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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #102

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1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents

(Part One)

What is one to make of a society that can't or won't protect its children?

What is one to make of a society that harbors people like the oleaginously vile Ted Cruz, who when asked by a British correspondent why the United States seems so prone to mass shootings, smiled his smarmy smile, patted the inquirer on the

shoulder, and walked away. [1] Or Josh Hawley, the posturing populist, the junior senator from Missouri, son of a banker and a teacher, graduate of Stanford and Yale, the child of privilege inveighing against elites as if he were a masochist deriving pleasure from his own pain? [2]

What is one to make of a society in which, as we read in last week's ***Book Notes*** about Richard Hofstadter's ***The Paranoid Style in American Politics***, paranoia seems to be, whether on the left or right, America's default political setting?

Which might actually be the sane response to a society that at times seems to challenge common sense notions of the commonweal, for as Andy Grove, founder of the computer chip manufacturer Intel, said when titling his autobiography, ***Only the Paranoid Survive***. [3]

What is one to make of a society which in its first 227 years failed only once to peacefully transfer power from one presidential administration to the next, but in the past five years and two presidential elections has seen first in 2017 a slew of books from the camp of the defeated riffing off Sinclair Lewis's ***It Can't Happen Here*** warning that "it could happen here," analyzing how democracies die, giving George Orwell's ***1984*** yet another moment atop the best seller lists and poring over Madeleine Albright's ***Fascism: A Warning***? Or, in 2021, the spectacle of a defeated incumbent president spouting lies about a stolen election, egging on a crowd to storm the Capitol Building, and, on a comparatively trivial note, for only the fourth time in American history not attending his successor's inauguration all the while whining "Stop the Steal"? [4]

In 2017, the sanguine said the paranoic spasm would pass; five years later their sanguinity seems less reassuring as figures on the right, including that former president of the United States, mutter that civil war might be necessary to save the country, white supremacists shoot up supermarkets, and deranged teenagers, who can't legally buy a beer, buy assault rifles and massacre fourth-graders.

What to make of such a society?

How did we get to now?

Dialing down the paranoia, regardless of your political persuasion, witnessing the recent primary elections in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, it's hard to argue that American politics doesn't seethe with culture wars.

It's culture wars all the time.

Elections no longer hinge on specific policy proposals regarding the economy, infrastructure, taxation, etc. When such proposals are put forth without regard to who sponsors them, they tend to get, if not widespread, at least some general agreement. But they are rarely or never discussed in a neutral fashion, for our politics now almost exclusively focus on socially fraught arguments about core values.

On the Republican side we see U.S. Rep. Mike Kelly (R-Pa., 16th Dist.) running on a platform of "faith, family, and freedom" or Ohio and Pennsylvania senatorial candidates J.D. Vance, Josh Mandel, Senate nominee Mehmet Oz, and Kathy Barnette trying to out MAGA one another; on the Democratic side candidates like Conor Lamb and U.S. Senate nominee John Fetterman trying to talk policies and programs but needing to pivot to individual rights to be heard amidst the emotional noise clouding our current divide.

Why the divergence?

How did American politics become a seemingly endless argument about core values?

As we'll see, one can argue that it always has been like this. Recently, during a conversation with a retired high government official who had spent decades in service to the U.S. Senate, the official observed, somewhat dispiritedly but with a vague note of hope, that we've been here before and survived. His example, however, was not exactly encouraging. He noted that in 1858 arch-abolitionist Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner was attacked on the floor of the Senate. Congressman Preston Brooks, a pro-slavery Democrat from South Carolina, beat Sumner with a walking cane to the point of being near comatose. Sumner survived to see in 1865 the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution banning slavery enacted. Of course, in the interim the United States fought a Civil War in which 620,000 Americans died in the line of duty, roughly 2 percent of the population. To put that in perspective, today that 2 percent represents about six million people. [5]

So, yes, we've been here before and survived, but barely and at a terrible cost. That cost might still be being paid, for it can be plausibly argued that our current travail surrounding racial relations and arguments about state rights are issues those 620,000 American deaths failed to resolve.

Thoughts of incipient civil war aside, since the 1960s those arguments have grown increasingly intense until we are now approaching a cusp moment that might well determine whether or not the American experiment ends permanently or fractures into competing regions – red and blue states or red and blue regions within states of either hue vying with one another.

Some six years ago, I began thinking about the American story, whether there was such a thing and what it might be. My naïve assumption was that if Americans could only get their story straight, then they could live together in that "domestic tranquility" the U.S. Constitution's *Preamble* says it was established to ensure. Beginning with a look at the 1960s in a series titled ***The Far Side of the Moon & the Birth of the Culture Wars: America in 1968***, then for the past several years ***The American Tapestry Project*** and its spin-off ***American Holidays,*** I have explored the shifting nature of American society and its politics.

The naivete in my assumption spun two threads. One, that there was a story and, two, that getting the story straight involved simply discovering the key facts, the key objects about which Americans agreed, whether they were as profound as those truths we espouse about liberty, equality, and opportunity or as banal as a common passion for football, barbecue, and Santa Claus (the ruddy cheeked version of which, although a European import, is an American invention).

Alas, if it were only that simple. During these six years, I discovered there is not one American story but many American stories that even when woven metaphorically into a tapestry of American stories do not tell a single, unified story accepted by all Americans.

And that, as has been said before, is a problem.

For as Joan Didion asserted, "We tell ourselves stories to make sense of our experience."

The "sense-making," the meaning a society's stories reveal creates that society's culture, for stories create culture and not the other way around. Like the strands of DNA in a gene's double-helix, experience and stories seeking those experiences' meaning intertwine in a complex dance.

A culture, as we know, binds a people together around a shared set of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Since the 1960s, Americans have increasingly realized that perhaps they no longer share a common understanding of their supposedly shared values, attitudes, and beliefs. They have begun to believe that they no longer share a common understanding of the American story; that they no longer share a common vision for America's future. When I asked a thoughtful, conservative friend of mine why people were so angry, he replied "Because they think they're losing their culture."

When that happens, when people begin to think they are losing their culture, it means those delicate strands of intertwining stories are fragmenting and breaking and, when they do, the shared culture they created begins to unravel.

One symptom of that unraveling is our increasingly frequent arguments about stories – about narratives, to use a fancier term – about what and whose stories tell the story of America and what America means. It's what, for example, the history wars are all about. It's what the debate about critical race theory is all about. It's what, in a certain sense, the abortion debate is all about. It is becoming increasingly clear it is really the most recent twist in the sequence of stories seeking to understand and define women's role in American society.

It's an argument about what America means, what it means to be an American and who gets to be an American.

And, most importantly, it's an argument about who gets to tell the story – the stories – answering all of those questions.

This argument in many ways is as old as America itself. It might even predate the creation in 1789 of the American political state. There are many threads – many stories – in the tapestry of American stories, but I now realize there are two meta-threads, if you will, in the tapestry of American stories.

While in some ways they are the obverse and reverse of the same story, they also conflict with one another in core – foundational – fundamental – ways. For they tell the story of two Americas with very different visions for the future – with very different understandings about what America means.

What are these two stories – these two meta-threads in the American tapestry?

First, let's define some terms. In philosophy, essentialism is "the idea that things have basic characteristics that make them what they are" and that these characteristics cannot be changed. [6] A thing is what it is, what it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. Essence precedes existence. It cannot change; it is incapable of evolving or adapting to changing conditions.

When applied to a culture, it suggests that the culture is frozen in place, that it is frozen in time. It is what it is; it can become no more. Unable to adapt, it lingers on in a static condition gradually withering until it dies. A process, to be sure, that can take a very long time. So long a time it can, for some, provide a sense of security.

Existentialism, on the other hand, "emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development …" [7]

More important for our purposes, it means that an individual or a society is in a constant state of becoming, evolving from its essence to adapt to changing circumstances so that it cannot only survive but flourish. True to its origins, its essence, which is only a beginning, it grows and matures, widens, and deepens in response to a changing world seeking in its fullness to be, as in the old Army ad, "all it can be."

For our purposes and admittedly risking oversimplification, the essentialist American story says that this is what America is, that it is unchanging; it is a story that looks to the past. The existential American story says that America is the story of two key sub-threads that constantly renew, redefine, and adapt themselves to the ever-changing, to the ever-shifting shape and contour of the American reality. It is a story that looks to the future seeking that more perfect Union of which the U.S. Constitution speaks.

Let me be more specific.

The existential story – the story that sees America as an ongoing experiment in human freedom and liberty – is the story of two intertwined threads.

One is the story of self-government – of government of, by and for the people – of a people's attempt to prove that humans can govern themselves. In ***The Federalist Papers: Number 1*** it is what Alexander Hamilton referred to when he said the American experiment would prove "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." [8] It is what Abraham Lincoln said was "the last best hope of earth." [9]

The existential story's second thread is the story of the "We" in "We the People." It is the story of the ever-increasing inclusiveness of that "We" as Americans attempt the exceedingly difficult challenge of governing themselves while constantly redefining the "themselves," the "We" at the heart of the American experiment. It has evolved from the 1790s Naturalization Act, which limited American citizenship to "free white persons," [10] to the post-1965 Immigration Act's reopening of America to people of virtually every hue and ethnicity in the world.

It's an inclusionary story.

Not everyone thinks that is a good idea.

The other meta-thread, the essentialist story, is an exclusionary story.

It is a story of government by the few for the few and the exclusion of all others. Where the inclusionary story is democratic (small "d"), the exclusionary story is oligarchic; where the inclusionary story seeks to increase the meaning of the "We" in "We the People," the exclusionary story seeks to restrict membership to those who look, think, and act like them.

It reserves America only for a subset of its people. At its most extreme, it is white, Christian, patriarchal ethno-nationalism. More subtly, it shades the "white" for it is possible to be an "honorary white" if one accepts its other tenets. At its most benign, the essentialist story seeks to re-establish what it identifies as traditional institutions and traditional values, by which it means traditional gender roles, nuclear families, a deregulated market economy, and a bleached out, judgmental Christianity based more on the Book of Revelation and less on The Sermon on the Mount.

As Nate Hochman, a fellow at the National Review, pointed out in a perceptive essay, it is not really about religion at all. It is about a worldview held by a growing number of people "the sociologist Donald Warren called "Middle American radicals, or M.A.R.s." [11] As Hochman notes quoting Matthew Rose, "M.A.R.s feel that they are members of an exploited class – excluded from real political representation, harmed by conventional tax and trade policies, victimized by crime and social deviance and denigrated by popular culture and elite institutions … they unapologetically place citizens over foreigners, the normal over the transgressive and fidelity to a homeland over cosmopolitan ideals." [12]

Its adherents want to freeze frame America in some older, "Father Knows Best" version of an America that never was. They want to make America great again by returning to some mythical past when everyone resembled them, thought like them, and acted like them. That that world never existed troubles them deeply, for why else would they not want history taught?

These two stories are admittedly pole points and easily caricatured; there are many intermediate shades, but they never quite mesh in the middle. The absence of a middle where these two stories can coexist is what is meant by people of both the right and the left who endlessly quote Yeats' "the center cannot hold."

While they never quite meet, these two stories share many threads in common. Sometimes adherents of one uses the values of the other to justify their position; at other times, they deny the other's very legitimacy – the legitimacy of their claims to be included in the American story.

Regardless of what date you care to say America began, these two meta-threads, these two meta-stories' plot lines and themes have defined American culture – American political culture – from the beginning.

At times, one has predominated; at others, the other.

But the strain and competition between these two competing visions of America are in many ways the story of America.

So, with that admittedly very general background in mind, how did we get to now – to a 2022 when American politics, American culture seem incurably polarized, when leaders cannot even speak coherently about the massacre of innocents – to a 2022 polarized by these two visions of America openly confronting one another?

Well, it goes back to the beginning, but in almost any serious, and many not so serious, conversations, you will hear the essentialists say, "it all went wrong in the 1960s."

Smithsonian magazine said 1968 was the year America shattered. So, using 1968 as a hinge year, what, to paraphrase a song from that era, "if the times we're a-changin, what changed in 1968"?

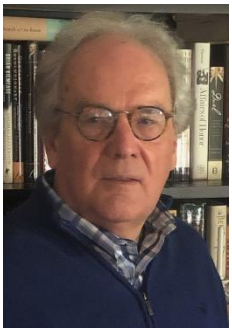
In the next seven ***Book Notes***, which collectively are the skeleton of a book I might or might not ever write, we'll explore what changed in America after 1968, its roots in American history and how it reaches down to today. Almost everything in American politics and culture is either an expansion or an attempt to refute and ultimately to undo ideas and values that blossomed in the 1960s.

Recognizing that the seeds of our discontent go way back in American history, we'll use 1968 as a benchmark year – as a signpost, as the hinge year – the year after which everything changed.

So, what are 1968's major signposts, the major hinge events that like the Roman God Janus look both to America's past and America's future?

To put some kind of frame around it, we'll look at six issues, or more accurately, six clusters of issues emerging out of 1968: Politics as Angry Partisanship and Theater; Race in America; Gender – Women's' Rights Morphs into Women's Liberation; The Counterculture; Music, Music, Music; Media: Mediated America; and what I consider to be the hope for a better future, The Fusion Thread.

Next week in ***Book Notes #103:*** *Politics as Angry Partisanship and Theater*, or what did Roger Ailes mean when he said Richard Nixon would be the last politician elected President – all the rest would be entertainers?



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End Notes

1. Archie, Ayana. *"Ted Cruz walks away from a reporter who asked why the U.S. has so many mass shootings"* at **NPR/*WQLN*** available here accessed May 30, 2022.
2. Cf. Hawley, Josh. *"The Age of Pelagius"* in **Christianity Today** (June 4, 2019) available here accessed May 30, 2022.
3. Cf. Grove, Andy. ***Only the Paranoid Survive: How to Exploit the Crisis Points That Challenge Every Company.*** (New York: Currency, a Crown Publishers Imprint, 1999).
4. The other three are the petulant Adamses and Andrew Johnson. John Adams, who, skulking away in the dead of night, snubbed Thomas Jefferson; John Quincy Adams, offended that four years earlier Andrew Jackson avoided him prior to his inauguration, in 1832 left Washington the day before Jackson's inauguration; and Andrew Johnson, the first impeached president, refused to attend Ulysses S. Grant's 1868 inauguration. Cf. *"Transitions at the White House"* at **The White House Historical Association** available here accessed May 30, 2022.
5. *"Civil War Casualties"* at **American Battlefield Trust** available here accessed May 30, 2022.
6. *"Essentialism"* in **The Cambridge Dictionary** available here accessed May 31, 2022.
7. *"Existentialism"* in **Oxford Languages** available here accessed May 31, 2022.
8. Hamilton, Alexander. *"The Federalist Papers: No. 1"* at **The Avalon Project, Yale Law School** available here accessed May 31, 2022.
9. Lincoln, Abraham. *"Annual Message to Congress – Concluding Remarks, Washington, D.C. December 1, 1862"* at **Abraham Lincoln Online** available here accessed May 31, 2022.
10. *"Nationality Act of 1790"* at **Immigration History** available here accessed May 31, 2022.
11. Hochman, Nate. *"What Comes After the Religious Right?"* in **The New York Times** available here accessed June 5, 2022.
12. Ibid.

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