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## Introduction

**H**alf a century ago, in the 1960s—that fabled era of free sex and free access to drugs—serious young radicals took aim at institutions, in particular big corporations and big government, whose size, complexity, and rigidity seemed to hold individuals in an iron grip. The Port Huron Statement, a founding document of the New Left in 1962, was equally hard on state socialism and multinational corporations; both regimes seemed bureaucratic prisons.

History has partly granted the framers of the Port Huron Statement their wish. The socialist rule of five-year plans, of centralized economic control, is gone. So is the capitalist corporation that provided employees

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jobs for life, that supplied the same products and services year after year. So also welfare institutions like health care and education have become less fixed in form and smaller in scale. The goal for rulers today, as for radicals fifty years ago, is to take apart rigid bureaucracy.

Yet history has granted the New Left its wish in a perverse form. The insurgents of my youth believed that by dismantling institutions they could produce communities: face-to-face relations of trust and solidarity, relations constantly negotiated and renewed, a communal realm in which people became sensitive to one another's needs. This certainly has not happened. The fragmenting of big institutions has left many people's lives in a fragmented state: the places they work more resembling train stations than villages, as family life is disoriented by the demands of work. Migration is the icon of the global age, moving on rather than settling in. Taking institutions apart has not produced more community.

If you are nostalgically minded—and what sensitive soul isn't?—you would find this state of affairs just one more reason for regret. Yet the past half century has been a time of unprecedented wealth creation, in

Asia and Latin America as well as in the global North, a generation of new wealth deeply tied to the dismantling of fixed government and corporate bureaucracies. So too has the technological revolution in the last generation flourished most in those institutions which are the least centrally controlled. Certainly such growth comes at a high price: ever greater economic inequality as well as social instability. Still, it would be irrational to believe that this economic explosion should never have happened.

Here is where culture enters the picture. I mean "culture" in its anthropological rather than artistic sense. What values and practices can hold people together as the institutions in which they live fragment? My generation suffered from a want of imagination in answering this question, in advancing the virtues of small-scale community. Community is not the only way to glue together a culture; most obviously, strangers in a city inhabit a common culture, even though they do not know one another. But the problem of a supportive culture is more than a matter of size.

Only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions. This ideal man or woman has to address three challenges.

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The first concerns time: how to manage short-term relationships, and oneself, while migrating from task to task, job to job, place to place. If institutions no longer provide a long-term frame, the individual may have to improvise his or her life-narrative, or even do without any sustained sense of self.

The second challenge concerns talent: how to develop new skills, how to mine potential abilities, as reality's demands shift. Practically, in the modern economy, the shelf life of many skills is short; in technology and the sciences, as in advanced forms of manufacturing, workers now need to retrain on average every eight to twelve years. Talent is also a matter of culture. The emerging social order militates against the ideal of craftsmanship, that is, learning to do just one thing really well; such commitment can often prove economically destructive. In place of craftsmanship, modern culture advances an idea of meritocracy which celebrates potential ability rather than past achievement.

The third challenge follows from this. It concerns surrender; that is, how to let go of the past. The head of a dynamic company recently asserted that no one owns their place in her organization, that past service in particular earns no employee a guaranteed place. How

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could one respond to that assertion positively? A peculiar trait of personality is needed to do so, one which discounts the experiences a human being has already had. This trait of personality resembles more the consumer ever avid for new things, discarding old if perfectly serviceable goods, rather than the owner who jealousy guards what he or she already possesses.

What I want to show is how society goes about searching for this ideal man or woman. And I'll step beyond the scholar's remit in judging that search. A self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience is—to put a kindly face on the matter—an unusual sort of human being. Most people are not like this; they need a sustaining life narrative, they take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they've lived through. The cultural ideal required in new institutions thus damages many of the people who inhabit them.

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I need to tell the reader something about the kind of research experience I've had which leads me to this



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judgment. The New Left critique of big bureaucracy was my own, until in the late 1960s I began interviewing white, working-class families in Boston, people who were mostly second- or third-generation immigrants to the city. (The book Jonathan Cobb and I wrote about them is *The Hidden Injuries of Class*.) Far from being oppressed by bureaucracy, these were people anchored in solid institutional realities. Stable unions, big corporations, relatively fixed markets oriented them; within this frame, working-class men and women tried to make sense of their low status in a country supposedly making few class distinctions.

After this study, I left the subject of work for a while. It seemed that big American capitalism had achieved a triumphant plateau and that on this plane working-class life would continue in its fixed grooves. I could hardly have been more mistaken. The breakdown of the Bretton Woods currency agreements, after the oil crisis of 1973, meant national constraints on investing weakened; in turn that corporations reconfigured themselves to meet a new international clientele of investors—investors more intent on short-term profits in share prices than on long-term profits in dividends. Jobs began similarly and quickly to cross bor-

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ders. So did consumption and communications. By the 1990s, thanks to microprocessing advances in electronics, the old dream/nightmare of automation began to become a reality in both manual and bureaucratic labor: at last it would be cheaper to invest in machines than to pay people to work.

So I returned to interviewing workers, though not now manual laborers but more middle-class workers who were at the epicenter of the global boom in high-tech industries, in financial services, and in the media. (This is the subject of my book *The Corrosion of Character*.) Here I had the chance to see the cultural ideal of the new capitalism at its most robust, the boom suggesting that this new man/woman would get rich by thinking short term, developing his or her potential, and regretting nothing. What I found instead were a large group of middle-class individuals who felt that their lives were cast adrift.

At the end of the 1990s the boom began to go bust, as is normally the case in any business cycle. As the economy sobered up, however, it became evident that the global growth spurt had left an enduring trace on non-business institutions, particularly institutions of the welfare state. This stamp is as much cultural as



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structural. The values of the new economy have become a reference point for how government thinks about dependence and self-management in health care and pensions, or again about the kind of skills the education system provides. Since I'd grown up "on welfare," as the American phrase has it, the new cultural model formed for me a vivid contrast to the culture of the housing project in Chicago where I spent my childhood. (This stamp is the subject of my book *Respect in an Age of Inequality*.)

I've sought to avoid in this book simply summarizing what I've written before. In my earlier writings, I neglected the role of consumption in the new economy; here I try, briefly, to address how new forms of consumption diminish possessiveness, and the political consequences which follow. I've had to think harder than in the past about the relation of power and authority in work. Looking backward has prompted me to look forward, to begin exploring the spirit of craftsmanship in mental as well as manual labor.

Most of all, I've had to rethink the Americanness of the research I've done. In the 1970s, America dominated the world's economy, and in the 1990s, even if people around the globe were involved in the process,

the United States led the institutional changes which produced a new kind of economy. American researchers thus easily imagine that they can substitute interchangeably the words *American* and *modern*. This fantasy is no longer possible. The Chinese road to growth is quite different from that of the United States, and more powerful. The economy of the European Union is larger than that of America and also in some respects more efficient, even in its new member states, again without mimicking America.

Foreign readers of my recent books have tended to view them as providing reasons to reject an American way of working which other places would follow at their peril. This is not quite what I intend. Certainly the structural changes I describe lack national boundaries; the decline of lifetime employment, for instance, is not an American phenomenon. What is "culture-bound" is the particular ways in which Americans understand the changes which have come over material life.

A stereotype holds that Americans are aggressive competitors in business. Beneath this stereotype lies a different, more passive mentality. Americans of the middling sort I've interviewed in the past decade have tended to accept structural change with resignation, as

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though the loss of security at work and in schools run like businesses are inevitable: you can do little about such basic shifts, even if they hurt you. The dismantling of large institutions which I describe is, however, not a divine commandment. Nor, indeed, is it yet the norm in American work; the new economy is still only a small part of the whole economy. It does exert a profound moral and normative force as a cutting-edge standard for how the larger economy should evolve. My hope is that Americans will in time treat this economy as outsiders tend to see it: a proposition for change which, like any proposition, should be subject to rigorous critique.

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In this regard, the reader should be aware of the critical mind-set of ethnographers. We spend hours listening to people, alone or in groups, explain themselves, their values, their fears, and their hopes. As the hours unfold, all these matters are reformatted and revised in the act of telling. The alert ethnographer pays attention to what causes people to contradict themselves or, equally, why people arrive at a dead end in understanding. The interviewer is not hearing a faulty report, but

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rather listening to a subjective investigation of social complexity. Such ambiguities, deformations, and difficulties which appear in personally accounting Faith, the Nation, or Class constitute an individual's understanding of culture.

This sociological craft is both eminently suited and unsuited to uncovering the sense of innovation today. Suited, because society's emphasis on flow and flux intersects with the process of working through an interpretation in one's mind. Unsuited, because most subjects participate in in-depth interviews in order to reach conclusions, to arrive at an explanation of how they are placed in the world. Fluidity frustrates this desire; ideological proposals for how to prosper in "the new" prove elusive, once people ponder them long enough.

In responding to Yale's invitation to describe the culture of the new capitalism, I've thus had to think about the limitations of my particular craft and about the frustrations of subjective investigation. I've taken, therefore, the great and unpardonable liberty of speaking for the people I've interviewed over the years; I've tried to summarize what's in their minds. In taking this liberty, I am aware of sweeping under the carpet perhaps the most basic cultural problem: much of modern

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social reality is illegible to the people trying to make sense of it.

The chapters that follow treat three subjects: how institutions are changing; how fears about being made redundant or left behind are related to talent in the "skills society"; how consumption behavior relates to political attitudes. The institutional changes I describe in the workplace in fact refer to only the cutting edge of the economy: high technology, global finance, and new service firms with three thousand or more employees. Most people in North America and Western Europe do not work for such firms. Yet this small slice of the economy has a cultural influence far beyond its numbers. These new institutions suggest the new formulation of personal skills and abilities; the combined formula of institution and ability shapes the culture of consumption; consumption behavior in turn influences politics, particularly progressive politics. I am unabashedly inferring the culture of the whole from a small part of society, just because the avatars of a particular kind of capitalism have persuaded so many people that their way is the way of the future.

The apostles of the new capitalism argue that their version of these three subjects—work, talent, consump-



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tion—adds up to more freedom in modern society, a fluid freedom, a “liquid modernity” in the apt phrase of the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman.<sup>1</sup> My quarrel with them is not whether their version of the new is real; institutions, skills, and consumption patterns have indeed changed. My argument is that these changes have not set people free.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Social Capitalism in Our Time

**T**here were many foolish things about the New Left of my youth, fifty years ago, but in one way the movement was prescient beyond its years; the Port Huron Statement foresaw how state socialism could die from within. Socialism would suffocate under the weight of bureaucracy. Capitalism would remain, and remain the problem.

As I've sought to show in these pages, big bureaucracy can bind as well as oppress. This has long been true of armies; Max Weber witnessed how in his time economic and civil society institutions mimicked the social structure of armies, in pursuit of social inclusion and obedience to authority. The secret of this milita-

rized capitalism lay in time—time structured so that people formed a life narrative and social relations within the institution. The price individuals paid for organized time could be freedom or individuality; the “iron cage” was both prison and home.

State socialism, as it developed in the Soviet empire after 1923, took on this military—capitalist legacy almost gladly. It thought the capitalist enemy lay in profits and markets rather than in bureaucracy. Like its enemy, the empire needed solidarity and subordination—bureaucracy became also the home and the prison of socialism. It was ironic that the New Left took aim in the 1960s at the military-capitalist-socialist behemoth because this was a decade of bureaucratic triumph, the factories of the Soviet empire finally becoming as productive economically as their brothers in the West. Looking back, the first sixty years of the twentieth century appear the age of the military machine, violent and self-destructive on the battlefield, triumphant, however, in the factory and the office. When the American president Dwight Eisenhower spoke of the “military-industrial complex,” his image applied more broadly than to the manufacture of weapons.

The New Left hoped the behemoth would wither from within because it was a prison. Perversely, contemporary history has begun to grant that wish, though not in ways radicals of my youth would have wished. In the past three decades, bureaucracy has reorganized itself in the advanced economic sectors of global finance, technology, media, and merchandizing. This global spurt of growth may have brought many benefits, but a better quality of institutional life is not among them. The new institutions, as we have seen, are neither smaller nor more democratic; centralized power has instead been reconfigured, power split off from authority. The institutions inspire only weak loyalty, they diminish participation and mediation of commands, they breed low levels of informal trust and high levels of anxiety about uselessness. A shortened framework of institutional time lies at the heart of this social degradation; the cutting edge has capitalized on superficial human relations. This same shortened time framework has disoriented individuals in efforts to plan their life course strategically and dimmed the disciplinary power of the old work ethic based on delayed gratification.

This is a list of negatives. The positives invoked by these institutional changes are qualities of self which

might allow individuals to flourish as institutional life becomes more shallow. These qualities are repudiation of dependence, development of one's potential ability, the capacity to transcend possessiveness. These qualities take us outside the realm of production, into the institutions of the welfare state, education, and consumption. The cutting edge of reform at work, as I have wanted to underline, is narrow; most people continue to labor under conditions Weber would well have understood. But the extension of the new values is broad. The positives invoked by the new order promise to consummate the project of meritocracy and to provide the model for progressive reform.

The remedy proposed by the New Left for the prison of bigness was cultural. Emotional declaration, made face to face, in small groups, would spawn a more humane order; the lessons of intimacy would be applied to society as a whole. Of course this scale is a young person's natural territory, and of course it cannot last; as adulthood unfolds, one's subjectivity becomes, if anything, more puzzling. And what the New Left might have learned from Bismarck, or from military service, is that strong social ties can flourish under quite impersonal conditions.

Yet I don't think the dreamers of my youth had the wrong idea in holding up material life to a cultural standard. As the reader may possibly have detected, I was one of those youthful dreamers. The normal path of the adult's "sentimental education" is meant to lead to ever greater resignation about how little life as it is actually conducted can accord with one's dreams. Ethnography about workers and their work has kept me off that path. The people I've interviewed, especially in the past decade, are too worried and disquieted, too little resigned to their own uncertain fate under the aegis of change. What they need most is a mental and emotional anchor; they need values which assess whether changes in work, privilege, and power are worthwhile. They need, in short, a culture.

I would like to conclude this book by assessing three critical values—narrative, usefulness, and craftsmanship—that might create a cultural anchor.

### Narrative

Cutting-edge institutions, short and erratic in their time frames, deprive people of a sense of *narrative movement*. Which means most simply that events in time



connect, experience accumulates. In the past decade I've been impressed by three innovative attempts to create this sense of narrative connection at work.

The first consists of efforts in Britain and the United States to fashion "parallel institutions" which seek to afford workers with the continuity and sustainability missing in short-term, flexible organizations. These efforts focus on rethinking the nature of labor unions. The idea is to make the labor union serve as a kind of employment agency, booking jobs; the union buys pensions and health care for its members; most important, it provides the community missing in the workplace, organizing crèches, discussions, and social events. Secretaries in Boston and communications workers in Britain have tried to establish such parallel institutions.

In so doing, they are challenging as new-fashioned employers sclerotic, traditional unions. The conservative union focused on a particular industry or craft and thus was poorly equipped to keep contact with workers who have to jump from one kind of labor to another; by contrast, a more forward-looking union like the United Auto Workers in America now enrolls young university lecturers in its ranks. Traditional



unions put their energies mostly into wages and material conditions; the Boston secretarial union concentrates on the communal needs of women and single parents. Service and seniority were the hallmarks of the old social capitalism, and conservative unions follow that time guide. The parallel union seeks to make a narrative thread of experience, as in its employment agency activities, for people who are not yet gray-haired.

The second way of threading experience together over time lies in job sharing. Here the Dutch have been pioneers. The Netherlands has as much as the United States suffered from outsourcing and the disappearance of labor into the developing world. The Dutch response has been to design a system in which available work is divided up in halves or thirds. The job network system further contains a good deal of open entry, so that a person can labor at more than one part-time job as market conditions permit. The Dutch, by temperament the most self-lacerating of Europeans, have found much wrong with the way job sharing operates, but the principle is accepted, and when practiced, this scheme has provided employers with a tool useful in a volatile economy, society with a tool for social inclusion.

Job sharing offers a special kind of narrative frame. A person is continually in work, long-term. This avoids the light-switch anxiety of short-term contracts—now I'm engaged, now I'm redundant. The self-respect from being in work is maintained, even if one works only part of the week or part of the day. Job sharing has the further advantage of permitting people to sort out family-work relations, particularly child care, on a reasonable and predictable basis.

The third way of shaping time under new conditions can enable people to plan long-term. This policy began as an idea which, glimmering a decade ago in the minds of a few radical academics, is now making its way into the real world.

The radical version, pushed by Claus Offe and Van Pariij, was a "basic income" scheme which would replace the welfare bureaucracies of northern Europe by a simpler system which gives everyone, rich and poor alike, the same basic income support to spend or misspend as the individual wants. All individuals would be able to buy education, health care, and pensions on the open market; further, unemployment benefits would disappear, since everyone has the minimum annual income needed to support themselves. Taxes support

everyone at a minimum level of life quality, but the Nanny State disappears; if you misspend your income it's your problem. Moreover, everyone gets this basic income whether they need it or not; means-testing disappears.

As these tonic notions made their way into the real world, the promise of providing people the means for long-term personal planning came to the fore. The radical proposal for basic income modulated into the notion of basic capital, that is, giving each young adult a pot of cash to use on education, on purchasing a house, or as a nest egg for hard times. The American jurist Bruce Ackerman has been pivotal in this shift; the results have appeared in Britain legislation which will provision young people this way, though the pot has been filled by a somewhat abstemious, Scotch-Presbyterian hand.

All three of these efforts address a hard reality: insecurity is not just an unwanted consequence of upheavals in markets; rather, insecurity is programmed into the new institutional model. That is, insecurity does not happen *to* a new-style bureaucracy, it is made to happen. These and kindred efforts aim to counter-vail against that program without returning to the rigidities of time within the old-style social capitalist organization.

The policies turn on a cultural pivot, which concerns narrative itself. If the well-made plot has gone out of fashion in fiction, it is a rarity in ordinary life; life histories are seldom shapely. In ethnography, we are indeed less concerned with how coherent are the stories people tell us than with the effort of our subjects to make their experience cohere. This is not a one-shot effort. Frequently a subject will retell and reorganize an event, sometimes taking apart a seemingly logical story into disconnected bits, in order to see what lies beneath the surface. In technical lingo, this is "narrative agency," the narrator actively engaging and interpreting experience.

In the new institutions, people can frequently succumb to feeling they have no narrative agency; that is, that they lack the power to interpret what is happening to them. We've seen one concrete reason for this; in new institutions, when intermediate layers of bureaucracy are stripped away, information can remain intact as it passes from center to periphery, with relatively little modulation. People subject to this process frequently complain that they have, as Albert Hirschmann put it, no voice within the institution.

Here are three experiments which give people, culturally, more agency in interpreting their experi-

ence in time, long-term. As policies, the experiments are small in scale, but as cultural practices they are largely suggestive.

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### Usefulness

Feeling useful means contributing something which matters to other people. As the scope of uselessness has expanded in the political economy, it might seem that people could compensate through the more informal relations of civil society. A supposedly over-the-hill, middle-aged computer programmer might, for instance, find useful activity in a community or church organization. This is an approach which follows from Robert Putnam's writings on social capital, in which voluntary participation is the crux. While volunteering is certainly a worthy act, this approach risks reducing usefulness to a hobby.

More consequent values for usefulness appear in two realms: among paid public service workers, the second among people doing unpaid domestic labor.

A few years ago I participated in an interview project which sought out British public service workers,



running the gamut from street cleaners to surgeons in the public health service.<sup>1</sup> For a generation—like their American counterparts—they had been under attack, their institutions derided as inefficient, themselves demeaned as people who couldn't make it in the world of private enterprise. Many of the people we spoke to were also self-critical; they knew from within how rigid and risk-averse these public bureaucratic pyramids were. Yet despite the criticism they stayed in public service. Our question was, why?

It fell to me to interview immigrants who change bedpans in run-down public hospitals; they could have made more money in better-run private clinics. The reason these hospital attendants stayed was a matter of status. The purpose of the National Health Service—health care for all—elicits the respect of most Britons; for these immigrants, the institution gave them a positive, institutional place in British society.

*Status* is perhaps the most elusive word in the sociologist's lexicon. While it is often used as a synonym for snobbery, its deeper value has to do with legitimacy. You have status when institutions confer legitimacy upon you. Being useful falls within this framework;



more than doing good privately, it is a way of being publicly recognized.

Another line of interviews turned up the same sentiment among noncommissioned officers in the army, who stayed rather than work easier hours as private security personnel. Interviewers in yet another branch of the project talked to people higher up the civil service. Though they received more verbally elaborate responses to the question "Why do you stay?" still the verbal meat boiled down to the same bone: more recognition for one's work in the public than in the private realm. Of course there are slackers, particularly in British transport services. Even there we found a good deal of peer pressure exerted on the lazy or time-serving; their frustrated colleagues put a high premium on professionalism, another cognate of status. And while conditions in the Inland Revenue or Home Office could drive any man or woman to drink, these institutions' purpose makes the work matter to the public, and so meaningful to the workers.

Voluntary service is of course a worthy act. Here, though, the State confers status on those who do useful work. In so doing, the state acquires authority. As we've

seen, institutions at the cutting edge walk away from issues of authority and legitimacy—issues they can't handle. And for this social reason, a truly progressive politics would, in my view, seek to strengthen the State as an employer, rather than hive-off public service work to private companies.

Once we think positively about the State as a source of legitimate, useful activity, progressive politics could deal with those people performing useful labor in families, mothers caring for children, adults caring for aged parents. In my view, government should pay them. The Putnam view is that people "volunteering" to do love's drudgery represent the ultimate test of social capital. The error in this kind of thinking is to equate domestic usefulness with altruism. Care work may be loving, but the work itself has no public recognition; it is an invisible gift, and many of the men and women who do it feel they have dropped out of the adult society of their peers. Were government to reward care work, people would not labor in that limbo.

As a practical matter, care work of all sorts represents an enormous slice of time and effort in the domestic economy. The economy used to benefit by driv-

ing a wedge between paid and unpaid care work. Today, the expansion of old age combined with the desires of many women to have careers outside the house has disrupted that old balance. Both these changes have opened up new opportunities for immigrant labor to do care work. Against these trends, however, is the need of both the elderly and the young to be taken care of, emotionally as well as practically, in ways only family members can provide. A truly progressive politics should make that possible, I believe, for men as well as for women.

If only reformers could accept that usefulness is a public good, they could engage with the anxiety and fear of uselessness spawned by the most dynamic sectors of the modern economy. For the reasons I presented in the second chapter, the cult of meritocracy is unlikely to salve these anxieties; exploring new ways for people to be recognized as useful has to be more inclusive. Usefulness itself is more than a utilitarian exchange. It is a symbolic declaration which matters most when the polity confers it, as it can to even the lowest worker in the public services and as it does not to people in the domestic sphere.

## Craftsmanship

The third value which could countervail against the culture of the new capitalism is craftsmanship. It represents the most radical challenge but is the hardest to imagine in terms of policy.

Craftsmanship broadly understood means the desire to do something well for its own sake. All human beings want the satisfaction of doing something well and want to believe in what they do. Yet at work, in education, in politics the new order does not and cannot satisfy this desire. The new work world is too mobile for the desire to do something well for its own sake to root into a person's experience over the course of years or decades. The educational system which trains people for mobile work favors facility at the expense of digging deep. The political reformer, imitating the cutting-edge culture in private institutions, behaves more like a consumer ever in search of the new than like a craftsman proud and possessive of what he has made.

Craftsmanship challenges the idealized self supposed by new work, educational, and political institutions. This is a self adept at change, a master of process. At its origins, psychologists like Abraham Maslow cel-

ebredated this ideal of self as responsive, open to experience, capable of growth, a self of potential powers. This idealized self indeed has real obvious strengths, and the craftsman's realm is in certain ways smaller and more guarded. Worrying about getting something right mobilizes obsessive elements of the self; getting something right can then lead to a kind of ungenerous possessiveness. Competition is no stranger to craftsmanship, and good craftsmen, be they computer programmers, musicians, or carpenters, can be highly intolerant of those who are incompetent or simply not as good.

For all this, craftsmanship has a cardinal virtue missing in the new culture's idealized worker, student, or citizen. It is commitment. It's not simply that the obsessed, competitive craftsman may be committed to doing something well, but more that he or she believes in its objective value. A person can use the words *correct* and *right* in describing how well something is done only if he or she believes in an objective standard outside his or her own desires, indeed outside the sphere of rewards from others. Getting something right, even though it may get you nothing, is the spirit of true craftsmanship. And only that kind of disinterested



commitment—or so I believe—can lift people up emotionally; otherwise, they succumb in the struggle to survive.

We've seen why commitment is in increasingly scarce supply in the new capitalism, in terms of institutional loyalty. The sentiment would be irrational—how can you commit to an institution which is not committed to you? Commitment is equally difficult in the new culture's recipe for talent. Mental mobility eschews getting deeply involved; ability is focused on operational technique, as in the SAT, an exercise in problem solving rather than problem finding. Which means that a person becomes disengaged with the reality beyond his or her own control.

Commitment poses a more profound question about the self-as-process. Commitment entails closure, forgoing possibilities for the sake of concentrating on one thing. You might miss out. The emerging culture puts enormous pressure on individuals not to miss out. Instead of closure, the culture counsels surrender—cutting ties in order to be free, particularly the ties bred in time.

What I have sought to explore in these pages is thus a paradox: a new order of power gained through

an ever more superficial culture. Since people can anchor themselves in life only by trying to do something well for its own sake, the triumph of superficiality at work, in schools, and in politics seems to me fragile. Perhaps, indeed, revolt against this enfeebled culture will constitute our next fresh page.