

5

CULTURE: INDIVIDUALISM VS. COMMUNITY¹

The relationship between the individual and the community is one of the timeless dualisms of social thought. As early as 1623 the English poet John Donne penned the original communitarian epigram: “No man is an island, entire of itself . . . any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”²

The contrast between individualism and community is not perfectly unidimensional, with the individual at one pole and the community at the other. The Bill of Rights in the US Constitution captures the subtlety: It enshrines individual rights, but it is also a quintessential part of a constitution that virtually all Americans worship. So does the Bill of Rights mark the US as individualist or communitarian? Or take the US frontier, symbolized in countless westerns by a lone cowboy riding into the sunset, but also symbolized by a wagon train in which settlers sustain and protect one another. Individualist or communitarian? The evolving dialectic between the individual and the community is an important feature of American history. In this chapter we trace the fluctuating balance between individualism and community in American culture over the last 125 years.

Cultural studies require narrative and nuance, and we aim at that here,

but we also draw on unexpected quantitative evidence to gauge the fluctuations. Cultural essentialists sometimes assume that culture is a fixed national characteristic, like "Chinese culture" or "Western culture," that determines institutions and behavior, but we have a different view. "Culture," as we use the term, is not uniform across a society nor across time—quite the contrary—and it is not an uncaused first cause of social change. As we will show in Chapter 8, culture is one strand in a skein of interacting social and economic and political influences.

Since the term "culture" is so widely used across many different disciplines, its meaning has been the subject of wide-ranging conceptual and definitional debates, especially in literary studies and cultural studies, particularly in anthropology. While those debates are important and often fascinating, our purposes here are simpler and more immediate. By culture we mean *beliefs, values, and norms about fundamental aspects of American society*. Conventionally, measures of culture in this limited sense rest heavily on surveys, but as we have seen in earlier chapters, surveys are essentially unavailable for the first half of our period. Census data, so useful in our earlier chapters, contain very little direct information about cultural change. Instead, we rely heavily here on narratives of intellectual and cultural history, alongside a new quantitative tool that enables us to explore the corpus of American literature over the last century or two. We have also discovered a few behavioral measures of culture that we shall introduce throughout this chapter, and fortunately they are completely consistent with the more abundant, but "softer" evidence that is most readily available to us.

Michele Gelfand, a cultural psychologist, has emphasized the power of culture:

culture . . . is largely invisible. We rarely recognize how powerful it is! One of the most important aspects of culture that we take for granted is our social norms. We follow norms constantly. And we rarely recognize how much we need norms: social norms are the glue that keeps us together, they give us our identity and help us to coordinate and cooperate at such a remarkable level. . . . But . . . some groups have much stronger norms than others; they're tight. Others have much weaker norms; they're loose.³

Gelfand is most interested in differences among groups, whereas we focus on differences across time, but her distinction between "tight" and "loose" norms is closely related to our distinction between communitarian and individualist norms.

Following the literary critic Lionel Trilling, "culture," as we use the term, always entails a contest, a dialectic, a struggle.⁴ American history and myth have always contained elements of both individual and community—the cowboy and the wagon train. "There is no period in American history when thinkers have not wrestled with the appropriate balance of power between self-interest and social obligation," observes intellectual historian Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen.⁵ Examined closely, the relative emphasis on the individual and the community in American culture has varied over long periods of time, a pendulum swinging irregularly from one pole to the other and back again.⁶

But this pendulum doesn't swing by itself. It is pushed one way or the other by social actors, sometimes by leaders, but often by grassroots activists. As it swings, it alters what pundits have recently called the "Overton window," making some policies more promising and acceptable or at least conceivable and others less so. "The Overton window is the range of ideas tolerated in public discourse, also known as the window of discourse. The term is named after Joseph P. Overton, who stated that an idea's political viability depends mainly on whether it falls within this range, rather than on politicians' individual preferences."⁷ As our culture becomes more individualist, for example, policies that rest on the assumption that "we're all in this together," like redistributive taxes, become unthinkable, while policies like deregulation become more plausible. And as the pendulum swings back toward the communitarian pole, the plausibility of those policies reverses. For this reason, culture is not simply flotsam and jetsam on the tides of history, of interest only to effete literati or connoisseurs of pop culture, but an active ingredient in the dynamics of political, economic, and social life.

GILDED AGE/PROGRESSIVE ERA STRUGGLES OVER INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITY (1870–1920)

Abraham Lincoln, though presiding over the most violent period in American history, was by background and instinct a communitarian and an egalitarian Whig.⁸ His strong personal and moral commitment to equality of opportunity was second only to his commitment to America's constitutional order. He sought to the very end to avoid fracturing the union, and as the war was ending, in his second inaugural address he urged that after the war America should be reunited as one community "with malice toward none, with charity for all." With Lincoln's assassination, however, followed by the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the full onset of the Industrial Revolution, his egalitarian emphasis on shared values gave way in both parties to the inegalitarian individualism of the Gilded Age.

At the 1893 World's Fair celebrating industrial change, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner reflected on whether American individualism, which had been fostered by the frontier then just closing, would be undermined by the emerging urban, industrial society.⁹ Recent research has confirmed that frontier life was indeed associated with a culture of bootstrap self-reliance and hostility to economic redistribution, an imprint still visible a century later.¹⁰ In this way, the frontier had encouraged American individualism generally, just as Turner had speculated, and its closing might portend a turn away from it. As we have said, the frontier was also symbolized by communitarian wagon trains and barn raisings, but both Turner and the recent research suggest that the more enduring legacy of the frontier was individualism.

At just about this time, an unanticipated and unrelated scientific thesis conceived across the Atlantic—Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*—unexpectedly reinforced the individualism of the Gilded Age. Despite Darwin's disavowal of the term, an English acolyte, Herbert Spencer, began to propound "social Darwinism," based on the apparently Darwinian principle of the "survival of the fittest."¹¹ A noted American sociologist, William Graham Sumner, followed Spencer in applying "survival of the fittest" to human society, arguing that "some people were better at the contest of

life than others. . . . The good ones climbed out of the jungle of savagery and passed their talents to their offspring, who climbed still higher. . . . Attempts to overrule evolution—as by alleviating the plight of the poor—were both immoral and imprudent.”¹²

That version of social Darwinism, launched around 1870, reached its peak influence between 1890 and 1915 and swept through much of the intellectual and upper middle classes as the Gilded Age waxed and then began to wane. Social Darwinism gave birth to scientific racism,¹³ to eugenics, and to a pseudo-biological defense of laissez-faire capitalism. Scientific racism offered a convenient rationale for the contemporary efforts of Southerners and their Northern sympathizers of the so-called “Redemption Era” to impose Jim Crow oppression and ridicule on freed slaves. To wealthy residents of Manhattan’s Upper East Side, disturbed by muckraker Jacob Riis’s appalling photographs of destitute slum-dwellers of the Lower East Side in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), social Darwinism gave reassurance that they deserved their wealth. Many came to believe that the ills of the Gilded Age were the inevitable price of progress. Cutting-edge science was blended with ancient bigotry to promote the principle of “every man for himself.” In short, the haves deserved what they had, and the devil take the have-nots. The cultural movement toward unmitigated individualism approached its zenith.

Other educated middle-class Americans, however, increasingly rejected that view. As historian James Kloppenberg has observed, “Although historians have discovered too many varieties of progressivism to make possible a simple characterization of a coherent movement, it is clear that a diverse array of new political ideas and reform proposals appeared in the first two decades of [the twentieth] century.”¹⁴ Progressives differed among themselves in many ways, but they shared a critique of hyper-individualism. They argued that individualism betrayed American values and had caused the economic and social crises roiling the country.

Progressives sought to use a scientific approach to bring about the moral betterment of society, and were largely reformist and pragmatic, rather than radical, in temperament, but were fiercely committed to democratic practices and more egalitarian socioeconomic outcomes. Many had

grown up in racially and religiously homogeneous small towns, and they longed for that sense of community in the newly industrializing cities. They sought to provide a new, more communitarian narrative of modernization that could knit together haves and have-nots, immigrants and native-born Americans,¹⁵ and their views gradually gained ground.

At the same time, reformers across the land were working locally to build networks to help improve social life, support local schools, foster a more engaged "new civics" education, create community centers, and discuss urgent national issues like women's suffrage, capital punishment, and racial equality. It was in just this context that in 1916 L. J. Hanifan, an obscure West Virginia rural educator and active Progressive, introduced the concept "social capital," to denote what he and his colleagues were aiming at. "Go to, now, let us be social," they urged, against the dominant culture of unbridled individualism. John Dewey himself, a leading communitarian Progressive and educational reformer, appears to have been the progenitor of Hanifan's coinage of "social capital," certainly in spirit and probably in fact. The concept behind the term pervaded the Progressive Era, but the term itself virtually disappeared from common usage until its reappearance at the end of the twentieth century, once again in service of a communitarian critique of hyper-individualism.¹⁶

Changes in religious outlook in the early years of the twentieth century also played an important role in cultural change, influencing even many essentially secular thinkers. As we discussed in the previous chapter, American Protestantism in the second half of the nineteenth century had focused largely on individual salvation, but around the turn of the new century a more socially engaged theology emerged under the label of "Social Gospel." The Social Gospel emphasized that community and equality lay at the heart of the Christian message, and reformist Social Gospelers attacked the philosophy of social Darwinism. "On the Catholic side," wrote Marta Cook and James Halpin, "Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, served as the intellectual and theological basis for a new generation of social activism among American Catholics," including Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, who would lead Catholic radicalism into the 1950s.¹⁷

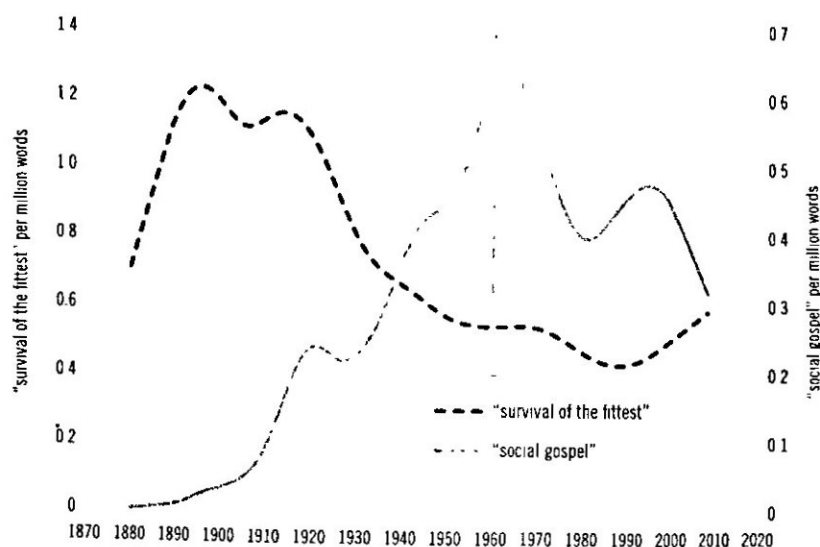
We can, as it happens, reinforce this historical narrative of cultural change with evidence produced by a remarkable tool of the Internet Age. Google has digitized millions of books containing over half a trillion words in English dating back to the sixteenth century. Using the website <http://books.google.com/ngrams>, it is possible to display the relative frequency of any word or group of words over long periods of time and thus to estimate trends in the cultural salience of words or concepts. We will frequently draw on Ngram evidence based on all books published in America from roughly 1880 (when our period of interest begins) to 2008 (the last year for which the archive is available).¹⁸ Scholars who have pioneered the use of Ngrams for historical studies of culture term the field “culturomics.”¹⁹ They argue that Ngrams provide a new and more rigorous way of exploring and quantifying cultural change, so that claims about culture become more than merely subjective.²⁰

This method “is based on the premise that books are a tangible and public representation of culture.”²¹ To be sure, writers and the written word are not the sole barometer of cultural change, but books have the advantage of systematically registering similarities and differences across time. The Google archive covers an extremely broad range of genres—detective stories, history books, gardening books, children’s books, poetry, public affairs commentary, self-help books, scientific and medical textbooks, travel guides, romance novels, cookbooks, and so forth—but it does not allow the user to limit which genres are used, so it is best interpreted as a broad indication of what literate Americans were writing and reading in any given period.²²

One instructive measure of the waxing and waning of the emphasis on the individual or the community in American culture from the first Gilded Age to today’s second Gilded Age turns out to be the changing relative frequency of two phrases that were born in the second half of the nineteenth century—“survival of the fittest” and “social gospel.” Figure 5.1 shows that “social gospel” hardly appeared in any books published before 1890, whereas Americans were already writing very often about “survival of the fittest” in that period.²³ By 1920, on the other hand, attention to “social gospel” was rising rapidly, whereas attention to “survival of the fittest” had begun to fade. The cultural passage from the Gilded Age to the Progressive

Era is reflected in this indicator—a measurable change from social Darwinism to the Social Gospel.

FIGURE 5.1: CULTURAL SALIENCE OF “SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST” AND “SOCIAL GOSPEL,” 1880–2008



Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .10.

Glancing briefly ahead in our narrative, Figure 5.1 also shows that the cultural salience of “survival of the fittest” faded throughout most of the twentieth century, only to win a new lease on life in the twenty-first century. By contrast, the salience of the “social gospel” rose steadily until about 1960. From the Sixties on, however, that communitarian concept has faded from our cultural milieu. In the rest of this chapter, we shall see consistent and often even sharper evidence of this pattern—a fading of individualist themes from American cultural debates during the first two thirds of the twentieth century, paired with a rise of communitarian sentiment in these same decades (often with a brief pause in the 1920s), followed by a sharp reversal of those trends from the 1970s into the twenty-first century. This is, of course, an I-we-I rhythm that is already familiar from previous chapters.

This conflict between individualism and communitarianism was explicitly debated in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first

decades of the twentieth century. Communitarian sentiment, though not yet dominant nationally, was at the heart of the Progressive mood. Teddy Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and other progressives were explicit in rejecting "individualism," and endorsing (in Addams's words) "a cooperative ideal of mutual assistance," not merely charity or philanthropy, which she and her fellow reformers saw as patronizing forms of aid.²⁴

TR was even more emphatic about our communitarian obligations. In his address on the "new nationalism" at the dedication of the John Brown Memorial Park in Osawatomie, Kansas, on September 1, 1910, he spelled out the philosophy that undergirded his Progressivism. Speaking to Civil War veterans, Roosevelt explicitly echoed Lincoln's communitarian themes and his Whiggish concern for community and equality of opportunity, pursued, if necessary, by government redistribution from the haves to the have-nots.

The essence of any struggle for healthy liberty has always been, and must always be, to take from some one man or class of men the right to enjoy power, or wealth, or position, or immunity, which has not been earned by service to his or their fellows. That is what you fought for in the Civil War, and that is what we strive for now. . . . We grudge no man a fortune which represents his own power and sagacity, when exercised with entire regard to the welfare of his fellows. . . . We grudge no man a fortune in civil life if it is honorably obtained and well used. It is not even enough that it should have been gained without doing damage to the community. We should permit it to be gained only so long as the gaining represents benefit to the community. This, I know, implies a policy of a far more active governmental interference with social and economic conditions in this country than we have yet had.²⁵

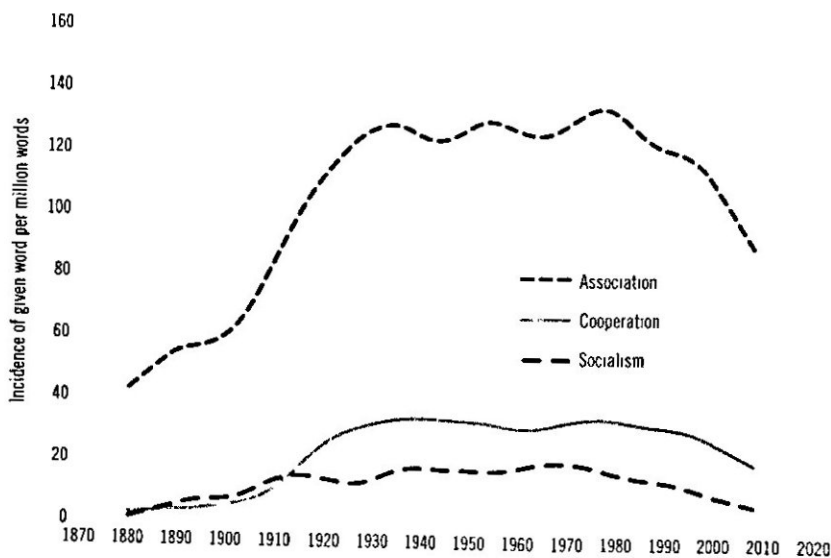
America was reversing its post-Civil War trajectory of cultural, political, and economic individualism, and communitarian obligations had an improbable new upper class tribune.

Roosevelt, Addams, and their Progressive colleagues had a variety of labels for the alternative vision toward which they were grappling.

"Christian socialism," "neighborliness," and even the more mundane "community" were common terms, but the most widely used were "association" (or "associationism") and "cooperation."²⁶ We can again turn to Ngram for quantitative confirmation of the changing cultural salience of these concepts. As Figure 5.2 shows, these communitarian ideals rose and persisted for the first two thirds of the twentieth century, but after 1970 they would all steadily recede.²⁷ Figure 5.2 also includes "socialism," because that concept attracted some activists in the Progressive movement, but not Adams, not TR, and not many others, who were put off by doctrinaire Marxism. Despite the ideological and political resonance of "socialism," "association" and "cooperation" were much more salient throughout the twentieth century. The attentive reader will spot in Figure 5.2 the familiar inverted U pattern that we have noted throughout previous chapters.

TR's Bull Moose Party was beaten by the equally progressive (or nearly so) Woodrow Wilson in 1912. In the fall of 1916, in an effort to attract TR's 1912 four million votes, Wilson led congressional approval of the final

FIGURE 5.2: CULTURAL SALIENCE OF "ASSOCIATION," "COOPERATION," AND "SOCIALISM," 1880–2008



Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .15.

tranche of national progressive legislation on child labor, the eight-hour workday, the estate tax, and a more progressive income tax. The Overton window had begun to shift to encompass more progressive policies, the culmination of a quarter century of cultural change and grassroots organizing.

FANFARE FOR THE COMMON MAN: 1920–1950²⁸

After World War I the communitarian thrust of American politics and culture seemed to dissipate during the giddy, materialist interlude of the Roaring Twenties, remembered more for “flapper” dance crazes, Prohibition, gangsters, and stock market gyrations than for enduring policy or intellectual innovations. Prosperity, presided over by Wall Street financiers, seemed to reanimate, if only temporarily, the myth that opportunity was open to all but the lazy.

Ironically, Herbert Hoover, who coined the term “rugged individualism” and would preside unhappily over the crash that ended the Roaring Twenties, had Progressive roots and was a firm communitarian. In a widely admired book, *American Individualism*, published in 1923, Hoover argued for a paradoxical blend of individualism and communitarianism.²⁹ In the words of historian James Kloppenberg, Hoover insisted “in good progressive fashion that laissez-faire was irresponsible, and that individualism without equal opportunity was repressive. The only individualism worth having—American individualism—must combine personal initiative with a deep spiritual commitment to the value of public service and the importance of cooperation.”³⁰ Hoover wanted what he called an “associative state,” in which the government would encourage voluntary cooperation among corporations, consumers, workers, farmers, and small businessmen.

As president, as we saw in Chapter 3, Hoover enacted orthodox conservative economic policy, a departure from his previous embrace of Progressive ideas, and that orthodoxy failed him with the onset of the Great Depression. Nevertheless, the Hoover of the 1920s was an excellent illustration of two important facts: (1) that good conservatives could be communitarians—opposing “big government,” but favoring collective action to redress injustice—and (2) that the Progressive Era torrent of

communitarianism had not dried up, but simply gone underground during the Roaring Twenties.

For American writers of the 1920s known as "The Lost Generation"—including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound—the millions of deaths in the trenches of World War I, followed by millions more in the horrific pandemic of 1918, had destroyed all illusions, including the illusion that kindness and altruism were normal human traits. They had lived through profound loss, alienation, and despair, and their heroes were left to celebrate inner strength and the individual. In "hip" circles, too, the Twenties were highly individualistic, favoring free love and flouting convention. Both the war and the pandemic fostered nihilism.

The stock market crash of 1929 dropped the curtain on the Roaring Twenties. The idea that joblessness was due to character flaws was hard to reconcile with the reality of the Depression, as unemployment shot up from about 3 percent in 1929 to about 25 percent in 1933. Individual effort could hardly solve such a massive collective problem. A commission of Episcopal bishops argued that "it is becoming increasingly evident that the conception of society as made up of autonomous, independent individuals is as faulty from the point of view of economic realism as it is from the standpoint of Christian idealism. Our fundamental philosophy of rugged individualism must be modified to meet the needs of a co-operative age."³¹ Historian Charles Beard argued that "the cold truth is that the individualist creed of everybody for himself and the devil take the hindmost is principally responsible for the distress in which Western civilization finds itself."³²

In literature, social conscience and social realism prevailed, culminating in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In cinema these were the years of Frank Capra's celebration of community spirit in films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). As Capra said, "My films must let every man, woman, and child know that . . . peace and salvation will become a reality only when they all learn to love each other."³³

In politics, too, the New Deal reanimated the communitarianism of the Progressive Era, not least because many New Dealers had themselves come of age in the Progressive movement. FDR had been a communitarian progressive from his days at Harvard in 1900–1903, likely having picked up

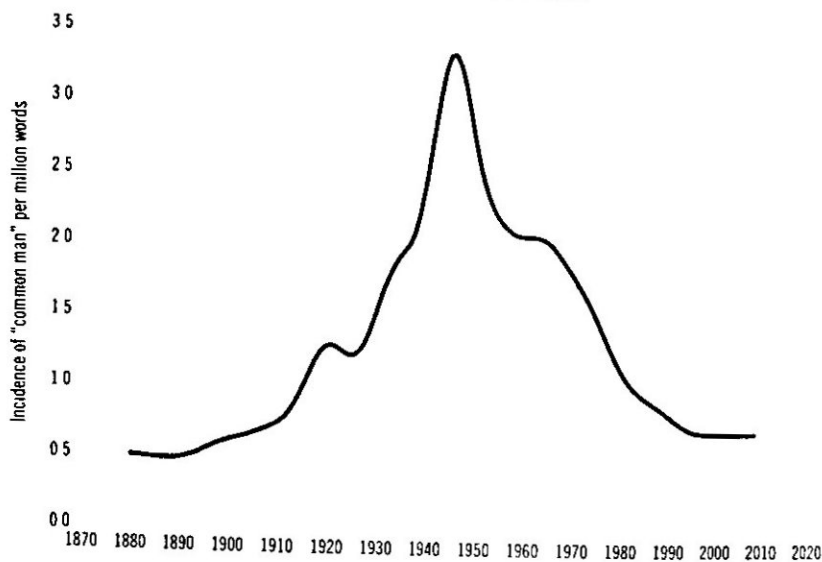
this commitment from his role model and fifth cousin, then in the White House. As a young state senator in 1912, fighting for conservation for the Adirondacks, FDR had argued that it was necessary to establish the "liberty of the community," the right of the community to require certain responsibilities of its members.³⁴ Experience in the Social Gospel movement and the settlement house had been especially influential among New Dealers, many of whom (like Harry Hopkins, one of FDR's closest advisors; Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr.; the pioneering secretary of labor, Frances Perkins; and the president's wife, Eleanor) had acquired their ideals as young people during the Progressive Era.³⁵

Politically, as well as culturally, seen from the perspective of the twentieth century as a whole, the New Deal was a continuation of the Progressive Era, interrupted only temporarily by the pause in the 1920s. The Great Depression and revival of concern for the community, not merely the isolated individual, had the effect once again of shifting the Overton window, making massive government intervention more plausible and laissez-faire policies less credible.

It was not merely in New Deal domestic policy that the communitarian spirit pervaded the 1930s. As early as January 1931 Congress had authorized, and President Hoover had appointed, a War Policies Commission to assure that should there be a war in the future, its burden would fall equally on everyone. The commission's executive secretary was a promising young Army officer named Dwight Eisenhower. The commission was a response to growing popular feeling that "merchants of death" had profited from World War I, and reaction to its report across party lines was overwhelmingly favorable. In other words, the idea that "we're all in this together" was widely shared nearly a decade before America's actual involvement in World War II.³⁶

The foremost anthem for mid-century America was the monumental "Fanfare for the Common Man" penned in 1942 by composer Aaron Copland, and inspired in part by a speech made earlier that year by Vice President Henry A. Wallace, in which Wallace proclaimed the dawning of the "Century of the Common Man." As Figure 5.3 shows, the term "common man" had appeared first in American literature in the Progressive Era, rose steadily in

FIGURE 5.3: CULTURAL SALIENCE OF "COMMON MAN," 1880–2008



Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .10.

the first half of the century (except for the familiar pause in the 1920s), peaked in 1945, and then faded in cultural salience throughout the rest of the century, its waning accelerating after the Sixties. By 1942 "common man" had become a powerful cultural symbol of national solidarity, social equality, and communitarianism that Wallace and Copland appropriated.³⁷

A virtually uninterrupted boom and ever-increasing prosperity were the most important features of the quarter century after the war. Poverty declined by almost half from 1945 to 1975. The postwar boom obviously helped, but so, too, did the fact that in that era (as we saw in Chapter 2) the poor and working classes were receiving a fairer share of the growth. Meanwhile, the number of families receiving Social Security checks increased by 4.5 million (nearly five-fold) from 1950 to 1960, and overall benefit expenditure rose from \$960 million to \$10.7 billion. By the early 1960s, 50 percent of major labor union contracts contained a guaranteed cost-of-living adjustment.³⁸

From the New Deal through World War II and into the postwar period, the exaltation of shared values, social solidarity, and the ordinary

middle-class American way of life intensified. Contemporary advertising neatly encapsulated these cultural stereotypes—portraying a happy, white, nuclear family enjoying unprecedented leisure time, surrounded by affordable, brand-name consumer goods, with a smiling mother cooking up all-American steaks while a handy father tinkered with an outboard engine. These stereotypes were exaggerated, of course, but they had more than a kernel of truth in them, as unprecedented prosperity made this lifestyle more widely available than it had ever been. In the arts, too, Norman Rockwell's middlebrow paintings in *The Saturday Evening Post* both reflected and reinforced the mid-century moral and cultural consensus.

The culture associated with postwar affluence and optimism could rightly be accused of "blandness," but it was not materialism shorn of all civic values. The term "American Dream" had originally been popularized by James Truslow Adams in 1931, who explained, "It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of their birth."³⁹

That high-minded understanding of the "American Dream" persisted into the 1960s. As Nobel Laureate economist Robert Shiller has observed, "it meant freedom, mutual respect and equality of opportunity. It had more to do with morality than material success." References to the American Dream became even more common in the 1960s, Shiller points out, including "Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech in 1963, in which he spoke of a vision that was 'deeply rooted in the American Dream.' [King] said he dreamed of the disappearance of prejudice and a rise in community spirit. . . . But as the term became more commonplace, its connection with notions of equality and community weakened. In the 1970s and '80s, home builders used it extensively in advertisements, perhaps to make conspicuous consumption seem patriotic."⁴⁰

In the decades after the Sixties, Shiller goes on to show, the "American Dream" as used by politicians and ordinary citizens was steadily converted into a symbol of individual material success, such as homeownership, not collective moral success. This conversion is a useful reminder that the same

all three would fade away just as abruptly in the half century after 1960. Thus, unembellished quantitative evidence reinforces the continued ascendance of communitarian values in American culture of the 1950s and 1960s.

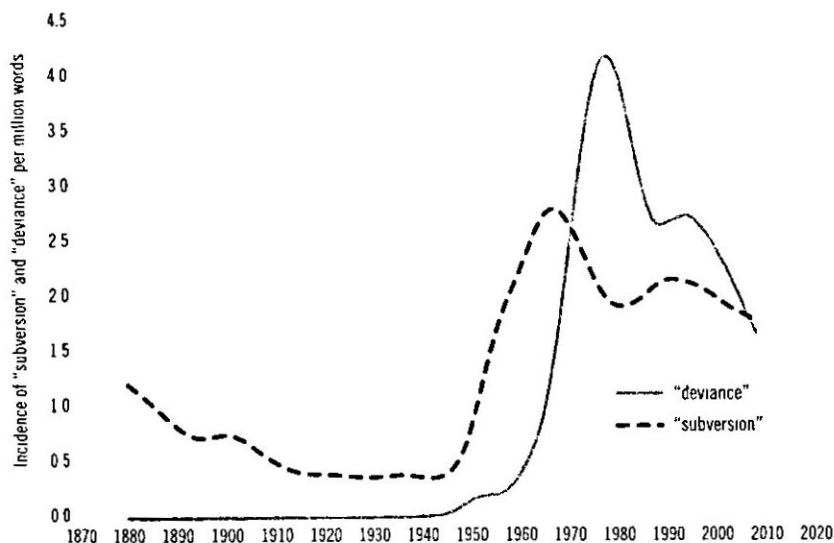
RUMBLES OF DISSENT: THE 1950s

So far in this book we've focused on patterns of social change from the 1910s to the 1960s that seem broadly commendable—more economic equality, more political comity, and more social solidarity. You couldn't have too much of a good thing, it seemed. The cultural story is more complicated, because although the familiar inverted U-curve is empirically unmistakable in the cultural domain, too, many reasonable Americans might reverse the normative polarity here. For example, an increasingly communitarian culture might seem to some a sign of the rise of repressive conformity, while a move toward individualistic culture might seem to symbolize the dawning of liberation. And in fact, one of the virtues of the 1960s' pivot away from communitarianism was greater tolerance and support for diversity and racial and gender equality, as we shall discuss at length in the next two chapters. However, the post-1960s tolerance was mostly of a live-and-let-live sort, not the embracing tolerance and moral solidarity of Martin Luther King's "beloved community," and it definitely did not entail tolerance of political opponents, as we saw in Chapter 3.

The dark side of communitarianism became readily visible in Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks on "subversives" in the early 1950s. Though the more tolerant Ike despised McCarthy and McCarthyism, even he sought to exclude "deviants" from government service.⁴⁵ The Red Scare (and the contemporaneous Lavender Scare aimed at homosexuals) gradually waned, but concern that the balance had shifted too far toward "conformity" and community standards began to spread, especially among intellectuals. Marie Jahoda, a social psychologist who had fled prewar fascism in Europe, observed in 1956 that "Many observers of the current crisis of civil liberties in this country agree with regard to one of its aspects: this is a time of growing conformism . . . of severely restricted tolerance for deviation from the medium and mediocre."⁴⁶

The cultural reflection of this mood appeared in growing commentary on “subversion” and “deviance” in the 1950s and 1960s, since subversion and deviance were defined as deviation from what were said to be widely shared community standards (see Figure 5.5). Strikingly, however, within a decade or two discussion about subversion and deviance would subside almost as quickly as it had grown, with the rise of cultural individualism in the 1970s and beyond. Concern about dissent was, in effect, a leading, but transitory indicator of the cultural turn that was to come.

FIGURE 5.5: CULTURAL SALIENCE OF “SUBVERSION” AND “DEVIANCE,” 1880–2008



Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .10.

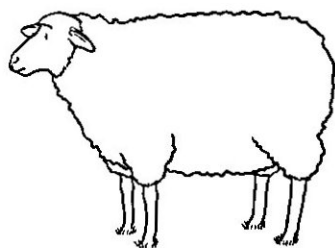
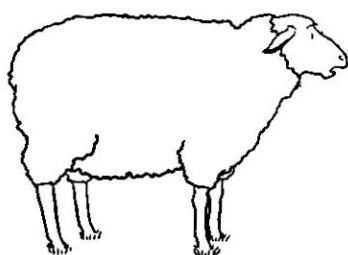
On the surface, American society in the 1950s seemed characterized by an unusual consensus, but appearances could be deceiving. Subtle observers could see deeper signs of growing cultural and intellectual dissent, flickering beneath the surface. Cultural rebellion against convention, repression, and consumerism emerged. In the field of literature, the 1950s brought *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, the beatniks inspired by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and other books that reflected rebellion against the mid-century insistence on conformity. In

cinema, this trend was embodied in James Dean, the lead actor in the hit movie of 1955, *Rebel Without a Cause*, who was killed in an auto accident at age twenty-three and who was nominated posthumously for an Academy Award for the film. Dean became an instant cultural icon, representing disillusionment and social estrangement to young people growing up in the 1950s. The decade's best works of fiction were dark reflections of youthful anxiety and hinted at seismic cultural shifts to come.

Increasing numbers of scholars and public intellectuals in the late 1950s and early 1960s were also concerned about the growing "we-ness" of America and decried the trend toward conformity. *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman's 1950 runaway best-seller, contrasted (unfavorably) the "other-directed" American of the mid-twentieth century with the "inner-directed" American of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ The "inner-directed" personality emphasized individual drive, initiative, and competition, while the "other-directed" personality took his cues from friends, bosses, and peers, seeking to "get along with others." The other-directed person's forte was not individual drive and innovation, but selling his own affable personality and seeking to fit in. For millions of young Americans, Riesman's polarity was morally loaded: It was bad to be other-directed and good to be inner-directed. In *The Lonely Crowd* Riesman had adopted a stance as neutral observer, not moralist, but in his 1954 *Individualism Reconsidered*, he urged Americans to find "the nerve to be oneself when that self is not approved of by the dominant ethic of a society."⁴⁸ His young readers were avidly listening.

William H. Whyte's 1956 social commentary *The Organization Man* and Sloan Wilson's 1957 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* were classics in the same genre as *The Lonely Crowd*. *The Organization Man* was critical of "belongingness," "togetherness," "sociability," conformity, classlessness, and the "social ethic," which Whyte defined as a "contemporary body of thought that makes morally legitimate the pressures of the society against the individual." The flaw in the social ethic, in Whyte's eyes, was not its suggestion that the individual had an obligation to society per se. Rather, the problem was that people came to believe that "society's needs and the needs of the individual are one and the same," with the result that anyone who expressed discontent was considered psychologically maladjusted.⁴⁹

FIGURE 5.6: CONFORMITY



GREGORY

"Sure, I follow the herd—not out of brainless obedience, mind you, but out of a deep and abiding respect for the concept of community."

© Alex Gregory, 2003

Source: Alex Gregory, *The New Yorker*, June 30, 2003. Reprinted with permission.

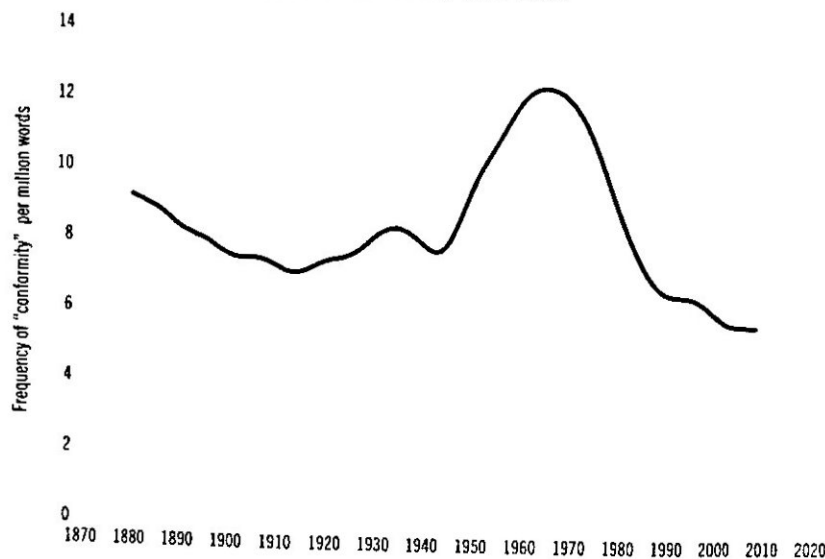
That these weighty tomes unexpectedly became best-sellers testified to the fact that similar concerns were spreading among millions of American readers. Their grievances embodied an impending turn away from a culture of conformity—and thus community—that spread rapidly in the late 1950s and peaked in the mid-1960s. As American society turned from “we” to “I” in the late 1960s, these complaints of excessive “we”-ness declined and would disappear by the late 1970s. As the problem they had identified began to dissipate in a more individualistic America, the complaints no longer seemed necessary or even novel. Hydrological engineers are said to believe that “the dam leaks before it breaks,”⁵⁰ and in effect, this cultural indicator was an early warning sign that the pendulum had swung too far toward the communitarian pole for comfort.

Conformity is the dark twin of community, for communitarianism almost by definition involves social pressure to conform to norms. If the communitarian “we” is defined too narrowly, however, then conformity to social norms punishes dissidents and deviants, whether political or sexual or racial. That was no less true in mid-twentieth-century America than it had been in seventeenth-century Salem, and it was no accident that Arthur Miller underscored that parallel in his 1953 play *The Crucible*.

During the first half of the twentieth century, this potential disadvantage of community had been virtually undiscussed. As the I-we-I pendulum swung

ever upward in the 1950s, however, Americans suddenly became more aware of this dark side of community. That awakening to the fact that we might have too much of a good thing was reflected in a sudden increase in the number of books dealing with “conformity” (see Figure 5.7). With the 1960s’ turn from “we” to “I”—a pivot that we shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 8—that preoccupation with conformity declined almost as quickly as it had arisen. Whether that cultural shift was itself a cause of the 1960s’ turn, or merely a reflection, is a difficult question to which we shall return in Chapter 8.

FIGURE 5.7: CULTURAL SALIENCE OF “CONFORMITY,” 1880–2008



Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .10.

Why do we emphasize these rumbles of individualistic dissent in the 1950s? In part, as we have argued, they seem to have been signals of an impending cultural shift. But equally important for our argument, they are implicit evidence that, in fact, postwar America was predominantly “other-directed” and communitarian. Why so many complaints about conformity unless conformity was, in fact, prevalent? However, our discussion of conformity has rested thus far on literary evidence. We know that people were writing (and reading) a lot about conformity in the 1950s. But were

Americans actually more conformist, more "other-directed" in the 1950s than now? Fortunately, we have strong, experimental evidence on that very point.

In 1950 social psychologist Solomon Asch conducted a simple experiment on visual perception whose results astounded psychologists and the general public.⁵¹ Subjects were asked to decide which of three comparison lines matched the length of a target line. Crucially, these judgments were made in the presence of other participants. Only one of the participants in the experiment was the naive subject, while the others were confederates of the experimenter and were instructed to give manifestly incorrect answers. Although those answers seemed plainly wrong to most of the naive subjects, as post-experiment interviews revealed, about one third of the time they went along with the majority anyway. In other words, people were willing to ignore the simple evidence before their eyes in order to conform to the group consensus. For many observers, these results threatened their image of America as the land of individualism and autonomy. The experiment became an instant classic, replicated many times in the 1950s and early 1960s. All confirmed that Americans were remarkably willing to suppress their own judgment in the face of social pressure.

Yet as the replications continued into the 1970s and 1980s, the size of the Asch effect diminished and then disappeared. Eventually researchers failed to detect even minimal levels of conformity, suggesting that "Asch's results were a child of the 1950s, the age of 'other-directed' people made famous by David Riesman."⁵² Asch subsequently agreed that cultural and social pressures for conformity in mid-century America could have contributed to his finding, and that the later failures to replicate it were not lab failures, but rather evidence of real social change: "Historical circumstances may have altered this supposedly rock-bottom condition."⁵³

In other words, the culture of community and conformism that peaked in America from the 1950s to the 1960s was not a figment of the imagination of social critics, but was embodied in the actual behavior of ordinary Americans. The history of "the Asch social pressure effect" is a rare instance in which changing lab results were evidence not of scientific incompetence, but of wider social and cultural change.

In sum, reformers in the 1950s were properly worried about the constraints that conformity placed on individualism and (as we shall see in Chapters 6 and 7) about the persistence of racial and gender inequality. Those combustible concerns, ignited by the sparks of the 1960s, would help to reverse the fundamental trends of the first two thirds of the century, and set us on a different course. That new course would indeed bring more cultural freedom and diversity, though at a cost to the earlier communitarian values, a cost mostly unnoticed as one century unspooled and gave way to the next.

THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM IN THE 1960s AND BEYOND

The sharp critiques of the 1950s from J. D. Salinger and James Dean to David Riesman and William Whyte were couched in social-psychological terms. They did not frame their complaints in terms of political ideology—Riesman's book was subtitled "A Study of the Changing American Character" and Dean's "rebel" famously had no "cause." It was constraint in American society and repression in the American psyche that these cultural critics worried about, not constraints on the American marketplace nor repression in American politics. At virtually the same time, however, a pair of seemingly independent developments extended the critique of America of the 1950s into the realm of political ideology. Strikingly, this occurred simultaneously on both the Right and the Left, giving rise to the New Right and the New Left.

On the Right the challenge had originated with Ayn Rand and Friedrich Hayek and eventually included orthodox economists like Milton Friedman. These "libertarians," as they began to be called, appealed to younger conservatives because their ideas seemed fresh and attractive in an era of flatness and tired "big government." Hayek (*Road to Serfdom*, 1944) and Rand (*The Fountainhead*, 1943; *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957) reacted against "collectivism" gone wrong under communism and Nazism. Hayek was the better thinker, but Rand was a better novelist. *Atlas Shrugged* is sometimes said to be the most widely read book of the twentieth century, trailing only the Bible.⁵⁴

Rand had a genius for quotable, controversial aphorisms: "Nobody has ever given a reason why man should be his brother's keeper" and "Altruism

is incompatible with freedom, with capitalism and with individual rights.”⁵⁵ Gordon Gekko’s “Greed is good” from the 1987 film *Wall Street* simply echoed Rand. Rand’s libertarianism was so accessible that it became virtually biblical to successive generations of conservative political leaders—from Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to Alan Greenspan and former speaker of the House of Representatives Paul Ryan.

Atlas Shrugged was the source for a right-wing meme that would endure well into the twenty-first century: “makers” and “takers.” (Rand called them “producers” and “looters.”) According to this meme, society is composed of two classes of people: those who make stuff and those who take stuff. The takers take from the makers, usually using the power of government. The makers, like the eponymous Atlas, bear the entire weight of society. All that is required for freedom and prosperity is for Atlas to “shrug” off the feckless takers. A direct line runs between *Atlas Shrugged* and Mitt Romney’s infamous observation more than half a century later in the 2012 election campaign that 47 percent of the country is a “taker class” that pays little or nothing into the federal government but “believe they are entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing, to you name it.”⁵⁶

Rand’s influence has become especially pronounced in Silicon Valley, where her overarching philosophy that “man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself,” as she described it in a 1964 *Playboy* interview,⁵⁷ has an obvious appeal for self-made entrepreneurs. In 2016 *Vanity Fair* anointed her the most influential figure in the technology industry, surpassing Steve Jobs.⁵⁸

The New Right, inspired by Rand’s extreme libertarianism, stressed the virtues of individualism, unfettered capitalism, and inequality over egalitarianism and collectivism. In this light the twenty-first-century revival of the term “survival of the fittest,” which we noticed in Figure 5.1, is unsurprising, since it was the slogan of choice for the libertarians of the first Gilded Age.

Gradually, individual “choice” became the touchstone for all conservatives. As Paul Ryan put it, “In every fight we are involved here on Capitol Hill . . . it is a fight that usually comes down to one conflict: individualism versus collectivism.”⁵⁹ To be sure, free market fundamentalism, undergirded

by libertarianism, was not the only route followed by post-1960s conservatives; others explored themes of law and order, racism, and evangelical Christianity. In today's Trump world what counts as conservatism is much in turmoil, but for the half century between 1960 and 2016 conservatism shifted starkly away from the solidarity and compassion of the 1950s Republicans (later dismissed as "Republicans in Name Only") to libertarian individualism.

The impact of this cultural shift went well beyond politics. For example, the dominant philosophy of business management during the "we" era (as epitomized by George Romney) had been that corporate decisions should take into account a wide range of constituencies beyond the owners—employees, customers, suppliers, and even the wider community within which they operated—what would later be called "stakeholders." But the newer libertarian philosophy of the 1970s argued for sharply narrowing the focus of business management to a single group—the shareholders of the company's stock—and closely linking the income of managers themselves to the stock price. "Shareholder value" (that is, the stock price) became the single metric for managerial success; this term first appeared (according to Ngram) in 1976 and then exploded in usage after 1980. The CEO of General Electric from 1981 to 2001, Jack Welch, converted that idea from theory to the dominant business culture and by 1999 was named "Manager of the Century" by *Fortune* magazine.

Meanwhile, in the very same years an equal and opposite evolution was more slowly getting under way at the far-left end of the spectrum, as the Old Left was replaced by the New Left, similarly eager to replace institutionalized solidarity with individual liberation. While the New Right wanted to remove the fetters from capitalist entrepreneurs, the New Left wanted to free people from oppressive community bonds. Francis Fukuyama in *The Great Disruption* (1999) emphasized that both Left and Right have taken freeing people from constraints as their central goal. For the Left, constraints are on lifestyles; for the Right, constraints are on money.⁶⁰

Leftist thinkers and activists in the late 1950s and early 1960s pursued the ideal of participatory democracy by turning against highly organized elites. C. Wright Mills wrote *The Power Elite* (1956) with the goal of mobilizing the resistance of a "New Left." His ideas were echoed by

more abstract thinkers, such as Herbert Marcuse, whose *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) argued that the political triumph of "technical rationality" had brought about "a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" in American society, as managerial techniques achieved "freedom from want" at the cost of "the independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition."⁶¹

Unlike the New Right that had attacked solidarity in favor of extreme individualism from the beginning, the New Left in its early years was communitarian in both its philosophy and its strategy. The 1962 Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, drafted by Tom Hayden and widely read on campuses throughout the 1960s, laid out the ideals of participatory democracy, racial equality, economic justice, and peace as a guide to the Left. In historical perspective the Port Huron Statement marked an inflection point on the Left, a high point of communitarianism, condemning "egoistic individualism," while praising self-expression as against conformism.⁶²

During the second half of the Sixties more individualistic strands in the New Left counterculture became more dominant. The term "New Left" itself exploded into common usage between 1963 and 1968 (according to Ngram). The New Left was more heterogeneous and fractious than the New Right, but in general members of the New Left shared disillusionment with the state, and all emphasized deconstruction of repressive institutions and assertion of self-autonomy. Outside the purely political sphere, as we'll discuss in Chapter 8, the libertine hippie slogan "If it feels good, do it" became the watchword for the Left for the Sixties.

The transition away from the Old Left toward a more individualistic New Left was neatly encapsulated in a 1966 mass meeting at Berkeley about an antiwar campus strike. It was a microcosm of the future of the Left: (1) the original Left, heavily influenced by labor unions and the Civil Rights movement, and (2) the growing hippie and New Left subculture. Todd Gitlin's autobiographical account reveals who won out in the merger.

In December 1966, Berkeley antiwar protestors tried to evict a Navy recruiting table from the student union. The police intervened. Afterward,

at a mass meeting to discuss a campus strike, someone started singing the old union standby, "Solidarity Forever." Voices stumbled; few knew the words. Then someone started "Yellow Submarine," and the entire room rollicked into it, chorus after chorus. With a bit of effort, the Beatles' song could be taken as the communion of hippies and activists, students and non-students, all who at long last felt they could express their beloved single-hearted community. (It did not cross the collective mind that "Yellow Submarine" might also be taken as a smug anthem of the happy few snug in their little Utopia.)⁶³

Most interpretations of the 1960s are framed in terms of the political struggle between the Left and the Right, a struggle in which the initial victories of the Left (the Great Society and the Civil Rights revolution) triggered a conservative backlash, putting in power the Right, which has largely dominated American politics ever since. In Chapter 3 we acknowledged that narrative, but we also argued that the more durable and pervasive change was from communitarianism to individualism, a dimension that is conceptually and empirically distinct from the left-right spectrum. The shift in the Sixties was less from left to right (or the reverse) than from we to I, a shift that was entirely visible on both extremes, as the Old Right gave way to the New Right and the Old Left gave way to the New Left. Both the New Right and the New Left seemed fresh and attractive, whereas the communitarian ideals had come to seem stale and constraining.

For the most part the New Right had much more long-term success than the New Left. The Republican Party in 2018 was much more like the New Right of the 1950s than the Democratic Party was like the New Left of the 1960s. In only one domain did the legacy of the New Left linger and expand into the twenty-first century, and that involves the concept of "identity."

Here, too, the cultural innovation did not begin in politics, but in social psychology. In 1958 the term "identity crisis" was introduced into the American lexicon by the psychologist Erik Erikson to describe a common phase in human development.⁶⁴ The new term resonated widely in an America where millions of young people craved independence and sought to craft a personal identity. The term "identity crisis" spread rapidly across

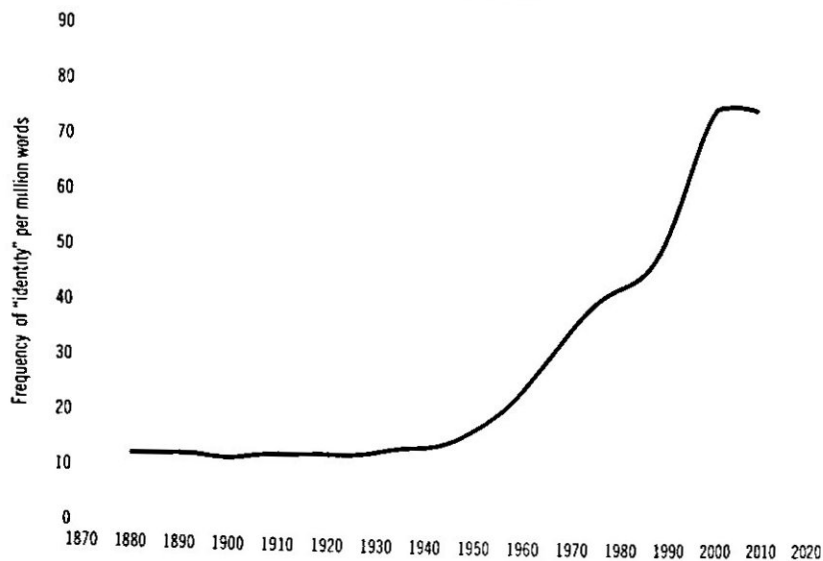
America in the next two decades and then began to fade from view. However, by then the concept of "identity" itself had begun to spread beyond developmental psychology to gender and racial identity in the 1970s and 1980s and to identity politics by the 1990s.⁶⁵

"Identity" itself, unmodified by race, or gender, or politics, rapidly became an important theme in American culture after mid-century, as our trusty Ngram tool reveals with great clarity. The frequency of the word "identity" in American literature increased more than five-fold over the second half of the twentieth century, as Figure 5.8 shows. Identities, of course, can be collective—"we Democrats," "we whites," "we women"—but over much of this period "identity" referred as much to personal identity as to collective identity. Of all references to "identity" charted in Figure 5.8, fewer than 3 percent involved "identity politics," "gender identity," "racial identity," "black identity," "white identity," "class identity," and virtually all other demographic identities combined. In short, the rapidly increasing salience of identity in American culture in the second half of the twentieth century began in young adult psyches far from race and gender and class and politics. Although identity was eventually reflected in those spheres, too, at its core it represented an emphasis on "I."

One final indication of the changing weight that Americans gave in the mid-1960s to the competing claims of the individual and the community involved the balance between rights and responsibility. An emphasis on individual rights, of course, has profound roots in American political culture dating to before our national founding. National commitment to a "Bill of Rights" was demanded by the states as a precondition for ratification of the Constitution. Historically, however, our strong normative commitment to rights has been counterbalanced by strong commitment to our civic responsibilities. "Citizenship offers many benefits and equally important responsibilities," we tell all new citizens. "Below [in this pamphlet] you will find several rights and responsibilities that all citizens should exercise and respect."⁶⁶

We can therefore get some measure of the changing balance between individualism and communitarianism by examining (see Figure 5.9) the changing cultural balance between "rights" and "responsibility" in our national literature.⁶⁷ Overall, "rights" is a more common word in American

FIGURE 5.9: CULTURAL SALIENCE OF "IDENTITY," 1880–2008

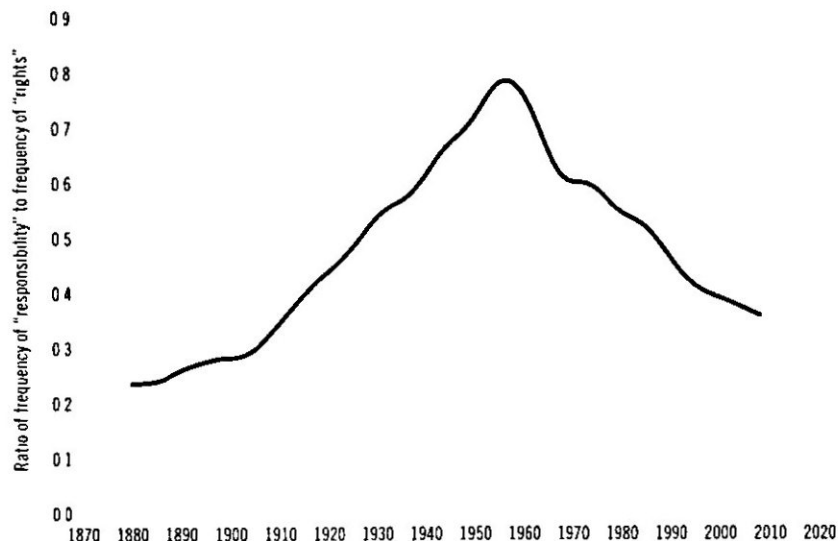


Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .10.

English than “responsibility,” but that edge has varied enormously over time. From the Gilded Age to about 1960 American writers put ever increasing stress on “responsibility” (as compared to “rights”)—not just civic responsibilities, of course, but also family responsibilities, religious responsibilities, and so forth. Over that period, as Figure 5.9 shows, the ratio of “responsibility” to “rights” in American publications rose from one to four in 1900, when “responsibility” was a relatively rare word, to four to five in 1960, when “responsibility” was nearly as commonly used as “rights.” By contrast, between 1960 and 2008, “responsibility” became rarer and “rights” more common, so that the ratio of the first word to the second fell back to about one to three.

Beginning in the Sixties, “rights talk” (as philosopher Mary Ann Glendon properly dubbed it⁶⁸) became ever more prominent. Communitarian constitutional scholars have criticized the “rights revolution” on normative grounds, but whether the shift was good or bad is less relevant here than simply the fact and timing of the shift. The emphasis on individual rights—civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, consumer rights, children’s rights, and so forth—has expanded steadily over the last half century and shows

FIGURE 5.9: RELATIVE CULTURAL SALIENCE OF "RESPONSIBILITY" AND "RIGHTS," 1880–2008



Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .10.

no sign of waning. Though initially framed as a progressive value, "rights" soon became a normative framework accepted across the political spectrum—"rights of the unborn," "gun rights," or even "white rights."⁶⁹ Figure 5.9 offers particularly crisp evidence of the swing of the pendulum in American culture from individualism to communitarianism from 1900 to the Sixties, and back to individualism from the Sixties to today.

Cultural change in America in the years after the 1960s is vividly portrayed in the sequence of Ngrams that we have offered so far in this chapter. In virtually every case the salience of ideas and themes that emphasize individualism has surged up to replace ideas and themes that emphasize unity, agreement, association, cooperation, compromise, and—lest we forget—conformity. However, some of the most salient evidence of change in the last half century involves generational change, as the generations who came of age during and after the 1960s were more likely to be socialized in favor of individual autonomy. Significantly, studies of how parents have raised their children over this period show that parental values have shifted from obedience to autonomy and self-expression.⁷⁰

Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that Americans have become literally more self-centered. Sales of "self-help" books soared in the 1960s and 1970s.⁷¹ "Selfies" have come to dominate our photographic behavior, and we now speak of "sharing a selfie," although the meaning of the verb "to share" has subtly changed. It once referred to other-directed behavior, or in the words of an older dictionary definition, "to give a portion of something to another." More recently, however, its meaning has become more "inner-directed" or (according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary online) to "talk about one's thoughts, feelings, or experiences with others."⁷² For many younger Americans, presenting a "curated self" online has become de rigueur. As early as 1979 social observers like Christopher Lasch argued that Americans were becoming increasingly narcissistic.⁷³

The most substantial quantitative evidence on this trend has been gathered by social psychologist Jean Twenge, under the rubric of *The Narcissism Epidemic* (coauthored with W. Keith Campbell, 2009) and *Generation Me* (2014). In one of her earliest studies, she cited the astonishing fact that in 1950, 12 percent of students agreed with the statement, "I am a very important person." By 1990 that figure had risen to 80 percent!⁷⁴ Twenge's interest is not in the incidence of a clinically defined personality trait, but in broader social and cultural change: "the fight for the greater good of the 1960s" turning into "looking out for number one by the 1980s."⁷⁵ Initially, Twenge's pioneering work was criticized on methodological grounds, but as she steadily improved the scope of her evidence, the scientific community has revised its assessment, which is now generally supportive. Her latest work definitely suggests a long-term increase in self-centeredness among American youth. "No single event initiated the narcissism epidemic; instead, Americans' core cultural ideas slowly became more focused on self-admiration and self-expression. At the same time, Americans' faith in the power of collective action or the government was lost."⁷⁶ She and others offer abundant evidence for a monotonic increase since the 1960s in self-focus, which matches our account of cultural change, but virtually no one has extended this analysis to the full twentieth century, largely because of the absence of systematic survey data prior to the 1960s.

That very absence of earlier survey data has required us in this chapter

to rely almost exclusively on narratives and Ngrams to trace the pendular swing between individualism and community. However, as it happens, one solid, century-long behavioral measure comes from a very simple choice that faces almost all of us at one time or another: What names do we give our newborns?

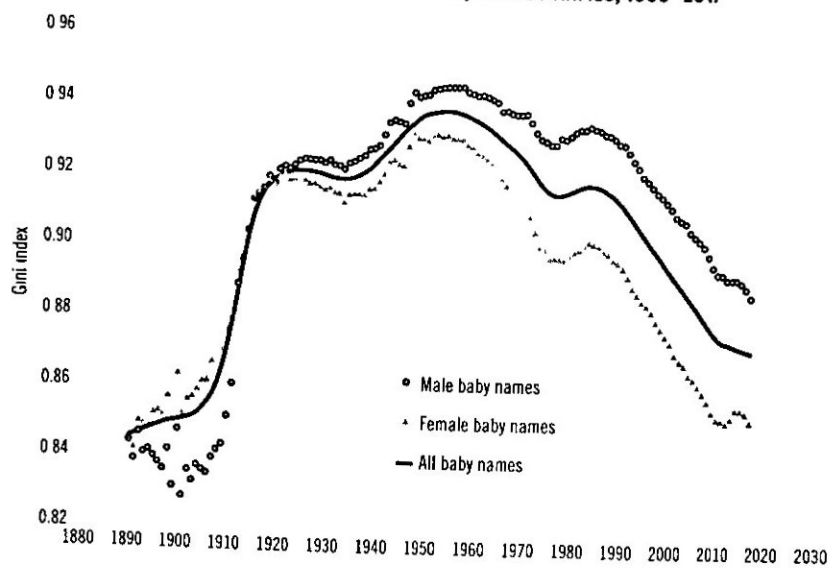
Concentration of parental baby-naming choices on fewer names implies tighter social constraints on appropriate baby names, whereas a wider dispersion of parents' choices reflects a desire to assert individuality. Individualistic people give their children rare names, reflecting a desire to stand out, as opposed to common names, which reflect instead a desire to fit in. Among advanced countries, those whose inhabitants have more idiosyncratic names rank higher on the Hofstede index of cultural individualism, representing "a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families."⁷⁷ We borrow our baby names measure of individualism from social psychologists—including Jean Twenge. This measure has been found to correlate strongly with other proxies for individualism in multiple contexts by economists and sociologists, as well as psychologists.⁷⁸

The advantage of this measure of individualism is that it is based on the actual choices of succeeding generations of all American parents, not on the somewhat mysterious processes that influence American authors' changing word choices. Strikingly, this objective indicator of cultural change turns out to be remarkably synchronized with the changes as reflected in our Ngram word counts.

Data on baby names year by year since 1879 is readily available from the US Social Security Administration.⁷⁹ The most sensitive and robust measure of the degree of concentration of parental choices on a limited number of names is the Gini index, a measure of statistical dispersion.⁸⁰ As Gabriel Rossman of UCLA writes, "Gini is basically a better version of taking the ratio of a high percentile and a low percentile. If you have exactly two people with exactly equal wealth (or exactly two names with equal numbers of babies) then you'd have a very low Gini."⁸¹ When the index (as oriented in this chart) is high, most children are given conventional names like John and David and Susan and Mary. When the index is low, many

more children are given unusual names like Silas and Jaden and Harper and Maude. (The basic trend in baby-naming persists even with controls for immigration and “foreign” names.⁸²) Figure 5.10 shows that this unusual measure of conventionality and individualism matches our I-we-I curve almost perfectly over the last 125 years, including even the “pause” in the 1920s. The figure also shows that since the 1920s, boys have been given more conventional names than girls and that this gender distinction has widened over the decades. Nonetheless, the pendular swing from idiosyncratic names to conventional names and back again has followed perfectly the same pattern as more literary measures of culture.

FIGURE 5.10: CONVENTIONALITY (VS. INDIVIDUALISM) IN BABY NAMES, 1890–2017



Source: Social Security Administration. “All baby names” data LOESS smoothed: .10.

PRONOUN USAGE

Social psychologist James Pennebaker in his fascinating book *The Secret Life of Pronouns* (2011) explains that our usage of the first-person plural and first-person singular pronouns is remarkably revealing. Use of “we” is more common in strong marriages and close-knit teams, for example.

Similarly, high-status, confident people, focused on the task at hand, not on themselves, use fewer “I” words. Frequent use of “I” is associated with depression and suicide; indeed, researchers have reported that pronouns are actually more reliable in identifying depression than negative emotion words, like “sad.” On the other hand, in the aftermath of community trauma (such as 9/11; Princess Diana’s death; or a mass campus shooting) use of “I” declines, researchers have found, whereas use of “we” increases. Frequent use of “I” seems to be a signal of individual isolation, whereas “we” is typically a sign of solidarity and collective identification.⁸³

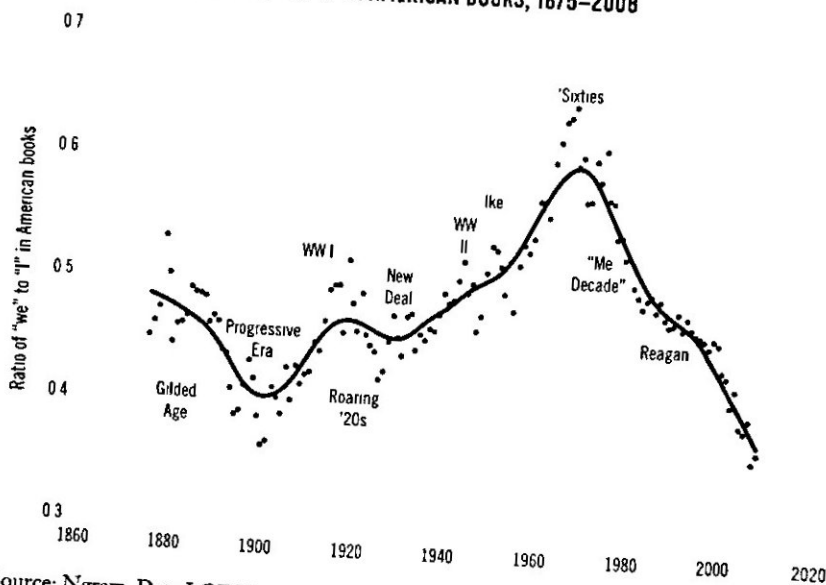
Pennebaker cautions that “we” has multiple meanings—he identifies at least five. “We” can mean “my friends and I, *not* you,” or the royal “we” (as in “we are not amused”), or “every person on earth” (as in “we face global catastrophe”), or even “you” (as in “how are we feeling today?”). Of course, “we” most conventionally means “you and I.” By contrast, there are not multiple usages of “I,” so it is a cleaner indicator of psychological and cultural focus.⁸⁴ But comparing “I” and “we” over time provides an unexpectedly clear index of individual and community salience.

In recent years scholars have turned to Ngram to explore the frequency of “I” and “we” across time and space, as a tool for measuring individualism. Patricia Greenfield⁸⁵ and Jean Twenge and her colleagues⁸⁶ have independently found evidence for a long-term shift toward language that evinces greater “individualistic and materialistic values” over the last two centuries. On the other hand, both have focused on “I,” ignoring “we,” and neither has focused specifically on the full period of our interest in this book. Both looked particularly for one-way trends (like modernization), not ups and downs, and Twenge did not extend her work back before 1960.

In fact, over the period from 1900 to 1965 the word “I” appeared less and less often in American publications, but after 1965 (as both Greenfield and Twenge reported) that trend reversed itself, and in a paroxysm of self-centeredness the word “I” became ever more frequent. The frequency of the word “I” in all American books actually doubled between 1965 and 2008. “We” is less common in general, and its changes over time are less marked, but Figure 5.11 combines both pronouns by showing the ratio of “we” to “I” over the period from 1875 to 2008 in American literature of all sorts.

Taking that full span of time allows us to see the accelerating individualism of the Gilded Age 1875–1900, supplanting the Lincolnian era of communitarianism. Then comes the reinvigorated communitarian reversal of the Progressive Era in the “we” spurt from 1900 to 1916, the familiar pause of the 1920s and the renewed “we”-ness during the Depression and then World War II. We can see the remarkable increase in “we”-ness in the 1950s and early 1960s, a very abrupt turning point in 1967, followed by what Tom Wolfe would call the “Me Decade.”⁸⁷ Finally, we can see the long plunge toward ever more intense individualism over the last half century. This chart closely matches the narrative that intellectual and cultural historians have given of the twentieth century. The convergence of these entirely independent streams of evidence gives us considerable confidence in our description of the I-we-I curve in this book.⁸⁸

FIGURE 5.11: FROM “I” TO “WE” TO “I” IN AMERICAN BOOKS, 1875–2008



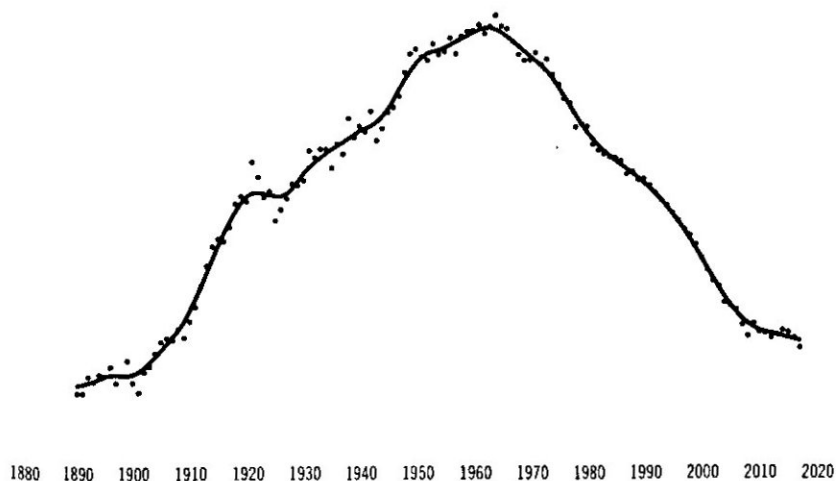
Source: Ngram. Data LOESS smoothed: .20.

As we have done with each of our analytical lenses so far, we can conveniently summarize the main empirical findings of this chapter in a single graph. Figure 5.12 tracks how a composite index of American culture varied

along that community-individual continuum between 1880 and 2017. This curve is, in effect, a weighted average of all the principal curves that we have seen in this chapter.⁸⁹ It shows the by now familiar pattern. Our further statistical analysis confirms that of all the noisy, chaotic, year-to-year fluctuations of these ten cultural indicators over a century and a quarter, 70 percent can be attributed simply to the common I-we-I pendulum.⁹⁰ In other words, the communitarianism indicators fluctuate across the years in impressive lockstep.

But we can't ignore the fact that "we" is, as we noted earlier, a slippery pronoun. That possibility is very vivid in the case of Charts 5.11 and 5.12. Was the American "we" of the 1950s and 1960s a truly national "we," or was it instead a white, affluent, male "we," excluding blacks, many women, and the poor? To this broad and fundamental question, we devote the next two chapters of this book.

FIGURE 5.12: CULTURE: COMMUNITY VS. INDIVIDUALISM, 1890–2017



Source: See endnote 1.4. Data LOESS smoothed: .10.

RACE AND THE AMERICAN "WE"

Throughout the preceding chapters we have outlined the multiplicity of ways in which America's trajectory toward economic equality, political community, social cohesion, and cultural communitarianism combined to produce a clear upswing during the first two thirds of the century, which then abruptly reversed course during the last third. To a remarkable extent, the interconnected phenomena we have examined so far can be summarized in a single statistical trend, which we have come to call the I-we-I curve.

However, the argument that America was for more than six decades moving toward a more equal, cohesive, and expansive "we" must also take into consideration the contested nature of the very concept of "we." Just how expansive was it, really? What kind of American community were we building toward during the upswing? Did our nation's "coming together" come at the expense of traditionally excluded groups? How was the upswing reflected—or not—in the experience of people of color¹ and women?

THE COLOR LINE

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois, one of America's most influential scholars and activists, wrote, "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of