really are as desperately bad as I have indicated. This is hard to see; the desperateness of things is obscured by the comforts and liberties that America does offer. Most people, understandably, don't really believe things are that bad. That's why, for them, the antics of this youth can be no more than a startling item in the passing parade of cultural fashions, to be appraised with a friendly but essentially weary and knowing look. The sorrowful look that says: I was a radical, too, when I was young. When are these kids going to grow up and realize what we had to realize, that things never are going to be really different, except maybe worse?

From my own experience and observation, I can testify that there is a profound concordance between the sexual revolu-

tion, redefined, and the political revolution, redefined. That being a socialist and taking certain drugs (in a fully serious spirit: as a technique for exploring one's consciousness, not as an anodyne or a crutch) are not incompatible, that there is no incompatibility between the exploration of inner space and the rectification of social space. What some of the kids understand is that it's the whole character structure of modern American man, and his imitators, that needs rehauling. (Old folks like Paul Goodman and Edgar Z. Friedenberg have, of course, been suggesting this for a long time.) That rehauling includes Western "masculinity," too. They believe that some socialist remodeling of institutions and the ascendance, through electoral means or otherwise, of better leaders won't really change anything. And they are right.

Neither do I dare deride the turn toward the East (or more generally, to the wisdoms of the non-white world) on the part of a tiny group of young people—however uninformed and jejune the adherence usually is. (But then, nothing could be more ignorant than Fiedler's insinuation that Oriental modes of thought are "feminine" and "passive," which is the reason the demasculinized kids are drawn to them.) Why shouldn't they look for wisdom elsewhere? If America is the culmination of Western white civilization, as everyone from the Left to the Right declares, then there must be something terribly wrong with Western white civilization. This is a painful truth; few of us want to go that far. It's easier, much easier, to accuse the kids, to reproach them for being "non-participants in the past" and "drop-outs from history." But it isn't real history Fiedler is referring to with such solicitude. It's just *our* history, which he claims is identical with "the tradition of the human," the tradition of "reason" itself. Of course, it's hard to assess life on this planet from a genuinely world-historical perspective; the effort induces vertigo and seems like an invitation to suicide. But from a world-historical perspective, that local history which some young people are repudiating (with their fondness for dirty words, their peyote, their macrobiotic rice, their

Dadaist art, etc.) looks a good deal less pleasing and less self-evidently worthy of perpetuation. The truth is that Mozart, Pascal, Boolean algebra, Shakespeare, parliamentary government, baroque churches, Newton, the emancipation of women, Kant, Marx, and Balanchine ballets don't redeem what this particular civilization has wrought upon the world. The white race is the cancer of human history; it is the white race and it alone—its ideologies and inventions—which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself. What the Mongol hordes threaten is far less frightening than the damage that Western "Faustian" man, with his idealism, his magnificent art, his sense of intellectual adventure, his world-devouring energies for conquest, has already done, and further threatens to do.

This is what some of the kids sense, though few of them could put it in words. Again, I believe them to be right. I'm not arguing that they're going to prevail, or even that they're likely to change much of anything in this country. But a few of them may save their own souls. America is a fine country for inflaming people, from Emerson and Thoreau to Mailer and Burroughs and Leo Szilard and John Cage and Judith and Julian Beck, with the project of trying to save their own souls. Salvation becomes almost a mundane, inevitable goal when things are so bad, really intolerable.

One last comparison, which I hope won't seem farfetched. The Jews left the ghetto in the early nineteenth century, thus becoming a people doomed to disappear. But one of the by-products of their fateful absorption into the modern world was an incredible burst of creativity in the arts, science, and secular scholarship—the relocation of a powerful but frustrated spiritual energy. These innovating artists and intellectuals were not alienated Jews, as is said so often, but people who were alienated *as* Jews.

I'm scarcely more hopeful for America than I am for the

Jews. This is a doomed country, it seems to me; I only pray that, when America founders, it doesn't drag the rest of the planet down, too. But one should notice that, during its long elephantine agony, America is also producing its subtlest minority generation of the decent and sensitive, young people who are alienated *as* Americans. They are not drawn to the stale truths of their sad elders (though these are truths). More of their elders should be listening to them.

(1966)