The Uses of Tradition

James Hitchcock

The Environmental Movement has produced a confusion in American politics stemming from the difficulties of classifying it according to conventional categories. Most of its warriors are young people who identify with the Counter-Culture, yet it is often denounced by hard-line radicals as diversionary. Its most substantial supporters are left-liberal suburbanites, but it also attracts individuals who have no truck with civil-rights or antiwar causes. It is future-oriented in image and rhetoric, yet its severer critics call its leaders “arch-Druids” and accuse them of trying to repeal progress.

The confusion is natural, because the ecology crisis has raised implicitly a question which has been largely ignored in America for a long time—what if any value adheres in conserving the past, in hoarding resources which are easily squandered. It has been little noticed that “conservation” is a word not far from “conservatism” and that the Ecology Movement provides the peculiar spectacle of “radicalized” young people using expressions like “preserve” and “save from destruction.”

Since the time of John F. Kennedy a broad consensus has developed among “enlightened” individuals—ranging from Charles Percy to Abbie Hoffman—that America’s fundamental problem is immobility, an unwillingness to change in the face of evils which cry out for radical new arrangements. This belief is now so pervasive that educators routinely discuss how to help their students prepare for change, clergy define themselves as “change agents,” and society seems to be divided primarily between those who welcome change and those who oppose it.

What is curious about this consensus is its failure to notice that there is not now in America, and has not been for a long time, any significant movement which can rightly be called conservative. Such conservative movements as have existed, like the Southern Agrarians of the 1930’s, have been largely literary in their appeal and devoid of social importance. As for the rest, there has never been a society in the history of the world as fanatically dedicated to change in all its aspects as modern America, and the situation intensifies rather than diminishes.
In calling the ecologists “arch-Druids,” their critics are not merely perverse, since the ecologists raise, from a vaguely leftist perspective, the question whether modernity has on the whole been a good thing, whether man must not ultimately return to certain older and more “backward” ways of thinking and acting. Furthermore, they ask this question not only about the obviously “bad” aspects of modernity, like weapons, but also about many “good” things which at one time were thought likely to hasten utopia, like pesticides and processed foods.

It is not, of course, unusual to find revolutionaries calling for repeal of the present in the name of an allegedly happier past, although this is not a mentality which in any legitimate sense can be called Marxist. What is curious about radical ecologists is their obvious schizophrenia, amounting practically to a dualism of body and mind. In this outlook everything having to do with the physical world requires an attitude which is conservative and even reactionary—forests and animal species, perhaps also old buildings, quaint streets and “unsanitary” outdoor markets, must all be saved and kept viable, however inconvenient this may be in terms of the accustomed modes of modern living. In the realm of mind and spirit, however, a fanatic innovativeness is normal, so that no moral or religious belief, political arrangement, or social custom can be conceded validity. Most inheritances are presumed to be perverse, and the past is thought to be merely an infringement on present growth and freedom.

Whether the Environmental Movement can survive this inner contradiction (which does not, of course, affect all its adherents) is doubtful. But revolutionaries probably distrust the movement with good reason, since it may be the vehicle by which genuinely conservative questions will be injected into public life and brought to the serious notice of intellectuals. Put simply, the question is whether a society which in its drive towards “progress” has made the most serious errors concerning the physical environment can be assumed capable of structuring a more viable social and moral universe, whether wisdom does not consist here also in an adherence to traditional values which antedate the frenetic modern age.

The fundamental contradiction of many ecologists is their failure to understand that there is a human ecology, an organism of social relationships, as well as an ecology of nature. If in his well-intentioned efforts to improve the quality of life man has struck perhaps
fatal blows at nature, it is possible that his well-intentioned efforts to construct a just and livable society according to rational plan have struck equally fatal, if hidden, blows at human existence as well. If there was more wisdom in primitive attitudes towards nature than modern man could previously know, it is possible also that ancient social forms now being consciously eroded, like the family and traditional moral codes, are also necessary to human survival in ways not always evident.

The Ecology Movement has demonstrated, if the proposition ever needed demonstrating, how what is called conservatism in America—the movement behind Barry Goldwater and Spiro Agnew, given intellectual coherence by William Buckley—is not that at all. At both the popular and the elite levels this "conservatism" has as its touchstone a strong commitment to capitalism and militarism, the two forces in modern life which bear the heaviest responsibility for prodigal innovation and social dislocation. The ecologists have demonstrated in the starkest fashion how the squandering of irreplaceable resources and the destruction of priceless facilities which help make life human are the direct result of free enterprise and a kind of "progress" whose outlines are largely determined in corporate board rooms. (This is not to say that ordinary persons are immune from responsibility.)

It is curious, but not unnatural, that technocrats reacting to the ecologists and young revolutionaries reacting against their parents should employ similar rhetoric. In each case the critic of "progress" is called old-fashioned, nostalgic and rigid. He is an enemy of "growth," someone who thwarts man's chances for utopian fulfillment. His warnings against "progress," whether technological or social, are dismissed as pessimistic and timid, stemming from basic insecurity and failure to trust in human potential. The ecologist is said to value nature over man, the moral traditionalist laws and structures over human beings. In both cases man is assumed to be wholly capable of willing and making a better future, according to his own plan and his own "felt needs."

Ecologists are false to their own insights when they tolerate within their movement the kind of riotous iconoclasm which has wreaked such havoc on streams and forests. Some partisans of ecology will not even renounce the regular use of drugs. In some cases they are also totally insensitive to human ecology. Followers of Paul Ehrlich, for example, find the notion of compulsory population
limitation, including if necessary forced abortions, entirely thinkable, with little regard for the psychological effects such a policy might have on the numerous citizens who find their principal joy and fulfillment in their children.

However, in this way the Environmental Movement does serve to raise another important question—what demands, if any, society may legitimately make on the individual for the sake of the general good. Here again the Movement harbors profound inconsistencies, since many young revolutionaries apparently believe that no limitations of any kind may be imposed on personal freedom. Here again the parallel attitudes of "conservative" businessmen and "radical" young people are evident; the former insist that no crippling limits be imposed on economic enterprise, while the latter espouse a *laissez-faire* of their own with regard to political activity and personal morality. Neither ultimately believes in a general good transcending the special interests of particular parties.

For decades (at least since the outbreak of World War II) the proverbial "average citizen" has been aware of how fragile his world is, compared with his image (and probably the reality) of the world of his youth or the world of his parents' youth. The manifestations of this fragility are overwhelmingly obvious in the oscillations of the "business cycle" and its effects on his employment, inflation, the increasing unreliability of manufactured items, the untrustworthiness of merchants and craftsmen, the nation's proneness to recurrent wars requiring his sons and his taxes, and the systematic destruction of large areas of familiar urban landscape for the sake of highways, "urban renewal," or economic expansion. However badly he may articulate it, the average man is deeply aware of how little control he has over the major forces shaping his life and the fact that such forces are increasingly controlled by huge organizations—commercial or governmental—which are beyond even listening to him, much less heeding his pleas.

To speak of conservatism in connection with ideologies which justify every kind of economic depredation and every kind of consolidation of power is a mockery which is not relieved by pointing out that idealistic conservatives do not justify wanton destruction of resources or dishonest business practices. The ideology of *laissez-faire* tends to underwrite these nonetheless, partly by the assumption that economic enterprise is to be rewarded in all but the most obviously deviant cases, partly by the assumption that economic
freedom has a priority over other kinds of liberty.

Middle America has, in a few years' time, been perhaps forever purged of its unquestioning faith in the military, although it is probably the military's provenvincibility in Vietnam rather than its moral transgressions which has chiefly brought this about. Faith in the military is usually a traditionalist attitude formed by associations of patriotism, gallant officer-gentlemen and brave young recruits; a society which ceases to value physical courage is not, by historical experience, a society from which much can be expected. But patriots of the past quarter century failed to notice, until quite recently, how deeply corruptive of tradition the American military has been. It has been a willing junior partner (the civilian government occupying the senior position) in conflicts having only the most oblique relevance to the real interests of American citizens. It has devoured increasingly larger shares of American wealth and has become a monstrous and permanent element in the state, a potential threat to civilian freedoms and thus a direct contradiction of the American tradition. It has, in its prodigal growth, made countless civilians directly or indirectly dependent on it for their livelihoods and to that degree involuntary accomplices in its activities. (Thus issues like disarmament cannot be discussed on their merits but only in terms of their effects on the economy.) Images of gallantry have evaporated amid revelations that the military tolerates the sleaziest kinds of corruption and careerism as well as cowardly brutality.

All these facts have of course been reiterated and elaborated by what is called the "New Left," embracing hard-core revolutionaries and various kinds of liberals. However, many critics of the established order have themselves exacerbated the spiritual crisis of the age by their determination to destroy as much of the past as possible, by their implicit conviction that new beginnings must be made everywhere, and by their gratuitous association of causes like peace and economic justice with causes like total sexual freedom, unrestricted drug use, and generational warfare.

The New Left has recognized that what people need and desire is a sense that they possess some measure of control over their lives. But like the Old Right, which has the same insight, they define the problem too narrowly. Just as the Right assumes that freedom is threatened solely by the "socialistic" central state and pays little attention to the activities of business corporations or local governments, so the Left locates the problem in large bureaucracies but
fails to recognize that the "enlightened" also bear a heavy responsibility for the malaise of the times.

For if "the people" are to regain control of their lives, this must be in accordance with indigenous values, and nothing is so obvious at present as the fact that the people yearn for a measure of stability, a reaffirmation of values which they believe have been systematically undermined. A philosophy which chants "power to the people" and simultaneously preaches total revolution is caught in an irresolvable contradiction, which is often an index of insincerity. It is almost self-evident that for people to have control over their lives means precisely that they be able to attain a kind of order and stability which present social arrangements deny them.

Liberals are dismayed that campus disorders and urban crime rank more important as issues in opinion polls than the war or economics, but what this probably shows is that for a majority of people what they perceive as the spiritual crisis of the age—the breakdown of authority, generational estrangement and repudiation of traditional morality—is more important than problems which they wrongly think of as merely physical. The average man's world is threatened most severely by the erosion of his inherited values, which he shortsightedly sees as wholly the fault of the Left.

Because of rampant crime, the average man now feels physically insecure. He blames this on the Left because it appears to protect criminals. He is also insecure, however, because he knows that through the collusion of "conservative" banks and realtors or "conservative" politicians using eminent domain he can be effectively forced out of his castle for someone else's profit. The situation is immensely exacerbated by black migration, where the principal blame appears to shift back to the Left, although ironically at the collusion of realtors who are essentially men of the Right. To a lesser extent the average man's physical security is undermined also by the unreliability of the homes, the automobiles and the appliances he buys, although all of them are marketed by individuals who think of themselves as conservative. Finally, he is totally at the mercy of that most demonic agent of relentless change—technology—which is fostered principally by right-wing corporations and the military.

Traditional values are above all family-centered; it is the family which is seen as the locus of peace, love and stability. Yet the family is also everywhere endangered: by hippies around the corner who turn children onto drugs, by teachers who undermine parental
believes and preach strange and subversive ideas, by free-love advocates, by communes, by extremists in Women’s Lib, by Gay Lib, etc. Yet the average man fails to notice how much the “conservative” forces in society also help undermine family solidarity, especially by inculcating a consumer ethic which entices families onto a debilitating and distracting financial treadmill and by enticing them also to their separate pleasures, in comparison with which family activities appear boring and insignificant. He also fails to notice the utter moral neutrality of the “conservative” capitalistic system, which thrives by keeping people discontented and by creating new “needs” which it then fills and which is prepared to embrace every kind of innovation once it has been shown profitable.

There is thus no significant force for tradition and stability in America, not even those “conservative” politicians who exploit the average man’s fears but, since they have no real principles and no workable plan for alleviating them, merely intensify the instability and unhappiness of the time by their irresponsible rhetoric. Liberals, profoundly confused and demoralized, lunge eagerly for every new social scheme in the hope that this one will succeed where the last 10 failed, as radicals make an even blinder leap of faith that, in destroying the old order, they will inevitably give birth to a better new one. Meanwhile the average man is told from all sides—advertisements, the popular press, the pulpit, the schools and the courts—that he has no alternative but to move with the times.

The trauma of the ordinary citizen before the spectacle of frenetic change is usually dismissed by intellectuals as hysterical and paranoid, but his exaggerated fears often catch more accurately than “responsible” academic analyses what sometimes lies behind the dislocations of the time, which is the drive towards anarchy. Abbie Hoffman is commendable for at least acknowledging his intentions. Other revolutionaries, however, cynically raise civil-liberties issues and cynically appeal to traditional political principles on behalf of a movement which seeks to undermine both. “Reforms” are sometimes proposed whose advocates are fully aware that if enacted they will simply hasten dissolution rather than reverse it. They often conceal from the public their long-range intentions, preferring to unveil them step by step and gambling that a commitment to modest change now will force acceptance of even greater changes later. (“There can be no turning back.”) The spirit of anarchy grows everywhere, as persons on all levels of society and of all ideological
persuasions come to believe that no restrictions of any kind may be imposed on what they perceive to be their needs.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that those who suffer from excessive change in society are solely of the older generation and that younger and better-educated persons are learning to live comfortably with it. The commitment of the young to change is partly an ideological matter; it is socially expected of them at the present moment. It is also, as their parents charge, partly a matter of inexperience; they do not fully understand the implications of all their ideas or the utility of various traditional arrangements.

There is abundant evidence from the Counter-Culture that the young are not coping with frenetic innovation and its obverse, frenetic destruction, much better than the older generation. The horrifying spread of narcotics use is the most obvious of warnings; if drugs are really no worse than alcohol, it is time to acknowledge the equivalent of an epidemic of alcoholism among teen-agers, a phenomenon which did not exist a decade or two ago. The number of students seeking psychiatric care continues to increase. Of comparable seriousness is the erosion of the spirit of gentleness and trust which was supposed to mark the youth culture. No one is any longer surprised when rock concerts break up in brawls and occasional murders. (Whatever may be said against football or boxing fans, the same rarely happens at those events.) Thievery, which was formerly directed against the establishment and justified on ideological grounds, seems to have penetrated the youth enclaves themselves, so that disillusioned young idealists now prey on each other. Within the youth culture there are bitter personal rivalries and animosities at least as intense as those that exist in corporate labyrinths. Every kind of fad which promises salvation can find its credulous adherents, and between fads a spirit of weary cynicism and compulsive suspiciousness prevails.

The roots of this pervasive unhappiness are of course deep and complex, but an essential component is the sharp severing of cultural continuity which is the experience of so many young people of this generation, their belief that nothing from the past is of the slightest help to them, that family, church, moral code, schools and laws are all hollow and meaningless. Although their official rhetoric perceives this situation as hopeful, since it permits the young to begin their lives free from all restrictions, to make a world of their own choosing, it appears that when faced with this prospect many young
people actually experience fear, loneliness and extreme self-doubt, since if man's accumulated efforts have been so unproductive or perverse there is little reason to hope for the future. The "radicalized" mind also experiences an enforced isolation and paranoia in its need to reject all compromising links with either the past or the mainstream of present society.

The easy assumption was made by radicals and reformers a few years ago that those traditional restraints which inhibited "good" kinds of behavior could be removed while the taboos against "bad" behavior would remain because of their obvious desirability. But the loosening of restraints and the jettisoning of traditions have instead conveyed a much broader message: that all things are now permitted. If spokesmen for the new freedom are careful by their choice of words to say that things like violence and drug abuse are of course still inhumane while sexual freedom and moderate drug use are condoned, young people (and some not so young) nonetheless read their message quite differently.

In projecting the society of the future, freed from past constrictions, it is therefore valid to ask whether Woodstock should be considered more likely than Altamont, Joan Baez more than Charles Manson, Nader's Raiders more than Hell's Angels, the happy communes more than the wretched runaways. It is a recurring dream, repeatedly disproved by history, that men would live gently and creatively if only society would allow them. But once laws and traditions are repealed, it is no longer possible to depend on the self-restraint or the benevolent instincts of all citizens. There is a report from the California Youth Authority that crime among middle-class and upper-class youth has risen since 1965, while that among lower-class youth has declined slightly.

An instructive example of the benign force of tradition is the relative absence of violence in British society, most strikingly evidenced by the fact that the police do not carry guns. It is doubtful if the British are more moral than other peoples; indeed some of their private murders suggest an exquisite capacity for bloodiness. Rather, public violence has been absent because its use has long been tabooed in a society where traditions are taken seriously and in which men do not perceive each other as threats because of their acceptance of a common code of behavior. Now, unfortunately, there is evidence that these taboos are eroding. The process of erosion begins slowly and imperceptibly, by a slight escalation of
actions beyond what is traditionally permissible. At a certain point, however, the disintegration becomes a landslide, and the process is almost always irreversible.

What is most remarkable about the rate of change in America is the fact that events which would have been unthinkable a decade ago are now almost accepted as normal. “Conservatives” justify shooting down students on college campuses. While on the Left a sympathetic observer of the youth scene relates how three children of a friend have succumbed to drugs while only one shows an ability to conquer them and mildly remarks that one victory in three is perhaps as high an average as can now be expected.

It is a supreme irony, little commented upon, that the various political and cultural movements which in the past decade have undertaken to restructure society for the sake of “peace,” “love,” and “creativity” have resulted, unwittingly, in a society more divided, more permeated by bitterness and mistrust, more marked by violence and destruction than at any time within living memory. If much of this is due to the exposure of concealed injustices on which the previous synthesis rested, much of it is also due to fanatic assaults on all kinds of traditional structures, which has left people disoriented, suspicious and fearful. Romanticism glorifies the unpredictability of human behavior, but the mundane truth is that people can live together amicably only when they do find each other predictable, at least within limits. The experience of the past decade has taught people to fear not only that every person encountered on the street may be a mugger but also that friends, children, teachers and clergy will, with scarcely any warning, transform themselves into nearly the reverse of their former selves, rejecting values to which they were formerly committed. However salutary in individual instances, conversion on a mass scale is always questionable.

No one can estimate with accuracy how much the global changes of the past decade have contributed to the general malaise of the population, but their effects are unquestionably profound. These changes include not only the obvious kinds which become public issues but also those which are accepted as normal and inevitable. The anxiety over the steady deterioration of old neighborhoods and the necessity imposed on so many people of moving repeatedly to new environments recently constructed in toto and having no organic link with any recognizable past is only compounded by the “conservative” corporations which require their employees to sever
all roots every few years in order to deposit themselves in still another indistinguishable plastic environment in an unfamiliar metropolis.

Even apparently trivial changes intensify an already serious problem of morale. One of the great unrecognized causes of discontent has been the demythologizing of professional athletics; for example, the realization over the past decade and a half that baseball teams, which in some cities have been the principal focus of popular tradition and passion, have no sacred ties to the community but are profit-making enterprises whose owners follow the summonses of the market and the blandishments of newer cities on the make.

Leftists who welcome change fail to notice the unhealthier roots of this desire, which include a blind submission to the march of "progress," a boredom bred by affluence and the consequent urge for continually new stimulations and a guilt bred by the same affluence and the seeking of repeated but abortive purgings. The psychology which demands continuous innovation, even for ostensibly good purposes, is not unrelated to the psychology fostered by capitalism through advertising—the worship of youth and dynamism, acceptance of planned obsolescence and a righteous expectation that what one desires will always be available. There are also charlatans and fanatics on the Right and the Left who foment confusion and instability in order to exploit it for their own purposes.

The primary evil effect of unlimited change is the dissolution of civility, the mortar which ultimately holds every meaningful community together. Men are increasingly insecure, suspicious and resentful; living in grim expectation of seeing their worlds collapse without possibility of remedy and expecting the worst from their fellow men, they are ready to commit aggression before others commit it first. Police agencies of all kinds are no doubt in need of serious reform. But radicals who wish effectively to abolish the police power are like laissez-faire economists; they do not see that the "freedom" they advocate will be the freedom of the strongest and most ruthless individuals to tyrannize over their fellows.

But the evils of frenetic change are not exhausted by the obvious polarizations in society or by the innumerable individuals, of all ages and social classes, whose personalities unravel under its strains. The parallels between Weimar Germany and the present have not gone unnoticed, and the possibility of a fascist reaction cannot be
discounted. But the resentful ordinary citizen is by no means the only potential recruit for a black-shirted legion. It is an ominous sign that the admiration of the young for Mao Tse-tung is not limited to the "crazies" but extends even to the clean-cut members of the United States table-tennis team. The young radicals' idealization of China and of Cuba cannot be dismissed as harmless romanticism because it demonstrates how alienated they are even from the "counter-culture" they have created. While professedly believing in love, freedom, self-fulfillment, eroticism and a gentle anarchy, every man doing his own thing, they appear actually to yearn for a society of ironclad puritanical discipline, of imposed and rigid ideology, with authoritarian leadership and a sense of purpose handed down from on high.

Furthermore, the discrediting of institutions has the effect of discrediting also the values they embody. The legal marriage bond is first rejected as an artificial imposition irrelevant to the beautiful commitment of the two spouses. Before long, however, the ideal of permanent commitment is itself rejected, along with the notion that a special love must be a part of every liaison. Sexual relationships tend to become increasingly casual and devoid of deep feeling, children not only unnecessary but undesirable. Civility itself suffers the same fate; as rules of etiquette are discarded, a more or less open hostility seems to govern casual social encounters of all kinds. By refusing to observe even the forms of respect towards others, "honest" men help to deepen the real disrespect which exists.

To achieve the necessary minimum of stability in a society which has been committed to continuous change for more than a century is perhaps a hopeless task, since change tends to be a perpetual-motion machine. But certain general suggestions are possible.

The Ecology Movement has already impressed on the public the fact that heedless economic "growth" is not a good thing, and the attitudes of the young will perhaps in time permeate the corporations sufficiently to force them to relax their grip on the lives of their employees. The Consumer Movement is hopeful for restoring, in time, a sense of trust and honesty to the marketplace. Anti-military sentiment is growing. Community-action groups of blacks and whites, while they often contribute to polarization, may prove useful in preventing the disintegration of existing cohesive neighborhoods. Intellectuals and politicians should in fact make the stabilization of existing communities one of their primary goals, even if this
means curtailing such practices as the compulsory bussing of school-children, which create bitterness and insecurity out of proportion to their provable benefits.

More difficult problems exist in the elusive area of cultural change. Most important, perhaps, is the reversal of the current trend in education, especially higher education, which would abandon the task of introducing young people to the traditions of Western civilization (denigrated by radicals as “the laying on of culture”) in favor of either a totally permissive curriculum which would readily degenerate into sheer vocationalism or dilettantism or an education centered on self-probing. There is ultimately no way of resisting rampant subjectivism or uncreasing change without admitting the existence of an objective reality called Civilization, which educated persons must acquaint themselves with, even if they choose to repudiate it.

Intellectuals and quasi-intellectuals should also recognize the great importance of self-fulfilling prophecy, the fact that repeated predictions about the future may come true partly because people expect them to and begin living accordingly. There is a need not for prodigal forecasts like Future Shock, but for sober and careful efforts to discern the forms of future life, plus a reemphasis on the fact that men do have some control over their futures and can choose to preserve a great deal of the past if they wish.

There is an obvious need for the dampening of rhetoric by all kinds of groups and individuals of all ideological persuasions and renewed attempts to state grievances and analyze problems in precise and modest terms in order to refrain from projecting apocalypses or threatening disasters. At least the forms of civility should be observed as much as possible, and other people’s sensibilities should be deliberately outraged only in extreme cases. Traditional customs and manners which are not pernicious should be reaffirmed wherever possible. Instead of continually asking, “What good is this?” man should rather ask, “Is there any reason this can’t be preserved?”

Those persons who feel compelled to reject aspects of the traditional moral code should be willing to settle for discreet and perhaps sometimes incomplete victories, asking for a minimum tolerance from society but not proselytizing publicly, assaulting generally accepted norms or seeking confrontations. No stable and coherent society can endure for long without a moral consensus, although this need not exclude all deviance. In general, citizens should recognize
that a perfectly just society is an impossibility, that minor injustices and irritations must often be endured, that not every aggrieved citizen can claim, as is now common, that he is a "nigger." There are numerous groups whose grievances are more or less just, but no society can survive multiple simultaneous revolutions.

The position of black people in a stabilized society remains of course a great question. Having been systematically excluded from whatever civility formerly existed, they cannot be asked now to sacrifice themselves to its restoration. The solution of the dilemma perhaps lies in the judgment that, after all, most blacks want to be part of American society as members of that great majority which is disparagingly called "middle class." They are not revolutionaries and they are probably willing, as the various ethnic minorities have been, to preserve their distinctive culture in their private lives, if a degree of symbolic public recognition is periodically given.

In his penetrating critique of technology, _The Pentagon of Power_, Lewis Mumford quotes the British anthropologist Lord Raglan to the effect that it is a modern misconception that organisms always die because they become rigid and unadaptable. They are just as likely to decay from too rapid a change, which produces the distintegration of their inner structures and loss of continuity with their former selves. America may be on the verge of proving this surmise in a dramatically catastrophic way.