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How the Other Half Lives

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CHAPTER 5

How the Other Half Lives

The American identity, as it began to develop in the new nation at the end of the 18th century, was imagined and written in New England, imagined and crafted separately by the southern white elite, and endured in the West. The great debates of the country in the 19th century centered on the conflicting views of North and South, reaching their peak with the outbreak of the Civil War. The West, in the context of this divide, either continued to be seen as grounds for extension of the North/South conflict or was ignored. Ignored, that is, until toward the end of the century when it became the new symbol of a grand American unity, myths concerning it even then crafted by the intellectual elite of New England and by East Coast writers generally.

In addition, while New England and New York were developing the first real American intellectual and artistic culture and the South was building its antebellum “paradise” on the backs of slaves, the Borderers of the West were busily engaged in a genocide that no one wanted to praise or even admit was happening. At the same time, they were eking out a living on land that often, as soon as they tried to lay claim to it, already seemed to be “owned” by someone from the East. The Borderers had no time for the “fully articulated pastoral idea of America”¹ that had emerged on the back of the Enlightenment and that was popular as an ideal in the East. Whatever garden they could find or create or conquer or defend was not often even theirs for very long. More frequently than we imagine, they were forced once again to move farther west and start from scratch—again. Poverty breathed down their necks; little of their lives would ever qualify as “pastoral.”
Given the romantic vision that had grown up even then concerning the frontier, it must have been quite a shock for many from the coast during the 19th century when they encountered the reality of the west instead. Any sense of the “pastoral ideal” that, according to Leo Marx, had been building for so long in New England would have been quickly smashed. Easterners from areas that had been home to established European-based communities for more than a century must have felt that they had found a completely alien culture when they met the real frontier. Expecting to find Americans of a familiar type, they would certainly have been confused—if not scared half to death, creating an image that later would become the basis for the Eastern “dude” in tales of the West.

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If, as some of those in the East had argued, the landscape makes the man, then why were the backwoods folk so “devolved,” so unlike their eastern countrymen? The land, after all, was abundant, filled with possibility. Why had the white people on the frontier not become, if they needed to change at all, more like the “noble” Native Americans? Such questions must have bedeviled any observant easterner as he or she traveled west. Writing about Robert Beverley’s *History of the Present State of Virginia*, which was first published at the beginning of the 18th century, Marx says, “The new garden of the world, which Beverley has celebrated as the cause of all that is most admirable in the joyous Indian culture, now appears to have had a bad effect upon the English.”

Beverly was not seeing the progress he had expected or a new and growing “society” (in the English sense of the word, almost one of class) on the frontier. All he found were people just as “base” as their ancestors had been back on the England/Scotland border—people a lot less sophisticated (in English terms) than those in the older, coastal colonics. Travelers for the next three centuries found much the same.

Numerous theories were put forward to explain the differences between the uncouth of the frontier and then settled “interior” of America and the civilized of the coast. Some writers actually blamed the land that had seemed so promising (as Beverly was coming to conclude at the end of his book), others blamed class distinctions, and still others saw the lack of civilizing government as the problem. Unfortunately, as all the writers were from the East (or from Europe) until well into the 19th century, those actually from the frontier culture had no voice in the discussion, no ability to ground the debate in the actual facts of the matter. As they would remain for generations more, they had been made mute. Few outsiders understood either their
perspective or their background, allowing erroneous conceptions to be put forward unchallenged and then to become received wisdom.

Because his own opinions were so rarely heard, it proved easy to romanticize the frontier farmer, transforming him "into a cult figure. Instead of striving for wealth, status, and power, he may be said to live a good life in a rural retreat: he rests content with a few simple possessions, enjoys freedom from envying others, fells little or no anxiety about his property, and, above all, he does what he likes to do." It was only when the fans of the pastoral actually came into contact with backwoods folk (which was rare, admittedly) that such views were challenged—and the blame, then, was placed not on the ideas but on the people who were not living up to standards others had imagined for them. It was the farmers' fault; they must have allowed themselves to become debased. So disillusioning was this to the East that, according to Henry Nash Smith, "in the early nineteenth century ... the farmer could be depicted in fiction only as a member of a low social class."4

To account for the cultural slide that they thought they were seeing (or hearing about) on the frontier, many writers came to promote a theory of social stages which places the West below the East in a sequence to which both belong. The West has no meaning in itself because the only value recognized by the theory of civilization is the refinement which is believed to increase steadily as one moves from primitive simplicity and coarseness toward the complexity and polish of urban life. The values that are occasionally found in the West are anomalous instances of conformity to a standard that is actually foreign to the region.5

In other words, the frontier had no culture—and it was the duty of the East to impose one. Here again, we have one of the classic patterns of colonialism, the metropole putatively bringing "civilization" for the benefit of the local population of the periphery—while lining its own pockets, of course. Furthermore, "the notion that the lore and the mores of the backwoodsman might be interesting without reference to his function as a standard-bearer of progress and civilization, or his alarming and exciting barbarism, or his embodiment of a natural goodness, was quite late in appearing."6 The resulting newer myth was created once the idea of the debased frontiersman had outlived its usefulness, the greater myth of an inclusive "manifest destiny" making it seem out of keeping with the newer ideas of American progress. Reflecting the views popular as the 19th century progressed to its end, Andrew Carnegie, an immigrant himself (from Scotland), saw the Americans as one culture, writing
that “they are essentially British.” Those who could not live up to that, again, were ignored or seen as debased anomalies.

One of the only differences between traditional conceptions of colonialism and the colonialism going on as the American West was settled by Europeans was that many of the people being colonized, the Borderers who had already arrived, were little different in language and bodily appearance from their “saviors.” Almost all of them were white. What was going on, we find when we step away from the traditional myths of westward expansion in America, was a pattern little different from that of the internal colonialism that Michael Hechter explores, colonialism that occurred back in the British Isles themselves. One significant difference, of course, was that this colonial activity came fast on the heels of an earlier type of colonization but by a different group (the Borderers themselves) that was one of conquest and displacement. What remains clear, however, is that a much greater percentage of Americans than is generally admitted come from traditions where they have felt the brunt of colonialism even after the Revolution rather than simply having been the colonizers. For many of us from both cultures, our ancestors have been both colonizer and colonized, but the experience of the Borderers lasted long after real independence came to the secular-liberal culture of the coast.

Aside from (or in addition to) the English Enlightenment tradition that bypassed, for the most part, Borderers and Borderer-based communities, coastal American thinkers were developing their own ideas of community and individual interaction, ideas quite different from what was growing on the frontiers, growing with little notice in the East. After all, the coast looked to the West primarily in commercial terms and as an outlet for excess population. It did not expect to find independent intellectual activity there.

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Though today’s Tea Partiers and fundamentalist Christians (both descendants of Borderer culture) try to gainsay it, the United States was founded on Enlightenment principles that excluded religion, for example, from the public political sphere and made science and “rational thought” the pillars for what was hoped would be a new type of society. Though the secular-liberal founders of the country themselves tried to deny it—even going so far as to construct the Constitution in both a populist and an elitist fashion (witness the distinct structures of the House of Representatives and the Senate)—most of them were elitists in terms of both class and culture. They believed that most of their fellow Americans were not as “enlightened” as they were and that the vast majority needed instruction as well as learned
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guidance. Take Benjamin Franklin: As John Cawelti claims, his “conception of self-improvement was closely related to his belief in the necessity of a self-selecting and self-disciplining elite, men of virtue voluntarily assuming the leadership of society.” Like many of today’s elitists, he skipped over cultural distinctions by substituting this idea of self-selection for success and leadership—something that was as much a fiction in the 18th century as it is in the 21st.

Franklin himself followed a long tradition of Americans who have felt they could best tell others how to manage their lives. In fact, according to Richard Weiss, even the later success literature bears much resemblance to the prescriptive writings of the divines of seventeenth-century New England. These Puritan guides gave advice on the achievement of material success, but always in the context of a larger framework of values. More than lists of commercial maxims, these writings were essays on the general conduct of life.

At first, the Borderers fled this sort of admonition, especially when it came from those who saw Borderer culture only as a degraded form of their own. However, by the end of the 19th century, Borderers, like many other Americans, were embracing it as their own—as can be seen in the popularity across the cultures of such phenomena as the Lyceum movement, New Thought, Chautauqua, and others that sparked what Weiss calls “success literature” and that promoted a new conception of self-reliance. The impact of these, however, was somewhat different on the Borderers than it was on secular-liberal Americans.

Franklin, as we can easily imagine, probably would have been reluctant to put the distinctions between what he saw as classes of Americans into cultural terms. “Human happiness and social welfare were, in Franklin’s view, dependent on two things: teaching prudence and self-restraint to the mass of men and encouraging the development of a new self-made leadership composed of men of practical ability and disinterested benevolence.” The elite would assist those rising to join them from the masses, no matter their backgrounds—something that anyone who watches societies in practice (not in the ideal) knows is not going to happen. In reality, we assist those who are “like us” much more than we help others. Sometimes we actually impede the progress of those furthest from us in similarity. Ability and drive are much lower on the list of criteria we look out for.

As time went on and at least some people began to see the limits of Franklin’s ideals, presentation of the vision that Franklin tried to promote
became more and more restrained. As Cawelti, again, explains, "Later philosophers of success followed Franklin in the assumption that the new elite would select itself, but they narrowed Franklin's ideal of intellectual, moral, and economic improvement to a conception of individual economic achievement." This did not have the result of slowing the growth of the idea that anyone can make it on their own, if only they are willing to put in the right effort. If anything, by narrowing the focus to economic success only, such writers fertilized it. No longer did you have to be good to be successful, though many began to believe that if you were successful, you were good.

At the same time, in the eyes of people from the secular-liberal tradition growing out of the English Enlightenment, there was indeed another criterion for success, a social one. There was only one "right" way to the cultural top, and that did not include either financial success alone or what Borderer culture might feel its members might be able to do for themselves. Conforming to the secular-liberal norm was required. Borderers could rarely cross that bar.

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Though attitudes toward the Borderers as uncouth and unlearned were seconded by coastal Americans, they could be seen most clearly through the eyes of the British who, paradoxically, often saw only one American whole, an essentially Borderer one:

The contrast between nineteenth-century English and American attitudes toward self-improvement appeared often in the comments of English travelers in America. Mrs. Trollope, who visited America in the 1830's, was stupefied by the pride that leading Americans took in the fact that they were self-taught and self-made, which, as she acidly remarked, meant to her only that they were badly taught and badly made. Mrs. Frances Trollope was a delightful writer (one can see where her son Anthony gained his talent), but she was the product of a society of rigid class lines, where learning was defined from the top, as were fashion and style. She recounts a conversation she had while on the road:

For the great part of this day we had the good fortune to have a gentleman and his daughter for our fellow-travellers, who were extremely intelligent and agreeable; but I nearly got myself into a scrape by venturing to remark upon a phrase used by the gentleman, and which had met me at every corner from the time I first entered the country. We had been talking of pictures, and I had endeavoured to adhere to
the rule I had laid down for myself, of saying very little, where I could say nothing agreeable. At length he named an American artist, with whose works I was very familiar, and after having declared him equal to Lawrence (judging by his portrait of West, now at New York), he added, "and what is more, madam, he is perfectly self-taught."

I prudently took a few moments before I answered; for the equalling our immortal Lawrence to a most vile dauber stuck in my throat; I could not say Amen; so for some time I said nothing; but, at last, I remarked on the frequency with which I had heard this phrase of self-taught used, not as an apology, but as positive praise.

"Well, madam, can there be a higher praise?"

"Certainly not, if spoken of the individual merits of a person, without the means of instruction, but I do not understand it when applied as praise to his works."

"Not understand it, madam? Is it not attributing genius to the author, and what is teaching compared to that?"

I do not wish to repeat all my own bons mots in praise of study, and on the disadvantages of profound ignorance, but I would, willingly, if I could, give an idea of the mixed indignation and contempt expressed by our companion at the idea that study was necessary to the formation of taste, and to the development of genius. At last, however, he closed the discussion thus,—"There is no use in disputing a point that is already settled, madam; the best judges declare that Mr. H—g's portraits are equal to that of Lawrence."

"Who is it who has passed this judgement, sir?"

"The men of taste of America, madam."

I then asked him, if he thought it was going to rain. Amusing, but Mrs. Trollope is completely unwilling to contemplate that there might be other aesthetics equal to her own from the English gentry—or that there might be other forms of "study" than those with which she was familiar. At another point, she writes,

The social system of Mr. Jefferson, if carried into effect, would make of mankind an unamalgamated mass of grating atoms, where the darling "I'm as good as you," would soon take place of the law and the Gospel. As it is, his principles, though happily not fully put in action, have yet produced most lamentable results. The assumption of equality, however empty, is sufficient to tincture the manners of the poor with brutal insolence, and subjects the rich to the paltry expediency of sanctioning the falsehood, however deep their conviction that it is such. It cannot, I think, be denied that the great men of America attain to power and to fame, by eternally uttering what they know to be untrue.
American citizens are not equal. Did Washington feel them to be so, when his word outweighed (so happily for them) the votes of thousands? Did Franklin think that all were equal when he shouldered his way from the printing press to the cabinet? True, he looked back in high good humour, and with his kindest smile told the poor devils whom he left behind, that they were all his equals; but Franklin did not speak the truth, and he knew it. The great, the immortal Jefferson himself, he who when past the three score years and ten, still taught young females to obey his nod, and so became the father of unnumbered generations of groaning slaves, what was his matin and his vesper hymn? “All men are born free and equal.” Did the venerable father of the gang believe it? Or did he too purchase his immortality by a lie? 14

Mrs. Trollope puts her finger on one of the core problems with the American myth—and it is no wonder her book caused such disapprobation in America. But she remains chained to her own biases. Like many East Coast Americans and other English visitors, she is unable to see beyond her own conceptions of class and culture—and of whom one counts as a “man”—in her vision of the American West.

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Though the two great American cultures, the Borderer and the secular-liberal, continued to grow side by side, never quite melding, there was still a great deal of influence, one upon the other. Quite a few from the coast joined the movement west, many of them integrating into Borderer culture. Some Borderer figures, such as Abraham Lincoln and Samuel Clemens, were able to learn to negotiate the coastal culture well enough to operate in it extremely successfully despite their roots. Others also proved influential on both sides of the divide though they came from the East. Perhaps the most important of these during the 19th century (and beyond) was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lines of his, like “A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think,”15 resonated as much with Borderers and their growing myth of self-sufficiency as with easterners who, for the most part, could only dream of a self-reliance that those on the frontier actually struggled to attain (but rarely did) on a daily basis. “The American Scholar” and “Self-Reliance” in particular are replete with phrases that rang true, though for different reasons of course, with 19th-century Americans of almost every sort.

In many ways, Emerson is an earlier and deeper Ayn Rand, a real scholar and thinker instead of a simpler manipulator of words and stories who is attempting to find ways to suit her extant predilections and to remake a
solitary point. He believed quite as strongly in the individual as she would, a
century later, but expressed his belief in a much more accommodating and
encompassing framework and upon careful consideration of the alternatives
—and as part of a broader and fuller philosophical exploration. In “The
American Scholar,” he writes, “In self-trust, all the virtues are compre-
hended. Free should the scholar be,—free and brave. Free even to the defini-
tion of freedom, ‘without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own
constitution.’ Brave; for fear is a thing, which a scholar by his very function
puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance.” Like Franklin,
Emerson would ideally like to bring every person to this point or would, at
least, allow it. Rand would not even bother; it is all up to each individual—
even to discover the possibility. There is an expansiveness to Emerson that
rings true to many people but particularly to Americans raised up in the indi-
vidualist traditions of both the Borderers and the secular-liberals:

Another sign of our times, also marked by an analogous political move-
ment, is, the new importance given to the single person. Every thing
that tends to insulate the individual,—to surround him with barriers
of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man
shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state;—tends
to true union as well as greatness. “I learned,” said the melancholy
Pestalozzi, “that no man in God’s wide earth is either willing or able
to help any other man.” Help must come from the bosom alone. The
scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of
the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future.
He must be an university of knowledges. If there be one lesson more
than another, which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing,
the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not
yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of
Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all.17

Again, this is an expansive vision, one open to all—quite different from
the parsimonious dreams of Rand and of those in the 21st century who
follow her.

In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson makes clear that he sees a difference between
individualism and selfishness, with individualism the more noble:

I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you.
If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot,
I will still seek to deserve that you should. I will not hide my tastes or
aversions. I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly
before the sun and moon whatever only rejoices me, and the heart appoints. If you are noble, I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions. If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. 18

He proclaims the value of society but sees its limits, though "it is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views." 19 Finally, though, for all his broad idealism, Emerson falls into the trap that ensnares many who extol self reliance:

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it. Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare? Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton? Every great man is a unique. 20

In fact, all of the "geniuses" he mentioned were instructed and made it their business to accept instruction and to take to heart its lessons. Their "master" was tradition and was the heritage of language and of the knowledge of generations. The "geniuses" may have been unique, but they all and always used what others had done before them.

Like his friend Henry David Thoreau, Emerson held something of a naive though beautiful and laudable view of what the individual could do in the world, a view that stemmed, in part perhaps, from that old wishful pastoral vision of the world as a garden—a different genesis from the worldview of the Borderers but with much similarity all the same and, over the years since, showing much influence over developing Borderer attitudes.

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Written in response to the British writer and philosopher Thomas Carlyle's 1829 essay "Signs of the Times," which Marx depicts as a "passionate attack upon the 'Age of Machinery,'" 21 Timothy Walker's North American Review article "Defense of Mechanical Philosophy" also presents an argument quite in keeping with the sentiments of Borderers. The people of the frontier, as I have indicated, never had much interest in the myth of the pastoral, seeing their
environment only as something to be fought and conquered—and used—by any means necessary. This attitude continues today. In his depiction of what he sees as Carlyle's doom-and-gloom attitude, Walker foretells similar attitudes by contemporary conservatives against what they see as the handwringers over global warming and environmental destruction. Writing specifically about Carlyle's attitudes, he says that

throughout the whole article ... he draws most cheerless conclusions from the course which human affairs are taking. If the writer do not, as he humanely assures us in the end, ultimately despair of the destinies of our ill-starred race, he does, nevertheless, perceive baleful influences hanging over us. Noxious ingredients are working in the caldron. He has detected the 'midnight hag' that threw them in, and her name is Mechanism. A more malevolent spirit, in his estimation, does not come from the hateful abodes. The fated inhabitants of this planet are now under her pernicious sway, and she is most industriously plotting against their weal.\textsuperscript{22}

He goes on to state his counterposition, again not unlike that of contemporary "red staters":

We cannot perceive that Mechanism, as such, has yet been the occasion of any injury to man. Some liberties, it is true, have been taken with Nature by this same presumptuous intermeddler. Where she denied us rivers, Mechanism has supplied them. Where she left our planet uncomfortably rough, Mechanism has applied the roller. Where her mountains have been found in the way, Mechanism has boldly levelled or cut through them.\textsuperscript{23}

All that we have are tools and resources given to us by God; therefore, we have the God-given right—duty, in fact—to use those tools and resources for our own betterment:

When we attempt to convey an idea of the infinite attributes of the Supreme Being, we point to the stupendous machinery of the universe. From the ineffable harmony and regularity, which pervade the whole vast system, we deduce the infinite power and intelligence of the Creating Mind. Now we can perceive no reason, why a similar course should not be pursued, if we would form correct concepts of the dignity and glory of man. Look at the changes he has effected on the earth; so great, that could the first men revisit their mortal abodes, they could scarcely recognize the planet they once inhabited.\textsuperscript{24}
Anyone who has ever walked behind a plow understands the advantage of the tractor to a degree well beyond the understanding of the writer who simply appreciates the evolution from the quill to the typewriter to the computer.

The intellectuals of the East and of Britain saw a difference between the mechanical world and the natural world that few Borderers were quick to accept. As poor farmers, for the most part, they interacted with the natural world on a level no longer even possible for the city dwellers and the gentry of the 18th century, who had already experienced the split between the lives they now led and the land, a split that becomes the heart of the urban experience. What the urban people and the intellectual elite (and even those who became the new working class) would feel to be a further alienation from nature through machines was seen, in agricultural places, as simply an augmentation of processes that had gone on for generations. Mechanization allowed farmers to do more with land with a little less physical effort, but the change is one of degree, not substance. Where the city dweller might see a break with the past, the farmer may very well only see a continuum of advancement:

We cannot go back to the origin of mankind and trace them down to the present time, without believing it to be a part of the providence of God, that his creatures should be perpetually advancing. The first men must have been profoundly ignorant, except so far as the Supreme Being communicated with them directly. But with them commenced a series of inventions and discoveries, which have been going on, up to the present moment. Every day has beheld some addition to the general stock of information. When the exigency of the times has required a new truth to be revealed, it has been revealed. 25

Walker goes on the claim that genius “was not the result of accident, but the work of an overruling Providence.” 26 Even the greatest possible individualist, in this view, would have to humble himself or herself before God—something many of even the staunch individualists of today’s Borderers would agree is true (though the followers of Rand probably would not).

Having presented a case much in keeping with the mind-set of the frontier—probably more than with the views of New England, where the pastoral and other myths still had a great deal of influence—it is hardly surprising that Walker had left his native Massachusetts by the time his article appeared, settling in what was then the great city of the West, Cincinnati. He founded a law school there, and his grandson, Nicholas Longworth, would be the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives in the late 1920s.
Cincinnati, right on the Ohio River, where Mrs. Trollope had also proposed to settle, had become an important Borderer town by the time Walker got there. Its population, in 1800, was less than 1,000. In 1810, there were more than twice as many people in town, about 2,500. By 1820, Cincinnati was home to almost four times as many as that, approaching 10,000. By 1830, a year or so after Walker moved there, nearly 25,000 people lived in the city. In 1840, it had nearly doubled once more, having reached 46,000. This, of course, was the pattern of the West, and it would be repeated over and over again. The first people there were Borderers, old and new. They were followed by immigrants from the East and abroad, people like Walker who, no matter how much affinity they might feel for the westerners, brought in another, more powerful culture and grafted it on top of that established by the Scots-Irish and those who had first joined them.

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As we see with Emerson and Thoreau, the rural world of westward expansion was not the only place of growth of American visions of individualism. Even these two were not the only ones in the East developing a strong individualist tradition, often starting from the ideas and writings of Franklin. So, though the urban cultures did not arise from a Borderer base, the experience of the city can also be used to illuminate this American phenomenon, if for nothing but contrast or complement to Borderer vision—or for both. After all, the cultures of America have never existed in silos. Each one influences all of the others and vice versa. Just like African American culture influences the lives of white Americans, and vice versa, the rural-based culture of the Borderers has influenced the cities and has been influenced by them. This was just as much the case in days before mass media. Population movement in America has always been so strong that few groups have been able to live their lives in relative cultural isolation. This is why it is only in Appalachia, one of the poorest regions of the United States and, for a long time, one of the most uninviting to urban outsiders, that the older Borderer culture remains immediately and clearly distinct from the greater American whole.

The general bifurcations of America can be expressed in quite a number of ways: North/South, of course, and Black/White. In this book, I am using the Borderers against the other British folkways, calling them, together, the secular-liberal culture. Again, that is not the only way in which fundamental American differences can be characterized. This is particularly significant today, when demographic shifts are ensuring that, soon, the majority of the
American population will not have strong ancestral ties to the British Isles and Europe.

Another way to describe the American dualities is through its political parties. The debates that led to their development, the struggle between those wanting a strong centralized government and others seeking a much more diffuse system, have continued ever since bickering started among George Washington's advisers (particularly between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson), and it too can be used to pin a basic philosophical differences to American contentions. One of the other common ways to see the divide is, as I have alluded, to place it as one between urban and rural; another sees an essentially immigrant sensibility (or an ethnic or even panracial one) against an older one, stemming from British colonial roots. There are more, including other obvious ones built around attitudes toward apparent race. The differences between these, however, are simply differences in starting points: Each one sheds useful light on the American experience just as each helps us better understand the others. They all lead to a similar place, often with the same people and groups on each side—even though they do all remain distinct.

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It is impossible to pin one's arguments about American culture successfully to a single approach alone, not if one does not wish to paint oneself into a corner, for the American experience, like the human experience, is varied and multidimensional. For that reason, I am going to turn my attention away from the specifically Borderer experience for a few pages to look at the opposite end of the spectrum: that of American cities, particularly the larger ones. Here, though the culture may be based on secular-liberal ideals, the impact of groups other than the remaining English folkways is even greater, if that is possible, than it has been on the Borderers. Sheer numbers make the case:

In 1890, as in many cities on the Atlantic seaboard, the proportion of foreign stock in San Francisco was 78 percent, in Salt Lake City 65 percent, in St. Louis 67 percent, in Duluth 75 percent, in Chicago 78 percent, and in Milwaukee 86 percent. Nor was immigration merely a big-city phenomenon. Immigrants and their children at the end of the nineteenth century constituted a majority in the still heavily rural and small-town states of Minnesota, the Dakotas, Montana, Arizona, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and California.
Though immigrants were important in many parts of America in the 19th century, the greatest impact of immigration was, not surprisingly, on the coasts or near the great inland waterways. It was not until well into the second half of the century, after all, that the railroads would be able to compete in numbers with the traffic on the rivers and coastal waterways. The states of the old Confederacy are noticeably absent from the list above, as are those adjoining. "Of the thirty-eight million to arrive between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, half came before 1900. Some five million entered prior to the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, with the result that by 1860 Boston's population was 36 percent foreign-born, Brooklyn's 39 percent, and New York's 48 percent."28 The impact of these numbers was phenomenal, of course, immigrant attitudes melding with established ones, creating a culture even more different than it was before from the Borderer culture and the southern culture, which were now irreversibly linked in eastern eyes through the losses of the Civil War and the devastation of Reconstruction.

To start to understand the differences in culture between "red state" and "blue state" America, one need look no further than the different visions of individualism and self-sufficiency exhibited within the two cultures, especially in their rural and urban incarnations. In the Borderer culture, as we have seen, individuality has a great deal to do with lack of restraint, with being left alone to make or create. In the secular-liberal culture, as we will see in the following discussion, individualism is more often linked to opportunity and to the taking advantage of it. The self-made person, in the former, succeeds through throwing off a yoke. In the latter, he or she finds ways to make themselves successful through working around, or even with, existing constraints. The former stresses freedom; the latter, ingenuity.

In many Borderer families, there remain vestiges of what was once a great sense of shame even at the idea of being "on the county" (as public assistance was once known in rural communities). This would be not only a last resort but also an absolute moral and personal catastrophe. Public assistance meant subservience and a loss of independence. Though families with backgrounds in the secular-liberal culture may similarly see public assistance as something to be avoided, they may (and many do) also see it as opportunity, as a bit of breathing room allowing them to get back on their feet or to allow them time, if they happen to be new immigrants, to learn enough about America to negotiate it successfully. The safety net, for the former, may stop a fall;
for the latter, it can also spring one back. This simple description of differing attitudes toward public assistance, though perhaps seeming to be making a distinction without a practical difference, points out something of real consequence: When one group sees another seeming to embrace what the first believes is a negative, all sorts of conclusions can easily be drawn, many quite distinct from the truth. Images such as that of the “welfare queen” result and resentments grow as the rural Borderers see what they think is a gaming of the system by the urban poor who often do not appear to be native born or either culturally or racially similar to the Borderers (who feel they are paying for the services) themselves.

The received wisdom in much of nonurban America is that welfare has become an urban lifestyle, something that people are proud of. The Borderers do not understand this. Though there is not the same sense of shame associated with welfare in the cities, the desire there is to use welfare not merely for survival but as a means to other ends. It is not the defeat of the individual that drives one to it but rather the desire not to be defeated. Such differing cultural attitudes, however, are rarely explored and almost never explained in ways allowing either side to understand the other.

One of the underlying secular-liberal assumptions of immigration to America in the 19th century was that an individual comes to take advantage of what the United States has to offer, not to change it. Opportunity was there; it needed only to be grasped, not created. This is quite different from the Borderer necessity of building from the bottom up (after destroying what was already there, Native American cultures, for example), of making opportunity instead of grasping it.

The most iconic of the American writers on urban success in the 19th century is surely Horatio Alger, whose books show boys rising from rags to, if not riches, the middle class. These are tales not of cultural change or of assimilation but of people in dire circumstances who, when given a chance, take it. Alger’s most famous character is “Ragged Dick” Hunter, who later tells a boy who had helped him along in the first book of the series, “‘If I’m changed, it’s because of what you said to me then, you and your father. But for those words I might still have been Ragged Dick.’” 29 There is never a sense that Richard Hunter has been able to do it all on his own, as in the wilderness tradition of a Daniel Boone. Here, it is the goal not to get away from society but rather to use the benevolent aspects of society for one’s own progress. After all, “‘Dick may have been lucky,’ said Mr. Rockwell, ‘but I generally find that luck comes oftenest to those who deserve it. If you will try to raise yourself I will help you.’” 30
The goal of the Alger books is not simply to encourage boys (and they really were written for boys) to make the most of themselves but rather to make clear to them that they also have to help others. Rarely is there one boy alone in the stories. In most, one who is beginning to gain a little success reaches a hand back to others: "Nobody had ever taken any interest in him before. Life to him had been a struggle and a conflict with very little hope of better things."31 This helping of others, to Alger, is the heart of what makes success in America possible, what makes individual effort meaningful. He expressed the importance of such help frequently: "He has been a rough customer, but then he has never had a chance. I believe in giving everybody a chance."32 And "I was once a poor boy like you, and found friends. I'll be your friend."33 And "He never forgets his humble beginnings, and tries to show his sense of God's goodness by extending a helping hand to the poor and needy boys whose trials and privations he understands well from his own experience."34 And "We ought all to help each other," said Mr. Bates. "I believe in that doctrine, though I have not always lived up to it."35 Then this:

"I congratulate you on your advance in life. Such a rise shows remarkable energy on your part."

"I was lucky," said Dick, modestly. "I found some good friends who helped me along."36

To Alger, it is not "God helps those who help themselves" but rather "helping others moves one toward God."

The type of success that an urban individual, in Alger's eye, can aim toward is quite different from that which a Borderer might imagine, for it is success within a framework of society and of commerce. Hunter, for example, does not necessarily aim to be the owner of a company: "By a series of upward steps, partly due to good fortune, but largely to his own determination to improve, and hopeful energy, Dick had now become a bookkeeper."37 Being an employee is sufficient. However, the type of employee considered sufficient or desirable falls within a narrow scope that ignores actual economic reality. "That certain kinds of labor were intrinsically destructive to health and well-being was ignored for the most part by a literature clearly directed more to clerks than to coal miners."38 Not everyone can aspire to office work. Weiss, in the quote above, is referring specifically to New Thought literature, but his words apply just as well to Alger. The consequences of the job on the employee were always assumed to be benign, assumed so by simply ignoring dangerous professions.
Of course, Alger was not against anyone working for himself or reaching the top. His characters, after all, often start out self-employed but at the bottom, working as bootblacks or paperboys. It is their energy in pursuing even so lowly a calling that leads them upward. He describes the attitude of one of his characters: “Now he was working for himself, and this seemed to put new spirit and courage into him. Then again he felt that he had shaken off the hateful thralldom.”

Success did not mean being at the pinnacle, though. What it did mean was having a job with a future, and an increasing income—and being able to put some of it aside for investment: “The feeling that he was his own master, and had a little hoard of money for present expenses, gave him courage.”

It also meant understanding one’s place in the realm of commerce—understanding that even the boss is not completely free. In this sense, Alger was well within the tradition of literature as a depiction of class structure and struggle for success within it, much as was James Fenimore Cooper, one of his personal favorites and to whom he once wrote a fan letter:

“Permit me to take this opportunity to express to you, Sir,” he wrote, “the great gratification with which I have perused many of your works—more especially the Leatherstocking Series.” He concluded his letter with “the hope that your life may long be spared to add to the works with which you have already enriched American literature.” Not surprisingly, Alger would often allude later in his juvenile fiction to Cooper stories he had enjoyed in his own adolescence.

At one point, Alger, intentionally or not, does almost parody the Borderer attitude of freedom: “‘I wish I had a store of my own,’ he thought, discontentedly. ‘Then I could do as I pleased without having anybody to interfere with me.’” This is from a character destined for failure, for no one is every really one’s own boss in Alger’s world. Even someone owning a business is constantly at the beck and call of customers. This character, from Mark, the Match Boy, does not understand the needs of the real individualism of the city. Alger writes of him, “But there was one thing he did not understand, that the greatest obstacle to his advancement was himself.” He explains, “According to his theory, the world owed him a living; but it seemed as if the world were disposed to repudiate the debt.” Alger’s urban aesthetic of individualism, clearly, is one not of the solitary striver but of the man in constant negotiation with a world that is not always going to provide for him or work with him. This is quite distinct from the Borderer vision of a world that, though it may be harsh, is his or hers for the taking—if he or she can.
In the late 1960s, Richard Weiss wrote that he thought it curious that Alger, of all of writers of juvenile fiction during the decades after the Civil War, had "entered the American vocabulary, though his books are scarcely read any longer." Furthermore, he found Alger to have not been "a representative of his time, but a nostalgic spokesman of a dying order. Of middle-class rural origins, he was always an alien to the industrially dominated society of his adulthood." Like Jeffery Decker, who finds this depiction "inaccurate," I believe that, though they were not industrial workers, the ability of Alger's protagonists "to secure respectable white-collar work is characteristic of Progressive Era standards for middle-class success" and even of the Gilded Age, that of Alger proper, that preceded it.

By the 1920s, though Alger was no longer read, his name had become a convenient description for almost any rags-to-riches story. So forgotten was he personally that Herbert Mayes, who went on to a successful career as a magazine editor at Good Housekeeping and McCall's, was able to write a fabricated biography of Alger that would long be accepted as the standard source for information on the writer. Only in the 1970s were the "facts" of the biography debunked. The irony, of course, is that Alger once again had helped another man's career—this time, though, not through his writing but through his name. Appropriately enough, Alger also had been, in truth, tutor to the sons of banker Joseph Seligman in New York City, one of whom, Edwin, would later become a renowned economist and one of the founders of the American Association of University Professors. Alger was not quite so intellectually meager as some would make him out to be.

The success and individualism myths hawked by Alger are much more muted and tame than are those of the West and of the Borderers and their descendants and much more cognizant of the relationship between individual success and the society as a whole. This, in a way, was part of what the secular-liberal easterners saw as their own much more sophisticated view of what it means to succeed, especially in terms of money, society, and even religion, setting themselves above the mass of Americans. Henry Adams, a confirmed follower of New England culture, expressed the prevailing attitude of disdain toward what was, by 1900, the mass of Americans:

Indeed, the American people had no idea at all; they were wandering in a wilderness much more sandy than the Hebrews had ever trodden about Sinai; they had neither serpents nor golden calves to worship. They had lost the sense of worship; for the idea that they worshipped money seemed a delusion. Worship of money was an old-world trait; a healthy appetite akin to worship of the Gods, or to worship of power
in any concrete shape; but the American wasted money more recklessly than any one ever did before; he spent more to less purpose than any extravagant court aristocracy; he had no sense of relative values, and knew not what to do with his money when he got it, except use it to make more, or throw it away. Probably, since human society began, it had seen no such curious spectacle as the houses of the San Francisco millionaires on Nob Hill. Except for the railway system, the enormous wealth taken out of the ground since 1840, had disappeared. West of the Alleghenies, the whole country might have been swept clean, and could have been replaced in better form within one or two years. The American mind had less respect for money than the European or Asiatic mind, and bore its loss more easily; but it had been deflected by its pursuit till it could turn in no other direction. It shunned, distrusted, disliked, the dangerous attraction of ideals, and stood alone in history for its ignorance of the past. 48

The cultural split, by the end of the century, just at the height of belief in a unitary American vision and a national “manifest destiny,” was as great as it ever had been.

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Yet the split between the two cultures did not mean that the Borderers were interested only in money or in doing it all on their own. Like many on the other side of the divide, Borderers had taken advantage of the Lyceum movement that had been promoted by Emerson and grew out of the writings of Franklin and that provided libraries, lectures, and more that could be useful to the working man who had not had the benefit of a strong education in his youth. The tradition of self-improvement remained strong throughout the 19th century and into the 20th and in both cultures, with the New Thought and Chautauqua movements (among others) succeeding the Lyceum movement and attracting adherents from both sides of the divide.

Just as the visions of success promoted by these movements crossed cultural boundaries, none of the success movements, particularly those of the late 19th century, was completely independent of the others:

The impact of New Thought was further enhanced because certain of its key ideas were disseminated by other groups, among them Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, Theosophists, and psychical researchers. Their common ground was an antipathy to “mere” materialism and a commitment to some kind of philosophical idealism. All affirmed
the primacy of spirit over matter which was fundamental to the new gospel of success. 49

Another significant point about New Thought, particularly in relation to attitudes today, is that, echoing Walker, “New Thought found it important to say that ‘man need not be the victim of his environment, but can be the master of it.’” 50 This is another part of what has led to contemporary splits in attitudes toward the causes of climate change or global warming. If man’s actions have led, unconsciously, to a worldwide shift in temperature and weather patterns, then man never really was master of the environment but was simply fooling himself. The inheritors of New Thought optimism cannot accept this. After all, they devoutly believed that “men suffered from aspiring to too little rather than too much.” 51 Accepting environmental limitations, then, is stultifying. This view was rather overly optimistic—or worse. According to Weiss,

New Thought writers turned common sense insight into extravagant exaggeration. This was particularly true of the notion that states of mind can affect objective reality. Clearly, the results of most objective conditions are to some degree determined by our subjective response to them. But inspirationalists encouraged the belief that thought did not only condition circumstances, but controlled them entirely. 52

The impact of this belief continues, showing up even in such popular culture icons as the various productions of Peter Pan starring Mary Martin in the 1950s, where Martin (as Peter) asks members of the audience to save the fairy Tinkerbell from the poison she has drunk by believing they can save her and showing their belief by clapping their hands. As Weiss says,

The commitment to individual power was too great to be surrendered to a social determinism. The problem of drawing the line between individual and social causation was certainly not exclusively American, but our particular history did have a unique emphasis. No other nation had experienced such an unsupervised development; no other country was so lacking in communal controls; no other people had known such freedom from institutional restraint. In other societies, existing institutional restrictions might be adapted to changing social needs; in America they had to be created from scratch. Historically, Americans had been compelled to discover individual solutions where social ones were lacking. Self-sufficiency, developed in response to need, in time became a cherished value and, even when inadequate, was too deeply ingrained to be scrapped overnight. 53
The Chautauqua movement, which began at about the same time as New Thought, was a little less centered in theology (though it still had a strong religious aspect), making it more clearly the inheritor of the Lyceum movement. Something of adult summer camps, the Chautauquas were events allowing people to take advantage of groupings of lectures by many of the more prominent figures of the time. They were extremely popular into the 1920s and served as vehicles for introducing Americans of all types to the intellectual debates of the day. Like the Lyceum movement and New Thought, they emphasized the responsibility and possibility of the individual: "Men seeking success must regard their task as one of realizing an abundance which, though latent, was infinite." 54

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Norman Vincent Peale, a 20th-century inheritor of the New Thought mantle, opens his phenomenally successful The Power of Positive Thinking with these lines:

Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy. But with sound self-confidence you can succeed. A sense of inferiority and inadequacy interferes with the attainment of your hopes, but self-confidence leads to self-realization and successful achievement. 55

Peale, one of the most successful American preachers of his time, reflected for new generations the attitudes of New Thought and other success movements of a generation before his, movements that, once again, often crossed the divide between the Borderer culture and that of much of the rest of America outside of the educated urban elite. The old ideas did not die but were simply incorporated into new presentations.

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Two of the most influential American writers on the Lyceum movement, New Thought, the Chautauqua movement, and others emphasizing “success” were Franklin and Emerson. A third, influential on both New Thought and Chautauqua, was the psychologist and philosopher William James. None of these could be called an intellectual lightweight. Yet Horatio Alger, who has (perhaps undeservedly) no intellectual reputation at all, also had a great deal to do with the success of these latter two movements though generally unacknowledged. After all, though Alger’s heroes “are patient and virtuous, much
more akin to the ideal bourgeois of ante-bellum time, they are also in keeping with the restrained New Thought ethos. In general, this and the other movements promoted the idea that individual virtue was rewarded and was its own reward, for both individual and community (for Borderers, the “community” aspect was probably not accented quite as much as elsewhere). Excess was frowned upon, especially in the “bad habits” (like smoking and drinking), which were seen as causes for slipping into poverty (and not as some of poverty’s results) but also for consumption beyond constraint and massive accumulation of wealth.

The idealism of these movements was a little excessive, though that did not diminish their impact, which can still be felt. Weiss writes, for example, that success writers would not admit any necessary antagonism between the boss and his workers. All were engaged in a common enterprise with mutual obligations. The employee owed his boss loyalty, hard work, and intelligence. The employer owed his worker a fair living wage, decent working conditions, and courteous consideration. Hard feelings and conflict were due to personal misunderstanding and suspicion.

This idealism, also the idealism of Alger, has led both to the sense of betrayal that many Americans (and not just Borderers) feel in contemporary employment situations where there seem to be few obligations to the employees (aggravating nascent beliefs that one should never rely on anyone but oneself and thereby contradicting the Alger ideal) and, paradoxically, to the belief that the rich, if left alone, will use their money in ways that benefit everyone—Ronald Reagan’s “trickle-down” economics. As employees, the Borderers want to be treated with respect. As potentially rich (their optimism often knows no bounds), they want the freedoms of the rich to remain unrestrained.

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Though the books of Horatio Alger have not lasted as long as his name has, the type of story for juveniles that he crafted became a major part of the American publishing industry over the first half of the 20th century. A number of other series directed at boys and with themes of moral struggle for success were eventually launched, some of them also becoming touchstones for their times. Among them was the Tom Swift series created by Edward Stratemeyer. Stratemeyer, who had a connection to some of Alger’s unfinished manuscripts, published the first Tom Swift books in 1910, including *Tom Swift and His Motor-Cycle* and *Tom Swift and His Airship*. Among the boys who gobbled up the books was likely an eight-year-old in Minnesota,
already probably dreaming of his own future. If he did in fact read the books, that boy, Charles Lindbergh, read the following words:

"Now do be careful," cautioned Mr. Swift, the aged inventor, once more. "I'm afraid you two have set too hard a task for yourselves this time."

"No we haven't, dad," answered his son. "You'll see us yet skimming along above the clouds."58

The "we," of course, was not a man and his plane, as it would become when Lindbergh would write his best seller We about his flight across the Atlantic, but the idea is there, an idea of adventure racing far beyond what an older generation could imagine. It was an idea of individualism as strong as any put forward by Emerson or lived by Boone—and it combined elements of the individualism of both sides of the cultural divide. Technology was what gave it its drive, and technology is what made the Tom Swift series, which focused on inventions, so very popular. The technological genius no longer needed to rely on society but could build machines to do for him (and, as yet, it was most always a "him") that which he did not wish to rely on other people for.

To Americans of the 1920s, Lindbergh seemed to be "a compelling Horatio Alger story as he became the most famous American of his time."59 More appropriately, he was Tom Swift taken from the pages of that other, later series of boys' books (though a series deeply indebted to the Alger books) and made real. Tom Swift had a motorcycle; young Charles Lindbergh had a motorcycle. As Lindbergh would do on his trip across the Atlantic, Tom Swift "had to rely on himself. Tom was a resourceful lad, and he had often before been obliged to depend on his wits."60

Like Tom Swift, Lindbergh appeared to be able to do everything connection with his projects:

During the first weeks of production, Don Hall [chief designer for the Ryan Company that built Lindbergh's plane] recalled, Lindbergh participated in every aspect of the plane's construction, "and he did not leave San Diego until he was absolutely sure that the smallest part, the weakest link in the mechanism of his ship was strong enough to withstand strain before which other planes had succumbed."61

This followed the time-honored tradition of "if you want it done right, do it yourself," a tradition that had become, by the boyhood and young manhood of Lindbergh, an American mythology in its own right. By the time of his
famous flight, Lindbergh “had become entirely self-reliant in the air. He could fix his own plane and plan his own route and possessed remarkable hand-eye coordination.” 62 This, to Americans on both sides of the cultural divide, was what American individualism was all about, though each side considered it in its own different light.

As it does in Lindbergh’s best seller about his flight, technology becomes part of the individual from the 1920s on—but in general today it is stripped of the humans who created it and of its history (at least it is by many in the Borderer culture). As with language and ideas, generally the only people of importance concerning technologies are, ultimately, those who use them, not those who created them.

Both Lindbergh and the fictional Swift were involved in the creation of their crafts, but this has become more rare as the complexity of our machines necessitates increasing specialization. Once, the pride of many young American men was the car that they had restored and augmented, the work of their own hands reflected in all aspects and usages of the product. Today, there is very little possibility of becoming an ace backyard mechanic, of making a new part if need be or cobbling together pieces found in a junkyard. Now, pride is found in using well the creations of others, leading to the encompassing of products as manufactured, so to speak, in one’s own individualism. Customization, for the moment, has fallen away.

The new attitude of incorporating technology into individualism does have antecedents, however, even in Lindbergh’s We (the “we” referring to himself and his aircraft), and it finds precedence in Tom Swift and His Airship:

“We’ll soon be flying through the clouds on your back,” he remarked, speaking to the apparatus as if it could understand. “I guess we’ll smash some records, too, if that engine works as well when it’s installed as it does now.” 63

Technology, like family and friends, becomes part of the individual and not the group. It is excused from the web of interactions that make up society. In science fiction, its antecedents are sometimes removed from human beings completely, as it is in Forbidden Planet (Fred Wilcox, 1956), allowing it to be even more closely associated with the individual wielder of it, questions of creation becoming moot.

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More than 80 years after the fact and in a milieu of continual media-celebrity overload, it is hard for us to imagine how absolutely unexpected was
Lindbergh’s flight over the Atlantic and landing at Le Bourget Field outside of Paris on May 21, 1927, and how unique the reactions of the public. The plucky solo flier, so young and looking so innocent, caught the imagination of Europe and America in a way no person ever had. Imagine: More than half the number of New York City’s population of nearly 7,000,000 turned out to see Lindbergh after he had landed (from a ship, not his plane) at the Battery and made his way up to Central Park just a few weeks after the flight, little more than a month after the then-unknown flier had, without fanfare, brought his little Spirit of St. Louis to Curtiss Field on Long Island to try for the first successful nonstop flight from New York to Paris.

What made Lindbergh’s feat so moving to so many? A great deal of it had to do with who he was—and with the fact that he seemed to be just one man attempting a feat against incredible odds. When he took off, others were preparing for the same trip, but in bigger, fancier aircraft with multiple engines and larger crews. Not to mention, they were doing so with access to money and publicity. Lindbergh did the flight alone, and it seemed as though he had done it all alone. And he had done it on the cheap (comparatively). He was just the sort of loner guaranteed to spark the American imagination (and the European, too, for that matter). His childhood, Americans saw once they started to learn the details, even carried resonances of Boone, America’s great 18th-century loner.

Growing up, Lindbergh had learned to hunt early and had developed self-sufficiency on his parents’ farm. Like Boone, Lindbergh had an indulgent mother who “understood his urge for the outdoors and for freedom from structure. She would pull him out of class every once in a while to take him for hikes in the woods.” Self-reliance was crucial to both men. Lindbergh’s “father had warned him about ‘depending too heavily on others.’ The old Minnesota settlers had a saying: ‘One boy’s a boy. Two boys are half a boy. Three boys are no boy at all.’” As soon as he could, Lindbergh developed another American type of self-sufficiency, learning to ride and maintain his motorcycle, again like Tom Swift, providing himself with individual mobility and a sense of freedom.

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On the Borderer side, people believed that, if they were left alone, they could become Charles Lindberghs themselves. On the secular-liberal side, people believed that, if they just had access to the resources, they could become Charles Lindberghs themselves. For the Borderers, however, another aspect of individualism was also growing, and that was of the individual as free from
restraint like the pilot soaring in the air. Up there, whatever one did was nobody’s business but one’s own. And that is the way, they thought, that it should be.

That this, too, was not simply a Borderer attitude but spread to other American cultures is evidenced in African American pianist and composer Porter Grainger’s 1922 song “Ain’t Nobody’s Business,” which includes verses much like this one:

If I should take a notion
To jump into the ocean
Ain’t nobody’s business if I do.
If I go to church on Sunday
Then cabaret all day Monday
Ain’t nobody’s business if I do.

Along with reliance on technology, the forced integration of human activities in closely packed urban environments has made this idea nothing much more than a pipe dream for almost anyone today—outside of the few privileged to operate in the remaining and rapidly closing “wide-open spaces”—even in the air. Yet it has persisted among Borderer descendants and has had a large impact on their view of the American political system.

At the same time, the “only in it for myself” attitude certainly did also arise in urban environments, especially among those of the poor who started to see the lack of success among those around them as the fault of the people themselves and not the fault of lack of possibilities or of anything or anyone else. Almost a parody of the Horatio Alger stories, this new paradigm of success came through a willingness to step on anyone and do anything at all—if it helped in getting ahead.

Perhaps one of the most famous of the examples of this paradigm is Sammy Glick, the title character in Budd Schulberg’s 1941 novel What Makes Sammy Run? In many ways, Glick is the antithesis of Lindbergh. He is the person with ambition but no skill but who is willing to “steal” the skills of others to get his way. To Glick, it is the result that matters, not the way one gets there or even what one learns along the route.

At one point in the book, the narrator, Al Manheim, tries to school Sammy on the old secular-liberal idea of what it means to be a successful individual:

“Sammy,” I began wisely, “society isn’t just a bunch of individuals living alongside of each other. As a member of society, man is
interdependent. Not independent, Sammy, *inter-*dependent. Life is too complex for there to be any truth in the old slogan of every man for himself. We share the benefits of social institutions, like take hospitals, the cops and garbage collection. Why, the art of conversation itself is a social invention. We can’t live in this world like a lot of cannibals trying to swallow each other. Learn to give the other fellow a break and we’ll all live longer.”

I felt pretty pleased with myself after I said that because I was convinced that it was one of the most sensible things I had ever said. But I might as well have been talking to a stone wall. In fact that might have been better. At least it couldn’t talk back.

Sammy’s answer was, “If you want to save souls, try China.”

Sammy, the ultimate cynic, shows exactly the other side of the Lindbergh coin of self-reliance: “‘Talent can get you just so far,’ ” he [Glick] said. “‘Then you got to start using your head’” —and must start using what other people have done. Even thievery does not matter—as long as one is not stupid enough to be caught.

For the cynic like Glick, one can even look to Thoreau for justification, even if a false one and a purposeful misunderstanding of Thoreau’s purpose: “Law never made me a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.” So why respect laws of any sort?

Though Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” can be misconstrued as primarily antistate, its real purpose is to justify resistance to an unjust state. The difference comes in an understanding of “what men are prepared for,” as in understanding just what the role of government should be. To Thoreau, an overreaching government is as bad as an overreaching man. The government must depend on the governed, but the governed must be dependable:

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to— for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well—is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher was wise enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until
the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which I have also imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.\footnote{70}

Instead of being shrunken to the point where it could be drowned in Grover Norquist’s bathtub, the state becomes a respecter and, by implication, a supporter of the individual. The implication is that the state can wither away, but only when the individual makes full use of his or her “higher and independent” power. Those “few” who could live “aloof” from the state, “not meddling with it, nor embraced by it,” can do so because they have learned to respect their neighbors and can live with them without conflict.

Thoreau’s vision melds well with the ideals of individualism in America of both the Borderers and the secular-liberals. However, it has always surprised me that he has never been quite so popular with the Borderers as with the secular-liberals. The reason probably has to do not with his views on government but with those on nature. Walden can seem extremely naive, though still gorgeous and energizing, to those who grow up without the removal from the land that industrialization has forced on a growing percentage of people everywhere.

\section*{****}

At one point late in What Makes Sammy Run?, Manheim tries to explain his feelings about Glick to a woman:

I told her a little of how balled up I felt inside because there were times when I wanted to say what I had to say as honestly as possible, and times when I felt as ambitious as Sammy without being able to free myself from the sense of relationship with everybody else in the world, which made it difficult to do anything which I thought might cause them pain.\footnote{71}

Sammy has no such constraints. As Manheim explains,

I saw Sammy Glick on a battlefield where every soldier was his own cause, his own army and his own flag, and I realized that I had singled
him out not because he had been born into the world any more selfish, ruthless and cruel than anybody else, even though he had become all three, but because in the midst of a war that was selfish, ruthless and cruel Sammy was proving himself the fittest, the fiercest and the fastest.72

This is the perversion of individualism that scared—and still scares—so many Americans of the secular-liberal tradition, people who see the individual as best residing within the constraints of society. What was becoming more and more apparent over the course of America’s cultural development, however, was that it was the Glicks, for the most part, who were getting ahead. More and more, as the 20th century progressed, Lindbergh was appearing to be the anomaly.

The Borderers are not Glicks, of course. Their individualism, though it can be scarly like the completely amoral selfishness of Schulberg’s imagination, has a great deal more to it—and a great deal more restraint. Though they can talk a good Glick/Rand line, most Borderer followers of the cult of individualism temper their beliefs through strong allegiances to family and friends—and through their commitment to religion. The secular-liberals, who do not view either family or religion as central elements to public (as opposed to personal) action, often fall into the trap of seeing this as corruption and bias rather than as, the way Borderers see it, personal responsibility and faith, the very building blocks, to Borderer minds, of real and successful community.

The Borderer vision of individualism starts within each of them, with faith in the person and in God. It next moves, in a spreading circle, to family, to friends, and only then to others in the broad realm of human interaction. If each person acted responsibly, by these lights (and just as Thoreau argues), there would be little need for government—each individual having a tempering effect on those they interact with. The secular-liberal vision starts in a different place, with a structured base created and maintained by the group. Once responsibilities to it are met, the individual is free to—act on his or her own to whatever ends seem appropriate, as long as those ends do not threaten or compromise the group structure. Here again we see Thoreau, but from another perspective. The secular-liberal sees a duty to resist the state when it becomes corrupt, while the Borderer seeks to avoid it, to move away from it, as has been done since first arrival in America, if not before.

In these ways and others, these two visions are fundamentally different, even if they do overlap a great deal of the time or end up looking the
same—even if the word used to describe them is the same. In fact, it is that
similarity that causes much of the problem between Borderers and those from
the secular-liberal culture: Though the words are the same, the meanings are
not, so the two cultures end up speaking at cross-purposes, neither one able,
at the end of the day, to understand how the other half lives.