

# Deciphering American Morality

*Gertrude Himmelfarb*

**One Nation, Two Cultures**

*Knopf, 192 pages.*

*Reviewed by Jeff Jacoby*

“Of course I dislike the Nazis,” a student at Hamilton College in New York tells philosophy professor Robert Simon, “but who is to say they are morally wrong?” At Harvard too, James Q. Wilson encounters a reluctance on the part of students to condemn the Holocaust: “It all depends on your perspective,” one student tells him. Another comments: “I’d just have to see these events through the eyes of the people affected by them.”

Something has gone badly awry when students at prestigious institutions of higher learning cannot bring themselves to speak ill of the Final Solution. How America sank into such

moral confusion and how it might climb out again is the theme of *One Nation, Two Cultures*, a concentrated cultural critique by Gertrude Himmelfarb.

It is no secret, Himmelfarb writes, that a lack of moral authority pervades contemporary American life. Americans consistently tell pollsters that “moral decay” or “moral decline” is one of the nation’s severest problems, and it is a belief that has grown more pronounced over time. In 1965, 52 percent of the public felt that “people in general do not lead lives as honest and moral as they used to”; by 1998 no fewer than 71 percent shared that view. Likewise, the proportion believing that “young people today do not have as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did 50 years ago” climbed from 46 percent in 1965 to 70 percent in 1998.

“It is not only conservatives... who now deplore the breakdown of the family; liberals do as well,” says

---

Himmelfarb. No liberal or conservative “seriously disputes the prevalence (even glorification) of violence, vulgarity and promiscuity in videos and rap music, or denies their degrading effects.... Nor do many people today seriously doubt the inadequacy of education at all levels, or the fragility of communal ties, or the coarsening and debasement of the culture, or the ‘defining down’ of morality, public and private. It is no mean achievement to have reached at least this point of consensus.”

But while Americans may agree that society has been demoralized, many—perhaps most—are nevertheless unwilling to pass moral judgment on others. They shrink from appearing “judgmental” or “moralistic”—terms that are now used only as pejoratives. “They habitually take refuge,” Himmelfarb writes, “in such equivocations as ‘Who is to say what is right or wrong?’ or ‘Personally, I disapprove of pornography, but that is only my own opinion.’” Moral judgment has become so uncommon that its appearance is big news. When Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut used the word “immoral” in 1998 to describe President Clinton’s behavior with Monica Lewinsky, it made headlines around the country.

Yet the problem is not that Americans lack principles; it is that they feel they have no right to apply their

principles to others. Thus, while 75 percent of the public believes that adultery is wrong, according to one recent survey, two-thirds of those who personally know women who have had adulterous affairs do not “think less” of them as a result. And what is true of the public generally is intensified among the young, particularly those who have been steeped in the ethos of multiculturalism prevalent in the educational system. (“If it is part of a person’s culture,” explains the instructor of one hospital course on multicultural understanding, “we are taught not to judge.”) And so college professors find their students “responding sympathetically to human sacrifice as practiced by the Aztecs or the scalping of enemies by Indians.” Or doubting whether the Nazis were “morally wrong.”

What happened?

The conventional answer, especially among conservatives, is that the 1960s happened. Authority, tradition and sexual restraint were undone by a tsunami of social shocks: Civil rights, the pill, television, the anti-war movement, the swelling of the welfare state, the Baby Boom. Any one of these developments would have changed American life. All of them together fueled a cultural revolution that profoundly altered American society, as the old culture based on moral authority gave way to a new one based

---

on permissiveness (or “tolerance”). In the new culture, traditional morality was no longer something to be enforced—not by government, not by civil society, not even by social pressure—but instead became a matter of “personal preference.” And as moral authority yielded to moral autonomy, vice became almost as respectable as virtue.

Himmelfarb accepts this conventional explanation, but her analysis goes further. The radicals of the 1960s, she points out, were raised during the 1950s. That was when the real seeds of change were sown. It was then that Dr. Spock’s views on child-rearing accustomed an entire generation to the principle of permissiveness. It was then that the writings of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg first set the counter-culture stirring. It was then that the GI Bill doubled the number of students exposed to the intellectual trends of campus life, dramatically intensifying the effect of the new thinking on society’s moral instincts. And it was then that opposition to McCarthyism and the atom bomb gave many young adults their first taste of organized dissent.

All this happened in an era of burgeoning capitalism, when new wealth was enriching tens of millions of Americans. In Himmelfarb’s view, this new prosperity and the capitalist ethic which brought it about played a

significant role in setting off the cultural explosions of the next decade. She cites Joseph Schumpeter, who had argued in 1942 that the very success of capitalism tends to subvert the society that makes it possible. “Capitalism creates a critical frame of mind,” he wrote, “which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own.” Decades before the rates of divorce and illegitimacy went through the roof, he foresaw that capitalism and the affluence it generated would threaten the “disintegration of the bourgeois family.”

Daniel Bell later refined the argument. While a free market cannot function without self-discipline and deferred gratification, he noted in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), the wealth it generates inevitably stimulates appetite, self-indulgence and an impatience with restraint. The outcome, sooner or later, is social degeneration. Endorsing this analysis, Himmelfarb declares that the success of capitalism has “taken its toll on the moral life of society”—indeed, she says, it has been “more destructive” than even Schumpeter could have anticipated.

Himmelfarb’s portrait of America’s moral decline is undeniably well-researched. But does capitalism really deserve to be blamed for today’s moral corrosion? The connection between

---

affluence and decay is far from clear; in fact, it may be fairer to say that business is a bulwark *against* moral slovenliness. “Business has a vested interest in virtue,” writes Michael Novak, the renowned Catholic theologian, in *Business as a Calling* (1996). “It cannot endure without leaders and colleagues in whom many key virtues are internalized.... Business is dependent on the moral and cultural institutions of the free society.” Indeed, much of the popular literature on effectiveness and productivity that has appeared in recent years encourages precisely those traits which reinforce a moral order and which successful individuals often inculcate in their children: Self-restraint, responsibility, faith and order, as well as the ability to absorb and apply the wisdom of others. Hollywood typically caricatures capitalists as greedy villains, but the reality seems altogether different.

In short, the successful practice of business generally rewards moral rigor. It is no surprise that while American capitalism was, if anything, even more unbridled during the nineteenth century than during the twentieth, there was nothing like the decline in traditional standards or the flight from personal responsibility that are such hallmarks of contemporary society. Himmelfarb herself mentions that foreign visitors used to marvel at “the

moral quality of the domestic lives of Americans.” Values and habits that would come to be known as “Victorian” were deeply rooted in American behavior long before that term was coined, and they remained rooted well into the twentieth century, even as the United States became a wealthy and powerful industrial state.

**B**ut if capitalism is not to blame for the moral decay that is so characteristic of Americans today, what is? Here is one possible answer: What paved the way for our contemporary disarray was not the burgeoning of American wealth, but the burgeoning of American government.

The role of civil society in building and enforcing moral norms has been widely discussed in recent years. Through voluntary organizations, particularly religious ones, citizens come to understand and believe in the role they have to play within society. And far from being hamstrung by capitalism, civil society thrives on it.

To begin with, citizens who are not burdened by the heavy taxes of a large welfare state have more money—and usually more time—for supporting voluntary and charitable organizations.

But there is a more fundamental way in which economic freedom and moral virtue go hand in hand. Where markets operate freely and the role

---

of government is sharply circumscribed, the principal way in which a law-abiding citizen acquires wealth is by earning it. And the way one earns wealth in a capitalist system is by serving others. No one can make money in a market economy unless he provides something that other people want. You are rewarded when your customer is rewarded. You benefit yourself by first benefiting others. Which means that the prosperity that tends to characterize market-oriented societies is the result not just of economic forces but of moral ones, too: Honesty, cooperation, trust, sympathy, concern for the needs of others. "For the first time in human history," Walter Lippmann wrote in 1937, reflecting on the great diffusion of wealth in the Western world since the rise of modern commerce, "men had come upon a way of producing wealth in which the good fortune of others multiplied their own.... It had not occurred to many men before that the Golden Rule was economically sound."

This is not to say, of course, that capitalism automatically makes men moral, or that honest and compassionate people cannot be found in societies not distinguished by free markets. It *is* to say that capitalism tends to reinforce the virtues and standards that keep society civil, and to keep

selfish and greedy tendencies in check. Since success in a free-market society depends on possessing many of the habits of moral virtue, those habits will usually be encouraged.

But as government expands, making more and more of the decisions previously left to the private sector, the opposite happens. Behavior driven by mutual benefit gives way to behavior driven by politics. The voluntariness of market transactions is replaced by the coercion of government directives. Where capitalism inculcates respect for the property of others, statism—which teaches that wealth may be redistributed by the government—encourages covetousness and resentment. If A has and B doesn't, the cry goes out for the government to take more from A so that B's "unmet needs" can be fulfilled.

The bigger government grows, the more it undermines the capitalist ethic of helping yourself by helping others first. Enormous time and treasure is spent on getting the state to change the rules of the game—to enrich some citizens by extracting more from others in the form of taxes, regulations or restrictions.

America's Victorian values were not undermined by the dramatic growth in industry and commerce that transformed the nation in the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the

---

twentieth centuries. Civil society could assimilate vast new wealth. What it couldn't assimilate was the dramatic expansion of government which began in the 1930s and reached its peak in a "War on Poverty" that encouraged poor Americans not to work and not to form stable families. What it couldn't assimilate was the relentless intrusion of state and federal regulations into virtually every aspect of American life. What it couldn't assimilate was a convoluted tax code that taught taxpayers that honesty is a sucker's game. Above all, what it couldn't assimilate was the proliferation of programs that treated Americans like children who cannot be trusted to run their own lives. For the effect of that infantilization was to erode the adult virtues that healthy society depends on: Work, honesty, discipline, fidelity, temperance, thrift, initiative.

Nor is that all. As the welfare state swells, assuming functions that used to be left to individuals and private organizations, communities are weakened. Concern for the well-being of others is dulled. After all, if the government is going to take care of the hungry, why should I feed them? If politicians and bureaucrats are going to take care of every social problem, why should I join a community group or send money to a voluntary

agency? A key factor in convincing people to take care of one another is the understanding that their help is not only meritorious but *needed*: That unless they act, others will suffer. By taking responsibility for the needy, government accustoms the average citizen to thinking that his charity and help are no longer necessary. As a result, he spends less time thinking about the misfortunes of others.

And what is true of individuals is true in the aggregate. All through the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, as the United States was growing richer and richer, Americans were giving greater and greater proportions of their wealth to philanthropy. "Then, suddenly, sometime during 1964-1965, in the middle of an economic boom, this consistent trend was reversed," Charles Murray wrote in 1988. "The proportion of wealth being given away began to fall even though wealth continued to increase. The trend continued through the rest of the 1960s, throughout the 1970s, and then suddenly reversed itself again in 1981 (during a period of hard times), when a new administration came to office that once more seemed to be saying: 'If you don't do it, nobody will.'"

Yet Himmelfarb shies away from blaming government for the country's moral and cultural diseases. "The arguments against 'big government' are

---

well taken, but they should not translate into arguments against law or government per se,” she cautions. In their eagerness to rein in the “nanny state,” libertarian-minded conservatives “risk belittling, even delegitimizing, the state itself.” Politics may be in disrepute these days, but the state still deserves “the enthusiastic service and loyalty of its citizens.”

But that is just what it does not deserve. It is fine to promote public service, but this cannot mitigate the catastrophe that the state has become. The tremendous expansion of government in recent decades has not only deprived Americans of so much in the way of liberty, self-respect and prosperity. It has pulled the rug out from under the institutions upon which the very virtues that Himmelfarb champions depend. What is badly needed is not for citizens to offer up “enthusiastic service and loyalty” to their government, but for the government to begin practicing self-restraint.

**O**n the other hand, Himmelfarb does make explicit something that too many conservatives often do not: The news is not all bad. If America is plagued by widespread moral disarray, it is also simultaneously undergoing an unmistakable moral and religious revival.

To be sure, the prevailing values in America at the turn of the twenty-first century are those of the old counter-culture. From the mainstreaming of “alternative lifestyles,” to the vulgar and violent offerings on television, to the common fear of appearing “judgmental,” the subversive attitudes of the 1960s have long since achieved respectability. But degeneration is only part of the picture.

Those who lost the culture war have not gone away. They have become the opposition—“the dissident culture,” Himmelfarb calls them. And while they may be heavily outgunned by the elites—academics, journalists, entertainers—“who occupy the commanding heights of the dominant culture,” they are nevertheless beginning to have an effect. *The New York Times*, she observes, regularly reports on the “explicit sex, language and behavior” being aired on television. College students are showing more interest in religion. As baby-boomers age, many polls suggest, they are turning against the sexual permissiveness of their youth. And while many conservatives have kept themselves busy charting the signs of declining social health—crime, welfare, drug abuse, illegitimacy, promiscuity and so on—Himmelfarb correctly points out that some of these statistics have recently improved. Violent crime is down,

---

fewer people are on welfare, and the rates of out-of-wedlock births, divorce and abortion have stabilized or even declined.

What can be done to build on these improvements? How should the traditionalists and religious conservatives who make up the dissident culture go about remoralizing American society? Here, perhaps unavoidably, *One Nation, Two Cultures* is at its weakest. Himmelfarb is a historian of civic culture, not an activist or a crusader, and she offers no prescription for curing the social ills from which America suffers. Indeed, she seems not to expect a cure. There will be no mass return to traditional standards, she says, no far-reaching transformation of American society. The best she hopes for is that as the influence of the current revival spreads, “more and more people [will] leave the state of

denial in which they have so long taken refuge.” And even about this modest prophecy she is tentative: “Historians,” she cautions, “have not been notably successful in predicting the future.”

Fair enough. The historian’s job is to understand what happened. It is for others to figure out—or attempt to influence—what is going to happen. *One Nation, Two Cultures* reflects Himmelfarb’s considerable strengths as a scholar: It is balanced, coherent and resolutely non-alarmist. It is a highly useful survey of where the culture wars have brought us. Himmelfarb has done an admirable job of charting how far we have sunk. It will be for other writers, inspired perhaps by her critique, to find a way to unsink us.

---

*Jeff Jacoby is a columnist for The Boston Globe.*