CULTURAL IDEOLOGICAL DIRECTIONS IN FIN-DE-SIECLE AMERICA

Ramona Gabriela HOSU

Rezumat

Lucrarea de faţă examinează conceptul de ideologie a culturii în America sfârşitului de secol XIX şi început de secol XX din perspective critice, filosofice şi sociologice. La începutul secolului al XX-lea, cultura însemna un sistem de valori ce nu urmau cu fidelitate progresul economic şi păreau a se transforma într-un cult excentric. Conceptul de cultură a suferit transformări tensionate ca urmare a unei relaţii ambigue dintre cultură şi gustul publicului, a polarizării ştiinţelor şi disciplinelor umaniste şi a aserţiunii unei abordări pragmatice a problemelor sociale. Datorită dezintegrării prosperităţii in anii 20 şi a Crizei din anii 30, „Ideologia culturii", numită şi „tradiţia gentilă", a fost înlocuită de o nouă orientare în arte şi societate.

To reflect on the membership and the size of groups and movements that have driven social change is to realize that reform is surely one of the major collective activities in America. As Robert H. Walker stated in *"Reform and the American Character"*, cultural values show themselves most directly in the arguments used by reformers to persuade their contemporaries. Three explicit arguments overshadow all others: the appeals to higher law, to reason and to a sense of the practical. The first is attributable to the religious influence visible everywhere during the century of colonial origins; the second is associated with the great Age of Reason that fueled the arguments for independence; the third allies itself to the romantic/ transcendental/ pragmatic chain of ideas (Walker, 377).

Since social protest implies discontent, the great, unresolved conflict is in the way the reform experience denies the primacy of individualism, self – reliance, and the pursuit of material success. In its place this tradition substitutes altruism, a concern for communal well – being, and the commitment to group action. Both individualism and collective action are important, or - as Walt Whitman said, articulating both sides of the conflict: *" One of the problems presented in America these times is, how to combine one's duty and policy as a member of associations, societies, brotherhoods or what not, and one's obligations to the State and Nation, with essential freedom as an individual personality, without which freedom a man cannot grow or expand, or be full, modern, heroic, democratic, American. With all the necessities and benefits of association, (and the world cannot get along without it,) the true nobility and satisfaction of a man consist in his thinking and acting for himself. The problem, I say, is to combine the two so as not to ignore either"* (apud Walker, 378).

Philosopher George Santayana defined the dilemma permeating the American character at the beginning of the 20th century in 1911. For him, America was a country of two mentalities:*" one a survival of the beliefs and standards of the fathers, the other an expression of the instincts, practice, and discoveries of the younger generation [...] One half of the American mind, that not occupied intensely in practical affairs, has remained... slightly becalmed; it has floated gently in the backwater, while alongside, in*

BDD-A2982 © 2004 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:56:45 UTC)

invention and industry and social organizations, the other half was leaping down a sort of Niagara Rapids. This division may be found symbolized in American architecture: a neat reproduction of the colonial mansion – with some modern comforts introduced surreptitiously – stands beside the skyscraper. The American Will inhabits the skyscraper; the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion.... The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition" (apud Roth, 165).

Matei Călinescu formulated the concept of modernity in *Five Faces of Modernity,* and his interpretation of the term is to be found in George Santayana's statement. The doctrine of progress, the belief in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the preoccupation for *time* (a measurable time, a time that can be sold and bought), the cult of reason, the ideal of liberty defined in the context of an abstract humanism, and the orientation towards pragmatism and the cult of action and success also - all these got involved in the fight for modernity and were sustained and promoted as clue – values of the civilization set up by the middle class. To this type of modernity, Călinescu opposed the second one that was to give birth to the avant – garde. This one adopted the radical anti – bourgeois attitudes. Being against the values of the middle class, it expressed this attitude by means of revolt, anarchy, apocalyptic attitudes and aristocratic self – exile. That is why cultural modernity is entitled to reject the bourgeois modernity, and to make use of its negative, devouring passion (Călinescu, 46).

Santayana's *genteel tradition* meant a well-concentrated world outlook, or with Lewis Perry, an *ideology of culture* (Perry, 218). The term 'culture' in the second half of the 19th century designated the superior ideals that were to represent the Republic, which was similar to what 'virtue' had done before. Culture was an aesthetic category less political than 'virtue' (Perry, 218). The contrast between the literary vision of perfection and the sordid reality could lead to different public attitudes, from the detached disgust with the existing society to the serious attempt to rectify it. In the United States cultures gained prestige first as a celebration of the individual and only then as a critical weapon against social failure. Culture was the key word of an ideology that honored good manners and the respect for the belle-lettre, believing that the great ideals would become established in spite of the transition towards urbanism and industrialism. Culture encouraged a certain self – admiration of those who appreciated the so – called 'literature of quality'. At the same time, it offered a perspective for understanding social differences. *"This view seemed to be like the traditional one, making a distinction between decency and wildness: the imagery was that of* 'we and they'*, light and dark, ideal values and material goals"* (Perry, 223). To take into account the significance of culture in understanding social problems does not mean considering that political and economic problems were less important; culture offered a certain point of view in order to assess the narrow commercialism of society, generally speaking.

For the critics of the 20th century, culture was a system made up of some middling values that could not follow the economic progress. In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, the sociologist Thornstein Veblen stated that culture was in fact nothing else than an 'eccentric cult'. This 'pecuniary culture' would appreciate what was useless: dead languages, vapid philosophies, fancy literature, the concern for taste, character, ideals.... All these qualities praised by the humanists were traps of the 'regime of ranks'. Within this system, the real merit was suppressed and a collective and efficient life under the modern industrial circumstances became impossible. To this culture of the rich, Veblen opposed the impersonal, efficient and democratic science. The glory of culture relied on the ethical detachment from the development of commerce and industry. The sociologist turned this distinction upside down considering that what was closer to the economic life was better. George Santayana with his *Genteel Tradition at Bay* followed him in 1911. The philosopher associated intellectual vitality with contemporary economic evolution, disregarding the Victorian ideals of culture, as stated before. Both Santayana and Veblen opposed Victorian principles to modern tendencies. However, if Veblen considered humanist disciplines elitist, not scientific and irrelevant for the modern problems, Santayana admitted that

BDD-A2982 © 2004 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:56:45 UTC)

one should evaluate American mentality by studying its writers. This belief in the importance of both literature and science was a directional indicator for evolution.

Most of the signs of subversion were obvious even before World War I. The exhibition in Paris, in 1900, made Henry Adams feel a mystical revelation: *" [...] but to Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross. The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel [...]. Before the end, one began to pray it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force. [...] The force was wholly new"* (Adams, 994). The Virgin and the Dynamo were not presented in *The Education of Henry Adams* simply as historical facts but as symbols. This book, since it showed imaginatively how all the major intellectual, social, political, military, and economic issues and developments of Adams' days were interrelated, is now considered one indispensable text seeking to understand the first signs of change within an ideology of culture, the beginnings of modernism – the materialized face of change and anxiety. The perspective of Adams seemed very pessimistic. Its final chapter prophesized that the disintegrative forces unleashed by science threatened to cause the destruction of the generation. The book has grown in interest in recent years for two major reasons: for what it tells us about its complex, elusive, and paradoxical author, and than about the technological – dominated and dehumanized world whose major power he foresaw so clearly. Adams was fascinated by the past, horrified by the present, and skeptical about the future. Thus, more than a half a century after his death, Adams and his most complex book speak with renewed pertinence to his dilemmas and ours.

All these tensions and cracks within culture would increase after World War I with the ambiguous relation between culture and popular taste, the attacks against the claims of nobleness in the name of civic efficiency or of literary creation, the polarization of sciences and humanist disciplines, the drowsiness of evangelic criticism against evolutionist science, and the early assertions of the pragmatic approach of social problems. Another aspect should be added: a profound anxiety concerning the problem whether the American institutes depended on individual efforts or on collective endeavor. The inter – war period was characterized by the decade of disintegration of prosperity and then by the merciless Depression, when the 'ideology of culture' crushed. Anxiety became an intellectual position, a very alluring one, defining itself as a reaction against Victorian convictions and habits once considered 'truths'. Poets like T.S.Eliot, Ezra Pound or William Carlos Williams tested free forms of versification that shocked the critics of the genteel taste because of defying the canon respected by them. While overthrowing the aristocrat tradition, many leaflets and artistic groups appeared on both sides of the Atlantic: cubism, vorticism, constructivism, futurism - all of them fighting for supremacy. Born in Europe, these tendencies appeared in America also because America, as Henry James stated, was no longer "on the edge of civilization" but it offered a fertile place for the appearance of a fragmental and syncopated culture, with an aesthetics that replaced declamation with interrogation. Further on, besides renewal in poetry, some editorial offices in New York promoted magazines that represented the young intellectuals, the new intelligence. "*Masses"* (1911) was a "*Revolutionary Magazine without Respect for the Respectable"* and it published works of some literary socialists. "*New Republic"* offered a program for some young analysts who resorted to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis in order to attack the sterile political rationalism. "*Modernism. A Monthly Magazine of Arts and of Modern Letters"* (1919) served the cause of progress, of revolutionary changing and of socialism. All of them represented a new generation of claimants for the American renaissance or cultural rebirth that would overthrow the sterile genteel tradition. They were all modernists because of rejecting the Victorian conception about the world, named the 'ideology of culture', as it uttered the discrepancy between the finical idealism and the essential realities of life. Modernism admitted the impossibility of finding some answers

BDD-A2982 © 2004 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:56:45 UTC)

to the question 'where the authentic criteria about reality are to be found' as being a natural impediment. It gave attention to the spontaneous expression of man as opposed to the canonical formulas; it planned attacks against morality and had an atheist view upon the 'flow of the universe'.

The economic depression hastened the greatest national collapse after the Secession War. The crash was a very literary and political challenge addressed to the writers of the thirties. Their duty was well expressed in social and political terms. The reactions brought about by the economic crisis were politically determined. Many writers joined the left. 'The Red Scare' determined John Dos Passos, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, Sherwood Anderson to consider capitalism " a house which was to crumble", and they were in favor of the workers by defying the madness of opportunism, of racketeers, of absurd businessmen (Conn, 252).

The dispute about the role of literature sharpened itself because of the Depression, although its roots were older, as ascertained. The embryos of anti – intellectualism and of suspicion upon art directed the course of political and cultural transformation. If the twenties are to be seen as an époque of intellectual alienation, youthful immorality and political dryness, creating doubt about political, social and, most of all, cultural values, the thirties meant radical change. The intellectual influences, the popular radicalism, and the political leadership determined the search for a new perception of culture from non – Western positions and from those of modernist experiments: social, political, economic, and cultural experimental practice followed by expectancies – sources of cultural anxiety.

There is an essential disjunction between culture and the social structure, and this prepared in history the way for more direct social revolutions. The new revolution in art started with Modernism, or with what Modernism brought about in art and culture. This happened along with the setting up of the autonomy of culture in art which, with its insight, penetrated the sphere of existence. The modernist temperament induced in life what before was only part of fantasy and imagination. As Daniel Bell formulated in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Călinescu, 53 - 54), there seem to be no difference between art and life, or, in other words, what is to happen in art happens in life also. In *Five Faces of Modernity* (p.52), Matei Călinescu refers to the artist's need for creative imagination in order to express 'modernity' as the identity of time and self; and imagination presupposes an immersion in 'now', which is the very source of one's originality.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Henry, *The Education of Henry Adams*, in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, volume II, New York, W.W.Norton & Company, 1979;
- Călinescu, Matei, *Cinci feţe ale modernităţii*, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 1995;
- Conn, Peter, *O istorie a literaturii americane*, Bucuresti, Editura Univers, 1996;
- Perry, Lewis, *Viaţa intelectuală în America*, Cluj – Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1995;
- Roth, Leland M., *A New Architecture, Yet Old*, in Luedtke, Luther S., *Making America*, Washington, D.C., The United States Information Agency, 1992;
- Walker, Robert H., *"Reform and Social Change"*, in Luedtke, Luther S., *Making America*, Washington, D.C., The United States Information Agency, 1992;

BDD-A2982 © 2004 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:56:45 UTC)