Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was . . . the first condition of all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguishes the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.—Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

There is, let us admit it, no revolutionary movement on earth today which is reshaping human society and the face of nature as vastly, as precipitously as the American business community. Metternich, speaking for conservatism old style, proclaimed himself “the rock from which the waves recoil.” But our jet-set managers, administrators, and systems analysts are a storm beating upon every coast.—Theodore Roszak, introduction to *Sources* (1972)

Anarcho-libertarian impulses have also been generated by capitalism, which has broken down many of the traditional frameworks of authority in this culture, generally replacing them with self-interest. Capitalist rhetoric about “the free enterprise system” as a voluntarist society of free choice, not compulsion—however removed from hard realities—contributes to our common definition of “the pursuit of happiness” as consumerism and of liberation as personal gratification. The radicalism that grows out of this is most often individualist, but, when communal, it also has been remarkably preoccupied with issues of decentralization and fears of the tyranny of organization.

We cannot understand American radicalism unless we understand American capitalism, which forms most of the core of our history and vitally influences all life in this most capitalistic of nations. Even the one-third of our working class that is unionized is neither socialist nor Communist, unlike that of any other major industrial country, but officially speaks for private property. Virtually every radio station, every large newspaper, every billboard, and every mass publication should be interpreted as capitalist propaganda. Since its values are everywhere, we seldom realize how distinctive they are. Many of our everyday assumptions are not shared by most peo-
Capitalism and Community

people in the world, who do not stress individual achievement or evaluate people as commodities. Our common forms of speech—the very way most of us think—are formed by these commercial concepts: “I'll buy that!” “You'd have to sell me on that.” “You pays your money and you takes your choice.” “How have you been spending your time?” “I wouldn't take a million dollars for her.” “I'd put my money on that.” “I don't have a personal investment in it.” “Put your money where your mouth is.” “We can certainly capitalize on that.” “We're in business.” “I've no use for him.” “He's a loser.” “Winner take all!” It would be profitable to examine this going concern.

Capitalism is being used here not as a synonym for business, profit, or greed, but as the proper name for a general system based upon the private ownership of the means of production (such as land and raw materials) by small numbers of people. The great majority own one commodity, their labor. Unlike slaves and serfs, however, they can move, change jobs, and attempt to bargain for the best sale of themselves.

The motive force of this system is profit, or surplus value, which is the difference between wages and the cost of production, on one hand, and the selling price of the manufactured goods or services on the other. Hence, if a worker produces five hundred dollars worth of goods in a week and receives three hundred dollars in wages, the remainder, minus production costs, enriches the owner. Conflicts arise because the capitalist desires the highest profit while the worker seeks the highest wage. These conflicts are usually resolved in favor of the capitalist because the system assumes economic production for private profit. If a capitalist cannot achieve what is considered a satisfactory profit from, let us say, selling food, then food is not produced (or the supply may be artificially restricted or efforts made to stimulate demand, most recently through advertising). But the motor of the system remains profit.

We have all been born into such a profit culture, in which the buying and selling of labor and land are considered normal. This seems to us the only "natural" way to live. Yet, for most of human history, and throughout much of the world today, capitalism is an aberration. The novelty of this system, so destructive of most definitions of community, can be highlighted by comparing it with the system of medieval Europe, which it gradually defeated.

The socioeconomic ideal of that period was an organic community in which everything and everyone had its proper place, as defined by tradition. This goal of stability—attractive because these were often violent, rather than placid times—was perhaps exemplified by the cathedral, which rose from a broad base (like society),

From Common Sense (June 1974), p. 4.
with its narrowed spires (like the temporal and spiritual elites) reaching toward heaven. In our day banks, supermarkets, and department stores might embody the symbolically central.

In medieval society, it was universally assumed that economic processes were moral questions that were answered by objective standards established by God and revealed in the Scriptures and the teachings of the church. For us, profit and personal advancement are dominant.

Earlier, land and labor were not in a free market. Land, for example, was the key to power and status. A lord would no more sell land than the governor of Maryland would sell a county. And the labor force (whether serfs, peasants, or the few townspeople) was seldom legally free to move about or to change occupations.

Business was often feared as a corrupting activity that focused too much attention on worldly things, an attitude that was reflected in such occasionally strident mottoes as "no Christian ought to be a merchant" and "business can scarcely be conducted without sin," along with the less extreme maxim (in canon law) that "to fornicate [that is, to commit adultery] is always forbidden to anyone, but to trade is sometimes allowed and sometimes not."

Other common practices of capitalist society were equally foreign to this world, such as the "sinful" practice of taking interest on loans, which could be interpreted as selling God's time or having money "unnaturally" breed more money. Prices and wages should be set not by demand but by standards of intrinsic worth. If a person needed some item but was under no compulsion to buy it, the "just price" was that fixed by convention. A merchant was not morally correct in raising his prices simply because demand had increased or to offset losses suffered in other areas, which were the judgments of God or the result of personal folly. Disregarding the just price could turn laudable industry into hellish avarice. Thus a seller was morally obligated to point out defects in a product, while the buyer was expected never to profit from the seller's mistakes. Augustine gave the illustration of the seller of a precious manuscript who was ignorant of its real worth. The buyer—who is evidently Augustine—pays the just price, which is substantially higher than the one demanded by the stupid seller. (Augustine would not have been a successful used-car salesman.) It was crucial to avoid the slithering snake of greed lurking in the transient wealth of this world. The ideal life avoided such problems by monastic retreat.

Practice, of course, often deviated from these standards, but they were central economic concepts of the official ideology of that day. There were individual capitalists who were aggressive traders, bankers, voyagers, greedy moneylenders, avaricious tax collectors, and the like, but these people were not participants in a systematic and rational way of life. They operated within a context that often specified maximum limits on profits and wages.
and usually denied them dear legal status on interest for loans. They might be able to overcome these barriers, but the fear of social and divine retribution was strong. Treasure in heaven was more to be sought than treasure on earth.

Capitalism, as a system, was a transformation that began within this medieval framework. The old order had functioned in rather primitive agrarian societies. Much of medieval Europe was essentially a nonmoney economy of self-sufficient local agriculture. Prices and wages in this kind of society were not likely to fluctuate too wildly. The traditional price was commonly assumed to be the "just price." Prices seldom changed rapidly, except when there were crop failures. But, by the eleventh and twelfth centuries there was already a money economy in some Italian cities, and financial expansion came with the crusades and later explorations. A commercial civilization (which was slowly emerging) required a new ideology. Signs of this change included technological innovation, increasing urbanization, accumulation of capital, the interconnection and expanding trade of Europe, population growth, and the opening of an era of overseas expansion. A new system began to form, based on the systematic, rational acquisition of goods, long-term capital investments, and standardization of finance and production.²

This transitional period was also marked by the disintegration of the hegemony of the Catholic church, which had generally preserved the older ideals of community. The relationship between the rise of capitalism and the destruction of the universal church is an extremely complicated one, but it can be said that those who rejected the halfway measures of Luther and the English state were to have some radical influences on business practices, as did John Calvin and the citizens of Geneva, beginning in the 1530s. Whereas most leaders of the Reformation remained essentially medieval in their social, economic, and political thought, Calvin, the "godfather" of the Puritans, virtually repudiated the entire Hebraic and Aristotelian heritage on the subject. While he agreed that excessive interest (undefined) was a sin against charity, he concluded that brotherhood and justice did not forbid the common practice in Geneva of charging 5 percent on loans. While Luther continued to denounce usury, and a later Catholic bishop, Bossuet, remarked that "usury is the brat of heresy" (which was not necessarily true), the Calvinists had changed.

In the New World this influence was most vitally expressed by the Puritans, who were the dominant elements of the Great Migration of 1630–40. During this time, the population of New England grew to about twenty thousand. Although there had been earlier settlements, such as Jamestown in 1607, they were shaped by other sorts of people and circumstances. Most of the South afforded rich land that eventually yielded much with relatively little effort (compared with stony New England); it was also characterized by
extensive slave labor, a geography that thwarted the creation of a network of closely associated towns, more upper-class leadership, and a major role for Catholicism and Anglicanism. In the course of history, the South became a regional curiosity, whereas the Puritan-influenced New Englander became the model "Yankee."³

Overall, Puritan thought encouraged the growth of a capitalist culture, although, like any ideological response to a period of change, it did not merely reflect the new order but contained considerable, and not always compatible, elements of the old. The earlier ideals were represented by such men as John Winthrop, who believed in a Christian commonwealth that would be upheld by both religious and political authority. Such leaders of New England hoped to create a New Canaan by inculcating and legislating extensive social controls. These controls ranged from status laws—defining who was qualified to identify himself as Master or Goodman, or what women could wear silk hoods (their husbands had to be worth at least 299 pounds), to upholding the ancient principles of just prices and wages. Thus, from 1633 to 1641, the Court of Assistants in Boston set maximum wages, with more for skilled laborers such as carpenters and thatchers, and less for common labor. The colonial governments also frequently examined the quality of exported goods such as leather and pipe staves to insure the good reputation of local products.

No one consciously defended unrestrained business egoism. Regulations were variously described as "the sinews of society" and the mortar that held a brick building together. As one minister intoned: "For if each man may do what is good in his owne eyes, proceed according to his own pleasure, so that none may crosse him or controll him by any power; there must of necessity follow the distraction and desolation of the whole, when man hath liberty to follow his owne imagination and humorous devices and seek his particulars, but oppose one another, and all prejudice the publike good."⁴

God-fearing merchants were expected to work within the bounds of this moral principle of social responsibility, with its specific applications of reasonable rates in labor and goods, to observe the rankings of social and political hierarchy, and to avoid "immodest and costly apparel" and all else that diverged from "the simplicitie of the gospel and...God's word."⁵ Businessmen were also expected to be charitable and to labor in the service of the church and the state. For forty years the merchant Robert Keayne put aside one penny of every shilling for the poor. When Governor Endicott died in 1665, he had met his duties so well that he had "died poor, as most of our rulers do"—and John Hull, the author of this comment, made extensive loans to the government, many of which were never repaid.⁶ Such men were often as concerned with the public interests as with their own, if not more. They were fulfilling John Winthrop's aspiration of constructing "a model of Christian charity" to the whole world—a New Jerusalem.
If Protestant saints like these had been common and without ambiguities in their own lives, the holy commonwealth would have killed the egoistic “spirit of capitalism.” But Puritan practice was a valiant failure. The “inner-directed” Puritan was at first controlled by a social conscience, but, as Perry Miller perceived, “at every point, economic life set up conflicts with ideology.” Or perhaps the older ideals in the Puritan ideology conflicted with the newer modernizing, capitalist aspects. The Puritan community contained its own gravediggers. As Cotton Mather was to remark in *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702); “Religion begat prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother.” Many businessmen soon gravitated toward their own immediate interests, fragmenting the order of the community, because of elements within Puritanism.

This occurred first, and most superficially, in the eliminating or modifying of many of the roadblocks to business (like the usury laws).

Second, it had the traditional notion of vocation, but in a more militant form. Everyone had a “calling” in life, even if only to be a lowly shepherd. Diligent labor in one’s calling was a kind of worship. They combined it with the earlier Christian notion of humanity as the temporary “steward” of God’s wealth to form a virtual sacrament of labor. As Luther commented, to be a good cook was like cooking for God, and to be a good housekeeper was like keeping house for God. Even when traditional images of work might be used, the content had been transformed. To the medieval church—represented, let us say, by Aquinas—work was a punishment for sin. There was no work ethic that glorified labor. Aquinas urged that rich people abandon the pursuit of further wealth for the study of religion. The Puritans rejected this as a monkish retreat from the struggles of everyday life and placed an unprecedented emphasis on work as a positive good rather than primarily as a divine retribution for Adam’s iniquity. All were expected to labor: the idle poor and the idle rich were both condemned.

This emphasis on individual work was reinforced in America by direct material encouragements. A small artisan could indeed become a merchant; a poor servant might come to own land. They could live better than people of similar classes in Europe. Edward Johnson praised the Massachusetts Bay Colony twenty years after its founding: “There are not many towns in the country, but the poorest person in them hath a house and land of his own, and bread of his own growing, if not some cattle.”

Third, Puritans suffered anxiety about their salvation and often sought proof of satification. “Success” might be taken as a visible sign of inward grace, although few dared to make this argument, since the wealthy could quite easily be wicked.

Fourth, the asceticism of Puritan life also stimulated a prosperity that tended to dissolve the stern commandments that had helped produce it. If Puritans were successful, they were urged not to spend their profits on
themselves, but to reinvest them. Reinvestment was good stewardship of
God’s wealth, made a greater contribution to the community, and protected
one from the temptations of vanity that lurked in consumption.

While these were values of the Puritan community, they ultimately
threatened social cohesion. Hard work, denial of luxuries, and reinvestment
of profits were godly acts, but prosperity could bring increased temptations
toward personal vanity. Thus, while the Puritans passed laws on just wages,
prices, and other aspects of business and social life, “at every point
economic life set up conflicts with ideology.”

In 1639 the future of Puritan economic laws was captured in a prophetic
social drama. Robert Keayne, a model and perhaps almost saintly Puritan
merchant, was vehemently accused by both court and church of “oppress­
sion”—that is, profiteering. He was originally accused of exceeding the just
price on a bag of nails; then other members of the community, placing the
blame for high prices solely on greedy merchants, further denounced him
for overcharging on some large gold buttons, a bridle, and a skein of thread.
Today this may not sound like a heinous crime, but the charge of exploiting
other members of the community was damnable and illegal in a Puritan
society pledged to be “knit together as a body in a most stricte and sacred
bond and covenante of the Lord . . . Straitly tied to all care of each others
good, and of the whole by every one and so mutually.” Keayne, in his
business practices, was charged with subverting the community and of­
fending God.

He was eventually censured “in the Name of the Church for selling his
wares at excessive Rates, to the Dishonor of Gods name, the Offense of
the General Cort, and the Publique scandall of the Cuntry.” For this he was
fined an extraordinary sum (later reduced), and he abjectly and tearfully
confessed his covetous heart in church. With the payment of the fine and his
“penitential acknowledgement” the case was officially closed. The gover­
nor, John Winthrop, sighed that humanity was naturally corrupt and that
Keayne was a godly man who had not consciously sinned but had fallen into
error and should be admonished rather than excommunicated.

It was significant that the more merchant-oriented magistrates objected to
the decision of the General Court. They argued that there was no explicit
law against Keayne’s variety of extortion, that everyone charged high rates,
and that “it is the common practice in all countries, for men to make use of
advantages for raising the prices of their commodities.” Though this view
did not prevail, and Keayne was formally defeated, his case still presaged the
time when the countinghouse would control the meetinghouse or—as
often—ignore it. As the pious William Bradford lamented by 1653, the
goals of the Plymouth Colony had also been subverted by “that subtile
serpente” who “hath stilye wound in himself under faire pretences of
necesitie and the like.” Just as radical Protestantism could devolve into
individual egos, so the early social controls of the colonists would be challenged by economic egoism.

Other settlers were less apologetic about their self-aggrandizement. When Cotton Mather told one group near Boston that religion was the main motive for colonization, a prominent member replied: "Sir, you are mistaken, you think you are preaching to the people at the Bay; our main end was to catch fish." Much later, when the founder of the College of William and Mary informed a Southerner that education would save souls, he was bluntly repelled: "Damn your souls! Make tobacco!" The cloven hoof of the wayward merchant was on the path not to the City of God, but to the City of the World. This was to be the future.

The liberation of business would mean the weakening of community. Capitalism was a vital, progressive force when it cracked the structures of feudalism, allowing the emergence of a society of choice, a society of constant change. People were no longer locked into a social mosaic of customs, rank, and community but were forced to be free. In the famous words of Marx and Engels: "Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was... the first condition of all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguishes the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones." This is the permanent revolution of capitalism.

Such a radical, innovative system demanded a degree of social mobility that destroyed controls on men like Robert Keayne. In the new society, the individual was supposedly free to choose his own occupation, work contract, religion, and marriage partner—and to try to get the "best bargain" in each choice. All individuals were to follow their own particular self-interests, living within the freedom and constant uncertainty of the marketplace, where ideas, institutions, and people were all commodities. Even the most eminent theoretician of Anarchocommunism interpreted this activity by capitalism as liberating: "millions of transactions are made without the slightest interference of government, and those who enter into agreements have not the slightest intention of breaking bargains." But if this was the positive dimension of capitalism for Kropotkin, its immoral or amoral ego was its darker side. He was no admirer of an ethic of "grabbing" for oneself, of "possessive individualism." Whereas such qualities have been partially restrained elsewhere by vestiges of an organic community (such as the "paternalism" and permanent employment of Japanese firms) or by powerful nationalistic sentiments that may limit capitalist self-interest (such as the selling of English or German firms to foreigners), American capitalists have been remarkably free from these restrictions. Profit is their first principle. As Jefferson observed: "Merchants have no country. The mere spot they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they
draw their gains." Certainly for American capitalists, self-interest is supreme.

At a minimum, this system has encouraged self-reliance, just as radical Protestantism had sometimes liberated the individual beyond its own expectations. The owners and workers, reinforced by religion, were under less external compulsion, being impelled by both self-interest and self-discipline. Secular society would later develop the themes of individual "Wealth" through "Self-Reliance" (two of Emerson's prominent essays) for its more-or-less official ideology. It was assumed that individual effort would be rewarded and that such striving in the marketplace would "work out best" for all of society. Even in 1976 the president of the United States could reveal that Horatio Alger had been his favorite childhood author.¹⁶

If the individual failed, business and religion both proposed a government that was deaf (or nearly so) to cries for assistance. Failure likely was a deserved punishment for a dourish disposition or a welcome suffering that would purify the soul. The first almshouse was not established in Boston until 1660. The image of the "welfare chisler" as lazy, sexually irresponsible, and dirty is still prevalent today. Welfare, to many, is parasitism. In 1972 the official ideology was crisply enunciated by President Richard Nixon in his Labor Day address. He sternly lectured the nation that the presidential election of that year was a titanic struggle between the staunch old "work ethic" and the evil allure of the "welfare ethic." Speaking to workers, he confidently declared: "The work ethic builds character and self-reliance, the welfare ethic destroys character and leads to a vicious cycle of dependency. The work ethic builds strong people. The welfare ethic breeds weak people.... This year, you are not only to choose the kind of leadership you want, you are going to decide what kind of people Americans will be."¹⁷

Few people thought it strange that the head of one of the largest bureaucracies in the world was praising individualism. His pronouncements merely restated old verities like "stand on your own two feet!" and "pay your own way." Whether this folklore bears any relation to reality is a question few public figures will ask.

Any interpretation of American radicalism must understand the pervasive powers—economic, social, and psychological—of American capitalism. Above all, it has been generally perceived as incredibly successful. Collectively, Americans are in the wealthy First World whose necessities are often considered luxuries in the Third World. A history of resilient business and abundant production, distributed far more equitably than in most of the world, may not have produced what Lord Bryce once called a land of happy monotony, but Americans have become generally accustomed to a fatalistic optimism about progress. This explains much of our innocence of the general reality of the world—poverty, famine, disease, "overpopulation," revolution, and limited hope—and our general difficulty in understanding
or feeling sympathy for noncapitalist societies. Just as F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that "the very rich are different from you and me," Americans are different from most other peoples. There has been no major depression since the 1930s, and the country remains the strongest of the capitalist nations. Whereas Japan, the third largest economic system, imported 80 percent of its energy resources and more than 50 percent of its food in 1976, the United States has the potential for self-sufficiency. In both food production and advanced technology, it also remains vastly superior to the Soviet Union.  

Although claims that this is a classless society are not convincing to me, it is nevertheless significant that these can be made and believed by many—which would be unlikely in Great Britain, France, Italy, or elsewhere. Marx said that the workers had nothing to lose but their chains; yet what chains do most Americans think they have to lose? The Industrial Workers of the World asserted that the working class and the employing class had nothing in common, but few agreed. The material success of capitalism has created bonds of belief, fostering the hegemony of capitalist values in this society, giving us the unreasoned assumptions through which we "see" the world. The boundaries of capitalism form the limits of the average imagination, of what seems "natural." Work is not simply imposed by the system but becomes a vital source of self-meaning, even when it has little hope of financial achievement or high status. Those who "don't make anything of their lives," whether "lazy hippies" or irresponsible welfare recipients, are commonly scorned as an insult to the self-esteem of the working class.  

But, despite these often shared values and aspirations, most of society is atomized. We live in a community, but it is a community of competition. We are divided from nature; people are perceived not as a part of a continuum with nature, but as the aggressive, exploitative dominators of it. We are separated from others by competition or because of the increasing specialization of labor. The interests of city and country, work and play, reason and emotion are also separated. Absolutes of all kinds, whether of religion, systematic philosophy, or tradition, are disintegrated by the demands of utilitarian self-interest. T. S. Eliot described such a world of uncertainty, where everything had to be "named" again, and the poet must be a beginner, not a continuer:  

```
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure...
...And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate.
```

While older societies were often based upon historically evolved social statuses, this organic union has been replaced by mechanical solidarity, by contractual relations for specific purposes. An impersonal society means living together but not knowing your neighbors. Instead, the individual is
evaluated primarily as the proprietor of self and the appropriator of others, in a society that ideally is composed of free and equal atoms like the millionaire in Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, crying out "I want, I want, I want." Already in the 1840s Emerson observed that industrial capitalism had destroyed the independence and satisfactions of craft labor, turning the workers into commodities to be brought, sold and used—into a collection of walking monsters, here "a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow," but never a whole person. More recently, if you worked in the auto factory in Lordstown, Ohio, in 1976, the cats went by you at the rate of 101 an hour. Every 33 seconds you had to mechanically repeat certain motions. If you were a telephone operator, a keypuncher, or a steel worker you might have the same response to such a division of labor:

You're there just to handle the equipment. You're treated like a piece of equipment.

You do it automatically, like a monkey or a dog would do something by conditioning. You feel stagnant; everything is over and over and over... This makes the average individual feel sort of like a vegetable.

That's mechanical; that's not human... We sweat, we have upset stomachs and we're not about to be placed in the category of a machine.

The images are all nonhuman: a vegetable, a monkey, a dog, a machine.

This resentment can be neutralized, however, by other forms of individualism. Many people, if they are unhappy or unemployed, believe the official ideology that it is somehow their fault. Others are gratified because their pay buys them a sense of freedom as a consumer. Consumerism then becomes a kind of spectacle that controls people by convincing them they have meaning through products: "Come alive, you're in the Pepsi generation," "Suzuki [motorcycle] conquers boredom," and "Take a puff and it's springtime." Even those who become disillusioned are often caught in "the golden chains" of installment buying; they now have something to lose if they rebel. Trotsky inadvertently touched upon this question when he described his family's 1917 living quarters in New York City: "We rented an apartment in a workers' district, and furnished it on the installment plan [!] That apartment, at $18 a month, was equipped with all sorts of conveniences that we Europeans were quite unused to: electric lights, gas cooking-range, bath, telephone, automatic service-elevator, and even a chute for the garbage. These things completely won the boys over to New York." Business has often been willing to further encourage this individualism with such techniques as profitsharing, company pensions, teams of workers, and more flexible working hours. These are all excellent forms of social control: "quit and you lose your pension!" "We're speeding up the line to increase your profitsharring." Or, "buy a share in YOUR company!" While most of these changes are cosmetic, merely giving the appearance of
humanistic management, most radicals have been insensitive to the power of such devices to meet minimal human needs. Elinor Langer, who took a job at a telephone company so she could write about it, soon realized that the “busy little world” of small rewards and loyalties could assuage the impersonality of most existing work situations. For business, “the pattern of co-optation...rests on details: hundreds of trivial, but human details.”

Capitalists have generally understood this better than leftists, who are still quoting Marx from 1848, or the IWW from 1905.

A contemporary exemplar of capitalist radicalism might be John D. Rockefeller III, a banker, Republican, and author of The Second American Revolution (1973). Although he opens his book with the delightful understatement that “the name Rockefeller does not connote a revolutionary,” his goal is an American utopia: an open society where each person can develop his or her potential free from limitations of race, sex, or class. Though all people should be guaranteed adequate food, clothing, and shelter, further status must depend upon ability alone. For Rockefeller, this is not only a practical question of utilizing resources but the moral responsibility of America’s “transcendental mission.” The latter is rather ill defined, but Rockefeller leaves no doubt that it can be most fully achieved by a “humanistic capitalism.”

He immediately laments the incomplete realization of this vision by American society. He invokes an eminently respectable group to preface his own complaints, the 1971 White House Conference on Youth, appointed by Richard Nixon. They had affirmed “the high ideals upon which this country was ostensibly founded” and challenged the government to act upon them: “We are not motivated by hatred, but by disappointment over and love for the unfulfilled potential of this Nation.” Rockefeller, like some Puritan moralist, then launches into his own jeremiad against the corruption of America. A crisis of faith has been provoked by such realities as “the exploitation and destruction of nature’s beauty,” too much money for the “haves,” hunger, greater emphasis on efficiency than on humanity, “the military-industrial complex,” racism, sex discrimination, “the dehumanization of work,” unresponsive bureaucracy, and a society where “competition predominates over compassion.” What sounds like a litany of the New Left is delivered by a capitalist with impeccable credentials.

How will these problems be overcome and his American ideal of full human liberation be attained? Centralist “elitism” is considered and rejected as stifling local creativity and initiative. Instead, he lauds a “participatory democracy” that will keep the large institutions of politics, business, and labor open to the opinions of average people. As models of such physical and intellectual liberation, he eclectically praises Ralph Nader’s consumerism, co-ops for housing, marketing, and agriculture, tax reforms, black capitalism, and feminism. These activities, he says, are “in the best
The Genesis of Revelation

American tradition of individual initiative." Government should encourage this by revenue sharing, "privatizing" many of its functions (emulating the postal service), and decentralizing many of its bureaus. He optimistically concludes that this second American revolution has already begun and will culminate not in "selfish individuality" or nineteenth-century laissez-faire, but in a renewal of the voluntary societies that were described and cherished by Tocqueville.  

Some will dismiss Rockefeller's book as the ravings of a crazy capitalist, as sham and hypocrisy, or as chuckleheaded nonsense, but I believe it is a sincere interpretation of many basic assumptions in our capitalist culture. Its liberalism represents the continuing American revolution of business, which prefers to organize society by the market rather than by the state. More aggressively antistatist versions of this will be investigated in the chapter on right libertarianism.