# THEMES OF CORPORATISM IN THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL



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# THEMES OF CORPORATISM IN THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL

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**Abstract**

Specifically interested in a species of democratic erosion known as "corporatism," a creeping political specter which John Ralston Saul has described as "for some time the only real threat to democracy," this thesis is based on a reading of selected works of three post-WWII American novelists—Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and *Armies of the Night*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Underworld*—as reactions to an increasingly corporatist America. I will argue that what is at stake for these writers in their fiction is the viability of democratic ideals in a postmodern culture and society in which the very possibility of a legitimately democratic civic life, and the effectiveness of individual political agency are, at best, put in serious jeopardy by organized interests that have unprecedented control over the shape of America, and that have created a political and cultural atmosphere saturated with paranoia, secrecy, and political passivity.

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# Introduction

## Politics in the Desert: Corporatism and Post-WW II American Democracy

In his book length travelogue *America*, Jean Baudrillard writes of a land within a land, a social desert zone inside postmodern America populated by those who, despite the winning of enfranchisement and human rights, and the profound political advancements made by woman, minorities, homosexuals and even prisoners, still find themselves isolated, marginalized and politically disconnected—a condition Baudrillard cheekily refers to as "excommunication" (113). It is not the poverty or the political exclusion that compels Baudrillard to call this to our attention—America has always yielded its poor and marginalized groups—rather what strikes a notably ominous chord with Baudrillard is that this "Fourth World desert zone" appears to be "transpolitical" (112). That is, America seems to have managed to allow a significant segment of its citizenry to completely disappear from the social and political landscape without any residual political implication, without any political meaning whatsoever.

For America, the existence of this "Fourth World" inside its own walls does not imply political failure, or even greater political apathy, but rather it is, in fact, an indication of its own political success. In post-war America, politics has increasingly come to signify only that which has to do with prosperity, with the signs of prosperity, or with that which brings about prosperity—economics, technology, innovation, stability, efficiency, etc. Unfortunately for those inhabitants of the "Fourth World," equality and democracy no longer seem to rate and are thus rendered

politically insignificant.

Everyday life in America, at least since 1945, has been defined by the pursuit of prosperity. The year 1945 marked the end of WW II and the beginning of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls "the period [. . .] [of] the United States as the hegemonic power of our world system" (176). The origin of this hegemony was mostly economic. The great industrial powers of Europe had been physically devastated, having suffered large-scale losses of both human life and infrastructure. In fact, the only major industrial region whose infrastructure and equipment of production remained intact was North America. Add to this the fact that the U.S. entered the war already very industrially advanced, and emerged from it having developed new and effective management techniques and a level of efficiency which gave it an enormous competitive advantage, and it becomes obvious how the Second World War contributed mightily to economic growth and to a prosperity unprecedented in American history.

This prosperity in turn brought the United States immense influence and political power on the world scene. However, such prosperity also brought with it its own set of difficulties. As Wallerstein writes:

> Prosperity is above all an opportunity, an opportunity to enjoy, an opportunity to create, an opportunity to share. But prosperity is also a burden. And the first burden that prosperity imposes is the pressure to maintain it. (178)

Prosperity can be an opportunity for the strengthening of democracy and democratic

values, but the immense pressure to maintain it can be an equally great strain on a democracy's integrity. In the United States after WWII, the national goal, the dominant public precept, quickly became the perpetuation of prosperity. In importance the latter objective soon surpassed the quest for greater equality, the nurturing of democratic values, and even the Jeffersonian ideal of the pursuit of happiness, as the central objective of the American utopia. The citizens demanded it, the politicians made it the driving force behind much of their policy making (foreign and domestic), and the various interests of corporate capitalism seized the opportunity to increase their political power and establish their influence on all levels of public decision-making. Even as postwar prosperity began to wane and the gap between rich and poor grew larger, the primacy of prosperity, its position as the central concern of the Republic, remained largely unquestioned, especially in public discourse. In the post-WW II period, those basic values on which American democracy was founded—liberty, equality, and the opportunity for effective political participation by every citizen—play an increasingly diminished role as prosperity and production consistently inhabit the centre stage of American politics. It seems in the ever-developing wrestling match between democratic values and the economic interests of corporate capitalism over control of America's political agenda, democracy is losing significant ground.

The pursuit of prosperity, however, does not in itself provide a satisfactory explanation for the erosion of democracy in America after WW II. America's preoccupation with prosperity merely provided the opportunity for those with technocratic agendas to fundamentally alter the nature of America's political culture

and to occupy more and more of its positions of political leadership. And while this situation has certainly been detrimental to the integrity of democracy in America, it is really a symptom of a much larger challenge to democratic values. A tendency considerably more insidious and more dangerous than an addiction to prosperity has been emerging in American politics since the end of the war. Little by little the democratic power of individual citizenship has been usurped by economic and social groups whose political agendas are motivated, not by any consideration of the public interest, but rather by private interests alone. This tendency, this specter which, as John Ralston Saul puts it, "has been for some time the only real threat to democracy" (Saul 1994 79) is corporatism.

As with much distinctly political terminology, corporatism, as a term, lives a hotly disputed existence and one must clarify it before proceeding. Narrowly, corporatism can be defined as a political relationship that exists between special interest groups and the state, arrangements which seek to bypass the legitimate rights and institutions of citizen-based democracy to promote policies and agendas based on the needs and desires of a particular corporate or associational interest, rather than on any notion of the broader public good. Corporatism is a kind of interest intermediation, a manner of governing which substitutes "para-parliamentary, as well as para-bureaucratic forms of decision making" for formal democratic processes, and which does not seek to govern by democratic consensus but rather determines state policy based on "a consensus resulting from informal, highly inaccessible negotiations among poorly legitimized representatives of functional groups" (Offe 167). In short, it is any political shift away from the primacy of the participation of

the individual citizen in a democracy towards the primacy of associations or organizations and their power to influence state decisions without electoral approval, mandate or legitimacy.

However, this limited political definition does not do justice to the pervasive social and cultural implications of the corporatist negation of democracy in America. Corporatism is more than just a theory, or even practice, of state and bureaucratic organization; it is, in fact, a useful term for describing the organization of post-WW II American society itself. Corporatism has its own value system, its own language, and its own social hierarchies. It possesses an ideology and its own army; it even boasts its own history of saints and heroes. Corporatism is part political movement, part religion, part conspiracy, and part illusion. It shuns the appearance of organization, and yet affirms the absolute virtuousness of organization as one of its central principles. As a social and political movement, corporatism's methodology is sophisticated, slippery, and often bi-partisan, and yet it has become so accepted in everyday practice as to become a fundamental component of modern American mores—an odd accomplishment in America, one would think, for a movement based on the contention that democracy is inefficient, impractical, and ineffective.

Just as remarkable, as political theorist Howard J. Wiarda points out, is that despite its growing influence "to date, the United States has never had a full-blown debate about corporatism" (Wiarda 150). Corporatism, as a term, is very rarely uttered in American political discourse, partly because what could be called "American corporatism" is so different in form and style from the corporatism practiced in Europe and other countries, and partly because, as Wiarda puts it,

"America refuses to call it that and it is hard to debate something that has no name and officially doesn't exist" (149). It is easy to understand the discomfort associated with corporatism in American political culture considering the popular misconception that it is politically parallel to fascism. However, this discomfort does not alter the fact that the roots of contemporary American corporatism, or what Wiarda terms "creeping corporatism" (129), penetrate deep into the political foundation of America.

Philippe C. Schmitter, a leading scholar on the subject of corporatism, lays bare these roots, suggesting that corporatism, in one form or another, has been a presence in American politics from the very beginning of American representative democracy. He writes that "the *genus* of which neocorporatism is such a relatively recent species is associability—the propensity for groups of persons within a larger polity to join together in some more or less formalized way to pursue through collective action interests they believe they have in common" (Schmitter 1983, 904). Of course the right of association, and the right to organize, are fundamental aspects of any legitimate democracy. In fact some political theorists, such as Robert Dahl, would argue that the right to association may be considered a morally inalienable "primary political right," more rudimentary even than democracy itself. However, associability is no substitute for democracy; or, better perhaps, it is not necessarily the case that where there is associability it follows that there is democracy. The confusion between the two is the natural breeding ground of corporatist ideology.

Alexis de Tocqueville, an early enthusiastic proponent of the importance of associability to American democracy, offers the following insight: "If men are to

remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased" (110). This eloquent appeal for a balance between the practical need for citizens to organize associations in order to make the procedures of government more accessible and responsive to minority groups' collective interests, and the more idealistic but absolutely essential impulse to vigorously pursue equality as a core democratic imperative, is part of Toqueville's larger project to protect liberty from the potential threat, that he perceives, an unhealthy fixation on equality might pose. Tocqueville firmly believes that a society devoted to equality, a quality he feels is both necessary for democracy and sure to grow as a political reality in America, would eventually show a natural tendency toward conformity, and thus endanger the development of liberty and individual freedom, qualities which Tocqueville insists must be protected if tyranny and despotism are to be successfully kept at a distance. Robert Dahl summarizes Toqueville's dilemma along these lines:

> In democratic countries the equality of condition that is necessary to democracy will, over the long run, tend to create a highly atomized society of isolated individuals and families, and to generate support among a substantial majority of people for a regime that undertakes to satisfy widespread popular desires for security, income, shelter, comfort, and the like, while at the same time drastically curtailing political rights and destroying the democratic process. (35-36)

What Tocqueville does not seem to anticipate is that democracy in America is just as susceptible to a "tyranny of the minority" as it is to a "tyranny of the majority;" that is, the democratic process can suffer as much damage through liberty becoming too dominant a preoccupation, to the exclusion of equality, as by the opposite scenario he so thoroughly explored.

The art of association in America, especially since 1945, has developed at a pace much greater than the social realization of equality. The reason for this uneven development is largely economic. Robert Dahl explains that, while what mainly concerned Toqueville was the threat that equality posed for political liberty, the focus of many of those who influenced the framing of the American Constitution was the protection of economic liberty, that is the guarding against possibility that "democracy, political equality, majority rule, and even political liberty itself would endanger the rights of property owners to preserve their property and use it as they chose" (2). Of course "the framers" were considering this potential conflict between equality and economic liberty in relation to a country that was still mostly agrarian, and not the advanced state of industrial capitalism of the second half of the twentieth century. Dahl writes:

> What no one could fully foresee [. . .] was the way in which the agrarian society would be revolutionized by the development of the modern corporation as the main employer of most Americans. The older version of a citizen body of free farmers among whom an equality of resources seemed altogether possible, perhaps even inevitable, no longer fitted that reality of the

> new economic order in which economic enterprises automatically generated inequalities among citizens; in wealth, income, social standing, education, knowledge, occupational prestige and authority, and many other resources. Had Tocqueville and his predecessors fully anticipated the shape of the economic order to come, they probably would have viewed the problem of equality and liberty in a different light. For if, in the older view, an equality among citizens might endanger liberty, in the new reality the liberty of corporate enterprises helped to create a body of citizens highly unequal in the resources they could bring to political life. (3)

As "corporate capitalism" increasingly became the dominant economic order of the United States, American democratic values underwent a "pragmatic" transformation. Equality and liberty became identified with prosperity and property rights; the American political consciousness began to synthesize old democratic ideas with justifications of the new economic order. The Toquevillian emphasis on the protection of political liberty from a system that is capable of an unbalanced pursuit of equality has, in its modern form, developed into a political system in which economic liberty seems to be privileged over all other liberties, while inequality is generally accepted as a necessary sacrifice to protect the sanctity of property rights.

The ascension of corporate capitalism as a political force, however, indicates more than just a shift in the political values of America; it is suggestive of a larger phenomenon that fundamentally transformed the way in which both American society and its democratic institutions were organized. For Max Weber "the spirit of

capitalism is best understood as part of the development of rationalism as a whole" (Weber 76). That is, industrial capitalism was just one form of the larger "rationalization" of society. As Peter Dews explains, in Weber's formulation of his theory of "rationalization,"

> The structures of consciousness which made possible modern bureaucratic forms of administration and the systemic profit-seeking of the capitalist enterprise are progressively set loose from the "Protestant ethic" which had nurtured them and given them their transcendent meaning. Regularity, asceticism, and relentlessly self-interested calculation are transformed into an "iron cage," a system of behavior to which individuals are now obliged to adapt in order to survive. (Dews 150)

For Weber part of that forced adaptation process involved a reformulation of the traditional liberal problem of balancing equality and liberty—democracy, like everything else in a rationalized society, must find its specific functional place if it hopes to survive.

Democracy in a modern rationalized society, Weber contended, was best considered as a mechanism for ensuring effective leadership. In a society devoted to the expansion of rational administration, bureaucracy, and organizational structures as a means of managing the increasingly complex problems raised by modern economics and mass politics, the individual citizen, Weber reasoned, can only hope to play a very limited role. The central issue for this "liberal in despair" was no

longer how to effect a civilized balance between equality and liberty, but rather how best to ensure "an effective balance between political authority, skilled leadership, efficient administration and a degree of political accountability" (Held 159). Power, in this system, is primarily secured in the hands of the elite who can best provide expert leadership of those large political, economic, and social organizations that compete for influence over public policy. Democracy, for Weber, was merely a practical instrument for establishing the most competent leaders, for legitimizing their power, and perhaps for effectively dispensing with those leaders who prove incompetent. It is this notion of politics, as a kind pragmatic machine that functions in the service of the greater imperative of rationalized administration and efficient organization, that is predominant in corporatist ideology.

Arguably the most influential school of political thought of the post WW II period in America, pluralism was developed as a response to this model of democracy offered by theorists like Weber and Joseph Schumpeter, who argued that democracy in America had developed into a political system in which power and influence were concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of competing political elites. Pluralists argued that this characterization of American democracy was incomplete, that Schumpeter, Weber, and the other theorists of "competitive elitism" failed to take into account the counterbalancing effect that the presence of interest groups has on the distribution of power in a functioning democracy. The principal idea of pluralism is that democratic politics, when approached empirically, should be understood as a competition, between a large number of interest groups, for limited political resources—namely power and influence over public policy-making. This

component of competition in modern democracy prevents an unhealthy concentration of power, and ensures that the "political marketplace" is never totally dominated by a single elite. For pluralists, "the existence of diverse competitive interests is the basis of democratic equilibrium and of the favorable development of public policy" (Held 187-188).

In a pluralist model of democracy, the conception of democratic government as an "organized mechanism that makes possible that level of shared disinterest known as the public good" (Saul 1995 72) offers an outdated and functionally unfeasible understanding of democracy considering the complicated nature of modern America's social and economic organization. Pluralism challenges the very notion of a disinterested public good, emphasizing instead a model of democracy based on interest mediation and the decentering effect that the competition between factions has on the distribution of power in a democracy. To some pluralists this emphasis on the functional importance of interest politics, and the renunciation of public interest as idealistic and possibly threatening to individual liberty, is a natural extension of the American democratic tradition centered on the rights of individuals to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Chantal Mouffe characterizes pluralism as:

> The recognition of individual freedom, that freedom which John Stuart Mill defends in his essay On Liberty as the only freedom worthy of the name, and which he defines as the possibility for every individual to pursue happiness as he sees fit, to set his own goals and attempt to achieve them in his own way. Pluralism is therefore linked to the abandonment of a substantive and unique

vision of the common good. (20)

Mouffe is careful to point out that what pluralism is dispensing with is the notion that there is, in a democracy, a *substantive* and *unique*, that is singular, vision of the common good, not the notion that individual citizens within a democracy should consider the common good, as they perceive it, when determining what is in their best interests. Of course this is only partly the case, since it could be argued that in a liberal pluralist democracy the individual right to pursue self-interest is surely enshrined as a substantive good, a good that must be protected for the sake of all citizens. In reference to modern American liberal pluralism the same could be said about property rights—the absolute protection of which greatly limits the ability, though theoretically not the right, of every individual to acquire the primary goods necessary to pursue happiness as he/she might wish. Liberal pluralism does indeed have a notion of the common good—individual self-interest—and it is a good to which all other goods, in particular equality, are subordinated.

Tocqueville himself recognized self-interest as an inherent and necessary element of democracy, but was also adamant that self-interest must be reconciled with a strong sense of public virtue if American democracy could ever hope to keep liberty and equality in a civilized balance. Tocqueville drew his concern for public virtue, but not his understanding of it, from the French social philosopher Montesquieu. Montesquieu's view of public virtue, as the sacrificing of the self for the sake of the public good, was greatly influenced by the classical republics of ancient Greece, but as Tocqueville rightly understood, it was an ideal that was pretty

much irrelevant to a thriving nineteenth century capitalist nation state such as America. Certainly public virtue was still a lofty political ethic, but the growing centrality of economic concerns and the pressing imperative to preserve liberty in the face of the growing revolution of equality, required that public virtue be approached pragmatically.

As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. points out, the distinction between the classical republican ideal of public virtue, and the kind of civic-mindedness which places necessary limits on what could otherwise develop into an excess of self-interest, as commerce and the "acquisitive drive" increase their hold on the minds of American citizens, is a central component of Tocqueville's pragmatic understanding of the proper role that interest should play in the functioning of a democracy. Schlesinger writes:

> The great distinction, in short, between the classical republics and modern democracy lay in the insertion of the commercial motive. The city-state was founded on virtue, the nation-state on interest. The problem was to make private interest the moral equivalent of public virtue. This could be achieved through the disciplinary influence exerted by society on its members—an influence embodied in the mores and in law and institutions. *Self-interest rightly understood*: this Tocqueville saw as the key to the balance between virtue and interest in commercial democracies. (495)

The result for a democracy, as Tocqueville warned, of a wrong understanding of self-

interest, is a rampant and excessive individualism—by which he meant a kind of withdrawal from civic life, a general civic apathy which isolates people from their fellow citizens.

Despite his recognition of the danger posed to democracy that the commercial compulsion, that is the propensity to think exclusively of one's own interests and lose all consideration for the public good, Toqueville, as Schlesinger tells us, was fairly optimistic about "the American capacity to transmute private interest into a facsimile of public virtue" (495). Toqueville could not have anticipated that the art of association or, as Schmitter terms it in its modern guise, "the science of organization," would progress at a much greater rate than the "revolution of equality"; nor could he have foreseen the relationship which would develop between capitalism, rationalization, and moral virtue in the American consciousness. Had he done so, it is certain he would have recognized that something stronger than a facsimile of public virtue was necessary to combat the diminishment of public life brought on by the development of specialized and professional interest associations. Tocqueville's optimism concerning America's ability to moralize private interest was well-founded—it is something America achieved with unprecedented brilliance. However, his contention that a moral and institutional simulation of public virtue based on self-interest would help to preserve the balance of equality and liberty was less prophetic.

Following in the great tradition of French intellectuals commenting on the state of American democracy, Jean Baudrillard contends that modern American politics is best characterized, not by its efforts to achieve an acceptable balance

between equality and liberty, but rather by its absolute belief in the moral justness and pragmatic superiority of the American "way of life"—a way of life which is based largely on the concrete and the material. It is one of Baudrillard's central observations that "in America only what is produced or manifested has meaning" (84). Ideas are not held to be inherently valuable; on the contrary, what defines America for Baudrillard is its absolute faith in its ability to transform "a way of thinking into a way of life" (84-85). In fact it could be argued that in modern American politics, legitimacy and materialism, like democracy and capitalism, have come to mean one and the same thing. This development is the result, as Baudrillard is fond of pointing out, of the profoundly moral basis of American society—it is an understanding of America that he acknowledges can be traced back to Toqueville: Tocqueville's central idea is that the spirit of America is to be found in its mode of life, in the revolution of mores, the moral revolution. This creates neither a new legality nor a new State, but it does create a practical legitimacy grounded in the way of life. Salvation no longer has to do with the divine or the State, but with the ideal form of practical organization (91). Baudrillard, though he never uses the term, has managed to zero in on two integral aspects of modern corporatism as it has developed in America—the idealization of practical organization and the practicalization of political legitimacy.

Herbert Marcuse argues that this idealization of practical organization, combined with an obsession with production, has led inexorably, especially in America, to a kind of malaise of political "false consciousness," a condition in which the objective of all political decision-making seems to be an increase in production,

and political debate is limited to polemics concerning the efficiency and efficacy of competing methods to achieve this uncontested end. Marcuse attributes this state of affairs largely to the growing pervasiveness and power of "instrumental reason." Instrumental reason, for Marcuse, is the result of an illegitimate alliance of philosophical or theoretical reason and ideology—in this case the single-minded pursuit of profit and economic production. This has resulted in a "totally mobilized state," that is, as state fully integrated into the ideology of production at the expense of all other concerns, and consequently a "depoliticized" society.

Marcuse's theory of "depoliticization"—that is "the eradication of political and moral questions from public life by an obsession with technique, productivity and efficiency" (Held 227)—is an extension of his examination of America's sanctification of "technical progress" and its obsession with rational organization. Marcuse writes:

> Political power asserts itself through its power over the machine progress and over the technical organization of the apparatus. The government of advanced and advancing industrial societies can maintain and secure itself only when it succeeds in mobilizing, organizing, and exploiting the technical, scientific, and mechanical productivity available to industrial civilization. And this productivity mobilizes society as a whole, above and beyond any particular individual or group interests. (3)

Marcuse moves deftly between production and totalitarianism, weaving a theory of a

state apparatus, machine-like in its function and organization, and monolithic in its drive towards productivity and in its ideology of "technological rationality." In the advanced industrial civilization, Marcuse argues, "domination is transfigured into administration" (32).

The problem with Marcuse's characterization, as David Held rightly points out, is that "while the state had become immensely complex, it was in general much less monolithic and much less capable of imposing clear direction than Marcuse had suggested" (Held 228). It turns out, and this is where Baudrillard picks up the torch from Marcuse, that in advanced capitalist democracies, especially the United States, the most immediate threat to democratic values lies not in domination or totalitarianism being transformed into administration, but rather in the diminution of the American democratic spirit that is the result of an absolute political legitimization of self-interest combined with a growing social, cultural, and political obsession with rational organization—the intertwining of the two central rhizomes of contemporary American corporatism. Furthermore, it is not that political/ideological and moral questions are eradicated from public life, but rather that such questions concerning the public good become absorbed into the certainty of material reality; or, more to the point, they become mere simulations, disappearing along with the inhabitants of the Fourth World into the cinematic image of democracy and prosperity that is the American utopia. This is, of course, not to say that Marcuse's condemnation of America's obsession with techniques, productivity, and efficiency is not still of the utmost importance and relevance. The point is that this obsession has brought about a political condition more complicated, more subtle, and certainly more slippery than

Marcuse imagined.

It is instructive to our purpose, however, to pay attention to Marcuse's views concerning the role of pluralism inside his "totally mobilized" and "depoliticized" state. What Marcuse perceived quite insightfully was that pluralism, while often offered as a countervalence to the centralization of power by the state, did very little to preserve the democratic integrity of the individual against the institutionalization of the capitalist drive for production. In *One-Dimensional* Man Marcuse writes:

> At the most advanced stage of capitalism, this society is a system of subdued pluralism, in which the competing institutions concur in solidifying the power of the whole over the individual [. . .] Advanced industrial society is indeed a system of countervailing powers. But these forces cancel each other out in a higher unification—in the common interest to defend and extend the established position, to combat the historical alternatives, to contain qualitative change. The countervailing powers do not include those which counter the whole. (50-51)

In short, for Marcuse, in the "totally mobilized" state, pluralism itself becomes institutionalized and thus is placed in the service of capitalist production. Indeed, again this may appear too simple an understanding of pluralism's relationship to the apparatus of the state to be wholly persuasive; however, the notion that the competition between interest associations, that is so central to pluralism's theory of countervalence of power, can be co-opted by a particular over-reaching ideology is

especially important to an understanding of the increasing influence of corporatism in American after 1945.

As liberalism's response to Weber's and Schumpeter's characterization of modern democracy as ultimately controlled by rational bureaucracy and ruled by competing elites, pluralism is indicative of liberalism's "continuing inability to deal with the contradictions between democracy and rational administration" (Saul 234). The traditional liberal triad of moral standards (i.e., the right over the good), democracy, and reason, disintegrates into self-contradiction in the face of the corporatist transformation of "'the art of association' into 'a science of organization'" (Schmitter 908). Liberal pluralism is based on the fundamental idea that there exists a natural alliance between democratic methods and rational organization, that the large scale competition between interest groups for political influence is a central expression of democracy. However, as the organization of society becomes ever more rationalized, that is, dominated by the values of rational administration and systems, pluralism functions more as a means for solidifying the overall power of organizations over individuals than as an effective means towards a democratic disaggregation and distribution of power. The result is a brand of politics where the role of the individual citizen is increasingly diminished as power shifts into the hands of interest organizations, and of course those who manage, create, and control such organizations. It could be said that corporatism is a kind of hijacking of pluralism, an ideology that has managed to both appropriate and corrupt the politics of American liberalism resulting in a democratic system which increasingly functions in the service of administration, organization, and group interests, not strictly as means, but

as ends in themselves.

Since the end of WW II major American novelists—in particular, but not exclusively, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo—have, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not, displayed in their work an awareness of, and concern with, the threat that corporatism and its values pose to the quality of contemporary American democracy, and have often, in their novels, borne witness to the changes corporatism has already produced in all aspects of American life. While Mailer, Pynchon, and DeLillo often attend to kindred themes in their work, themes that are intimately linked to the increasingly influential corporatist presence in America, such as technology, bureaucracy, consumerism, and America's growing obsession with prosperity, efficiency, organization and expertise, each author's individual vision and unique perspective on postwar America offers a rich opportunity to focus on particular facets of the ideology and values of contemporary American corporatism, as well as to get a sense of its historical development as part of America's evolving post WW II political culture. One must keep in mind the importance of recognizing the complexity and variation of the American postwar era: each of the three novelists represents a particular sub-period of American postwar history: Mailer the WW II and immediate postwar period, Pynchon the "Cold War" period, and DeLillo the "post-Cold War" period.

We encounter a vigorous and determined literary voice beginning a long and prolific career of political engagement in Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*: it compels its reader to take account of a war against totalitarianism fought and won, while simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, focusing attention on an

America engaged in a very different, though not unrelated, kind of struggle, a struggle fraught with ideological uncertainty, existential stagnation, and the many threats and challenges that corporatism poses for the American democratic spirit. In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer takes us to the front lines of that struggle, introducing us to the combatants and reminding us that what is at stake in the postwar political wrestling match may very well be the democratic soul of America.

Thomas Pynchon, a novelist of a different generation than Norman Mailer, is a writer whose political perspective was primarily shaped by the paranoid and ideologically charged atmosphere of the Cold War, rather than the totalitarian horror of WW II which so obviously influenced and politically motivated Mailer. We encounter in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland* a sensitive and suspicious political voice whose tone is best described not as despairing or disenchanted, but rather as discontented. Pynchon is a writer with a keen and politically astute historical sense, who recognizes that much of the responsibility for the ascent of corporatism and the decline of democracy in contemporary America can be attributed to the winding down of the liberal spirit in the postwar period, and the liberal left's complicity in, and consistent failure to resist, the corporatist challenge to American liberal democracy.

It is the insistent critique of the status of the individual in postmodern America which garners our attention in two of Don DeLillo's novels, *White Noise* and *Underworld*. By broadly examining the interplay in DeLillo's work among themes such as death, technology, community and consumerism, we confront a writer who is profoundly suspicious of the way that America's obsession with

administration and systems has degraded the role of the individual in determining the shape and character of life in America, particularly in the "post-cold war" period. The ramifications of a degraded role for the individual on the nature of democratic citizenship and participation are numerous and serious, and it is my intention to show that there is an inescapable, and often seemingly intuitive, sensitivity to the growing influence of corporatism reflected in the assemblage of themes that DeLillo attends to in his work.

On a final point of clarification, it is not my intention, in this thesis, to label these writers as anti-corporatist, though I do not find such a label wholly indefensible. Rather I simply want to demonstrate that corporatism, as a term which "better than any other [. . .] describes the organization of modern society" (Saul 1994 74), is a useful political reference when approaching the constellation of political, social, and cultural themes that appear in the literature I will be discussing.

## Chapter 1

# "The shits are killing America": The Ascension of the Technocrat and the Decline of Existential Democracy in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Armies of the Night*

> "As the years go by and I become a little more possible for Ph.D. mills, graduate students will begin to write about the slapping of my creative rage, of Mailer's vision of his rage as his shield, when what I was trying to say was simply, 'The shits are killing us.'"
>
> --Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*

Let me begin with a general observation: taken as a political statement, Norman Mailer's work is uneven, imprecise, temperamental, self-indulgent, and, at times, guilty of such grievous overstatement and generalization as to produce an overall effect of serious awkwardness, or naiveté, often prevalent in the ramblings of paranoids and egotists. It is also brilliant, penetrating, fearless, and full of the kind of vigorous political engagement which is so distasteful to contemporary corporatist culture. For our purposes, Mailer's central contribution is as a diagnostician, as a writer with a sensitive nose for the corporatist sickness in America, and a style combative enough to emphasize the danger he believes it poses to the greater health of the nation.

The political and social direction of America after WW II is certainly one of the central concerns of Mailer's work. Mailer seeks to understand his country existentially, which for him usually means in terms of power and self-creation. "Existential" is a term that Mailer employs often and widely in his essays and in interviews. Impossible to define exactly, the term implies, for Mailer, more of an attitude than a philosophy. This attitude is best described as the aura which surrounds a personality with the courage to confront the power of the will, which means, for Mailer, to recognize the freedom inherent in existence and exercise it through action, risk, and constant self-creation. That a nation can possess such an attitude and express a personality capable of exercising existential freedom in this manner is a belief that radiates in all of Mailer's musings on American politics. For Mailer, America is not based on anything absolute or unchangeable, but rather is in a constant state of becoming; liberty and democracy combine to form a kind of existential politics which, as far as Mailer is concerned, constitutes the closest thing to an essence that America possesses.

This existential view of America compels Mailer to seek out the alienating elements in its social and political life. What, in America, destroys both the individual imagination and the sense of collective free will that are so central to its continued self-creation? Mailer's answer in work after work is the totalitarianism of technology and the values of the corporation. As he demonstrates early on in his career, in *The Naked and the Dead*, the old political battle between conservatism and liberalism, between the right and the left, for the soul of America is dead. In the wake of this, for Mailer, America has become "corporation-land," and much of what

could be called political in his work is devoted to examining the violence that this has done to the democratic America consciousness.

In his essay on totalitarianism found in *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer argues that "totalitarianism is better understood if it is regarded as a plague rather than examined as a style of ideology" (175). The persuasion of totalitarianism that most concerns Mailer is specifically American; it is not the totalitarianism which comes attached to Fascism or Bolshevism with their penchant for absolute dictatorship and authoritarian oppression—modern American totalitarianism is not an employer of the hob-nailed boot or the internment camp. For Mailer the term totalitarian is most usefully affixed to a psychology rather than an ideology, or rather to a particular disease of the American mind, a contamination of the American collective consciousness by the growing ubiquity of the technological and of corporate techniques.

In emphasizing totalitarianism's pathological rather than ideological nature, Mailer advances what is perhaps his most salient point on the matter—that, as it has manifested itself in America after WW II, totalitarianism has developed in a largely transpolitical manner. He writes:

> Totalitarianism has slipped into America with no specific political face. There are liberals who are totalitarian, and conservatives, radicals, rightists, fanatics, hordes of the well-adjusted. Totalitarianism has come to America with no concentration camps and no need for them, no political parties and no desire for new parties, no, totalitarianism has slipped into the body cells and

> psyche of each of us. (184)

In America, for Mailer, totalitarianism transcends politics in as much as it functions as a kind of anti-politics, a "shapeless force" and "obdurate emptiness" at the heart of American political culture whose pervasiveness spells, not so much the end of politics in America, as its stagnation, its descent into technological and corporate stasis. Though Mailer consistently employs the term "totalitarian" to describe this condition of American politics—a term perhaps chosen as much for its impact as its justness—as he develops and clarifies his political perspective on post-WW II America, the term "corporatist" seems to acquire an increasing appropriateness. In fact in an interview with Christopher Hitchens, published in the *New Left Review* in 1997, Mailer embraces the term, suggesting that corporatism's ideological presence in America is a matter central to his self-described political position as a "left conservative." Asked to elaborate on just what he means by "left conservative," Mailer answers:

> You can define it by saying what you're against. You know, on the one hand, I'd say that I'm against corporations. I think corporations have done, as much damage to the world, or certainly will by the time they are finished, as the communists ever did to the intelligence of Russians. That, in fact, corporatism and Stalinism have many more similarities than differences. (Hitchens 117)

Mailer's point, that corporatism in America is a kind of kindred spirit to totalitarianism, is one that he first started making in print with the publication of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, in 1948.

In *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer's novel about WW II, the diminishment and atrophy of politics in modern America are reflected in the impotence of the ideological conflict between the "fascist" General Cummings and the "liberal" Lt. Hearn. Jean Radford argues that one of the chief ironies underlying this conflict is that Cummings and Hearn "are both officers involved in fighting a war against fascism with a military instrument which is itself fascistic in organization, structure, and ideology" (44). It seems that on this one point—that the army is fascistic—Cummings and Hearn agree, though certainly with greatly differing degrees of approval. Radford explains that Mailer's portrayal of the army here is part of a larger challenge in the novel to "expedient fascism," that is, to the notion that the totalitarian exercise of power within certain organizations, such as the military or large corporations, can be justified on the grounds that it maximizes efficiency and productivity. Radford especially notes Mailer's distaste for the political hypocrisy which this matter seems to expose in the American war effort, and which seems characteristic both of military men such as Cummings and progressive thinkers such as Hearn.

On a certain level this may be the case. Mailer is assuredly not particularly enamoured of the strict hierarchical structure and undemocratic nature of the military. Also, undoubtedly, scenes such as the one in which Lt. Hearn protests the privilege accorded the officers of receiving an unfair and unequal portion of meat while the

enlisted men are left without, are meant to correspond ironically with the tales of racism, poverty, and social inequality in American civilian life, which Mailer unfolds by way of his "Time Machine" literary device. However, one must not lose sight of the fact that the centre of this novel is historical, or perhaps more specifically, a well-defined historical event—WW II—and its significance as a point of rupture in the political, social, and cultural life of America. What Mailer provides in *The Naked and the Dead* is not so much a depiction of WW II as a perspective, a point of view that, while certainly critical of the army and its officers, understands the hypocrisy and fascist mentality of American institutions like the military as antiquated, as the last vestiges of an ideology that, by the time of the war in the Pacific, was anachronistic, and whose transformation into more sophisticated and subtle forms of totalitarianism was ultimately greatly facilitated by the war.

For General Cummings the army constitutes a testing ground for his fascist social theories. When Cummings asserts that one could "consider the army . . . as a preview of the future" (Mailer 283), the irony lies not in the potential for the victor to assume the fascist nature of the defeated, but rather in Cummings' failure to perceive that changes already afoot in both American society and the army itself, as the war draws to a close, have already rendered his fascist ideals anachronistic and socially irrelevant.

Cummings' fascism is of the heroic variety, full of glorifications of the will and grandiose theories of power. Ideologically it is rooted in a particular understanding of history and the purposes of conflict. In one distinctly metaphysical passage, Cummings associates his firm belief in the inevitability of fascism with a

larger historical process:

> I like to call it a process of historical energy. There are countries which have latent powers, latent resources, they are full of potential energy, so to speak. And there are great concepts which can unlock that, express it. As kinetic energy a country is organization, co-ordinated effort, your [Hearn's] epithet, fascism ... Historically the purpose of this war is to translate America's potential into kinetic energy. (280)

All of the metaphysical trappings aside, the essence of what the General says here has some validity in respect to America. Indeed organization, in its dual forms of associability and bureaucracy, is a powerful element, both latent and present, in American democracy. Just as valid is Cummings' somewhat overstated thesis that WW II would bring organization and the structural consolidation of power to the forefront of the postwar American political and social scene. Where General Cummings' historical perspective fails, however, is in his idealistic claim that it is "great concepts" which hold the capacity to release the "potential energy" of large scale political and social organization; indeed, as the General himself will later learn, the organizational impulse in America is based on phenomena much more mundane and materialistic than he predicted.

The grand concept which Cummings believes will allow for the release of America from what he calls "the backwaters of history" is the emergence of a new kind of political leader in America. According to Cummings' teleology, the postwar

period in America will be defined by a fortuitous convergence of America's final realization of its historical destiny, and the development confluence that will encourage those in leadership positions in America to express power without feelings of guilt or anxiety. As he explains to Hearn:

> For the past century the entire historical process has been working toward greater and greater consolidation of power. Physical power for this century, an extension of our universe, and a political power, a political organization to make it possible. Your men of power in America, I can tell you, are becoming conscious of their real aims for the first time in our history. (281)

Cummings views the war as a significant transitional moment for America, the endgame of America's emergence from the dark ages of a country unsure of its destiny to a new renaissance of organization and power which will produce a country unashamed and unafraid to openly express and impose its will. History, according to Cummings, is firmly in the camp of fascism.

By including Cummings' fascist theories as a central component of the novel, Mailer achieves something subtler than just a warning about a nascent American fascism, or a philosophical point about the underlying fascist tendencies of large organizations. There is an air of elegy surrounding Mailer's depiction of Cummings and his metaphysics. Certainly he is every bit the "monster" that Hearn describes him as, but he is also engaging, charismatic, and willing to appeal to the imagination. There is, as Mailer might put it, something of the existentialist in Cummings—a

distrust of the purely rational and a certain flare for the dramatic and the tragic. At the heart of Cummings' personality, though not his ideology, is an enemy that Mailer can respect, a worthy adversary for those who believe that to struggle with the devil is an existential act. For Mailer he has the kind of politics which has the potential to reveal "being," to force a man to explore his soul, and a country to discover its meaning. In many respects *The Naked and the Dead* is, at least in part, a lament for a vital style of politics that is now past, and a nostalgic acknowledgement, by a determined leftist, of a worthy, but now passé, enemy.

Cummings is a wake-up call to the American left. In one discussion with Cummings, Hearn remarks that "We're moving toward greater organization, and I don't see how the left can win that battle in America" (280). Hearn, the single significant liberal presence in the novel, is resigned to the fact that post-WW II American politics will be dominated, not by ideological struggles between left and right, but by the struggle for control of growing and increasingly powerful bureaucratic systems and extra-governmental associations. The significance of Cummings in this corporatist vision of the future is finally his insignificance. Fascism, with all of its dramatic and metaphysical violence, will, in the new rationalized America, be relegated to the ideological graveyard of political science textbooks. General Cummings, and those like him, will no longer constitute the face of the authoritarian threat to American democracy—the enemy would be far less obvious than Cummings' "League of Omnipotent Men" (342).

Equally as impotent in the face of the creeping spectre of the "new" totalitarian organization of America as Cummings' naked fascism is Hearn's dead

liberalism. Hearn's weak and half-hearted effort to respond to Cummings' fascist vision of a society based on "subservience to the machine" with his talk of "the continual occurrence and re-forming of certain ethical ideas" (154) and the "different tensions" experienced by ethnic minorities is indicative of Mailer's pessimism concerning liberalism's potential to provide meaningful resistance in America. Many critics have addressed the issue of Hearn's liberalism in the novel. Some, such as Robert Solotroff and Jennifer Bailey, read Hearn as ultimately a defeated liberal whose eventual death confirms that Mailer regards liberal ideology as ineffective and incapable of responding to a serious totalitarian threat. Others, perhaps most vigorously Nigel Leigh, interpret Hearn as a kind of martyred liberal, a figure of repression who struggles against his repressor, but is ultimately sacrificed in recognition of "the immediacy and potency of the potential domestic right-wing threat as perceived by Mailer" (Leigh 20). Lost in all of this, it would seem, is any serious consideration of the apparent superficial nature of Hearn's liberalism.

Hearn begins to explore leftist political possibilities in college, briefly dallying with revolutionary Marxism—"there is even a political honeymoon for a month. He [Hearn] reads some Marx and Lenin, joins the John Reed Society" (Mailer 298). However, he soon abandons politics in favour of football and self-involved boredom. In one of their political discussions he tells Cummings that "there're times when I think it's Ghandi who's right" (280), but later, forced to confront the reality of life as part of Sergeant Croft's platoon, he entertains the possible advantages of violent resistance:

> If the world turned Fascist, if Cummings had his century, there was a little thing he could do. There was always terrorism. But a neat terrorism with nothing sloppy about it, no machine guns, no grenades, no bombs, nothing messy, no indiscriminate killing. Merely the knife and the garotte, a few trained men and a list of fifty bastards to be knocked off, and then another fifty. (508)

Almost immediately this train of thought is dismissed as "horseshit." Ultimately the sum total of Hearn's liberalism is a vague belief in the necessity of struggle—"you had to keep resisting"—and in the importance of egalitarian gestures—"you had to do things like giving up a commission"—as well as a tentative optimism concerning the essential motives of leftist leaders and groups—"When things got really bad, maybe the political differences on the Left would be shelved" (508).

Hearn indulges his liberal inclinations, less out of strongly held political beliefs or moral ideals, than as a result of his inability to adequately resolve his bourgeois guilt with his feelings of intellectual superiority and his acceptance of privilege. Hearn's leftism poses as concern for his fellow man, but even Hearn himself is acutely aware of the significant limitations of his sense of compassion—"Several people had at one time or another made it a point to tell Hearn that he liked men only in the abstract and never in the particular, a cliché of course, an oversimplification, but not without casual truth" (63). Hearn's liberalism is indeed weak and ineffectual, suffering as it does from being both abstract and self-serving in nature. For Hearn, liberalism is more a convenient tool than a set of political

beliefs—a tool for rebellion against his father, a tool for separating himself from other less enlightened officers in the army, a tool for easing his guilt over his position and privilege, and a tool which allows him to obey authority while keeping his sense of intellectual and more superiority intact. Hearn's impotent liberalism in *The Naked and the Dead* is not the result of Mailer's having given up on the ideals of the political Left, nor is it the product of Mailer's interest in allegorizing its potential defeat; rather Hearn's liberalism suffers from the same sickness as Cummings' fascism—the same sickness, I would argue, that Mailer detects in modern American politics as a whole—a lack of existential authenticity.

It is for these reasons that I cannot wholly agree with Paul Levine when, in a discussion of Mailer's politics, or what Levine calls Mailer's "civil war," he argues that "the opposition between a dying liberalism and a nascent fascism becomes the central dialectic in Mailer's work" (Levine 162). Certainly liberalism's unhealthy state and America's flirtations with fascism are important concerns of Mailer's, but they represent, not so much a central dialectic in his work, as signs of political decay, symptoms of a larger condition that Mailer, in a speech given during a debate with William Buckley, would later characterize as "a disease which afflicts almost all of us . . . so prevalent, insidious and indefinable that I choose to call it a plague" (Mailer 1964 165). This plague is perhaps best described as a mass betrayal of "being," a pervasive modality of existentially inauthentic consciousness which has infected America's political culture with apathy, alienation, and a desperate desire for nothing more than stability and security.

For Mailer, American politics, afflicted as it is with this plague, has become

the enemy of history—anti-dialectical, stagnant with timidity, and a means towards the obliteration of distinction. A healthy and vibrant politics provides an arena for meaningful struggle, a sphere in which the particular dialectic that Mailer contends constitutes the most profoundly influential struggle of Western history—"the great and mortal debate between rebel and conservative" (165)—can continue to create, challenge, and debate America's understanding of itself and its future. Totalitarianism, Mailer's term for the politics of this plague, is, in effect, a denial of the historic validity and power of this dialectic; it attempts, in the name of stability and security, to conflate the rebel and the conservative, the two modes of existential democratic citizenship, into a single mode, a single ideology of organization and efficient administration.

In *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer demonstrates, through the ideological impotence of the Cummings-Hearn conflict, his belief that the struggle between the liberal and the fascist, the modern manifestation of the rebel versus conservative dialectic, will become increasingly irrelevant to postwar American politics. In its place a consolidation of power has developed, not as Cummings would have it, in the hands of the new proponents of his fascist power morality, or as Hearn might wish, in the hands of the historically repressed and their representatives on the Left, but rather power seems to Mailer to be increasingly consolidated in the hands of what he has called "the statistical congelations of the Centre" (173)—referring of course to the rational structures and administrative organizations which increasingly inhabit the centre of American existence. If there is a central dialectic in Mailer's politics, it is not the struggle between a dying liberalism and a nascent fascism, but rather the

struggle between the existential individual and the plague-ridden organization. More important, in reference to *The Naked and the Dead*, is Mailer's recognition that the real threat to democracy and existential self-determination in postwar America will not come from fascism, but from America's increasing corporatization, and from the power wielded by that particular ideology's devoted disciple—the technocrat. In the novel Major Dalleson most definitively exemplifies this role.

Major Dalleson, the red-faced, thin-lipped mediocre bureaucrat, whose "only desire was to be promoted to captain, permanent grade" (Mailer 571), manages, in the closing pages of the novel, to steal General Cummings' glorious climax. Through a combination of luck and benign opportunism, Dalleson finds himself in command of the successful invasion of Botoi Bay, which "in the official history of the campaign sent to Army... was given as the main reason for breaking through the Toyaku Line" (571) and consequently the final occupation by the American army of the island of Anopepei. This final irony is employed by Mailer to blatantly imply that, as Cummings is finally compelled to accept, "it would be the hacks who would occupy history's seat after the war" (623). The future, Mailer seems to be suggesting, belongs to those like Dalleson, who appear to derive immense pleasure and satisfaction from their own instrumentality, who can accept as their greatest purpose their assigned role as part of a larger system which they neither control nor completely understand. The final image of the novel is of Dalleson sitting in his newly finished shack, going about his administrative duties and paper work, and contemplating new techniques for his map-reading course with what Mailer describes as "a simple childish joy" (626)—a parting glimpse perhaps of the new American

guardian of power, the technocratic priest of the postwar corporatist configuration of America going about his work. This is a more archetypal image than it might first appear, especially when one considers John Ralston Saul's assertion that "the first technocrat was not produced by ENA of Sciences Po or Harvard. He marched out of the military school and his profession was that of staff officer" (Saul 1992 179).

In a collection of writings and interviews called *Cannibals and Christians* Mailer writes:

> There is one expanding horror in American life. It is that our long odyssey toward liberty, democracy and freedom-for-all may be achieved in such a way that utopia remains forever closed, and we live in freedom and hell, debased of style, not individual from one another, void of courage, our fear rationalized away. (Mailer 1966 51)

In short, Mailer's nightmare is an America populated not by individual citizens, but by technocrats. Democracy, for Mailer, draws its energy and its existential validity from its revolutionary potential, its ability to pose a constant and present threat to those individuals and organizations who wield privilege and power in American life. At the heart of democracy is conflict, the struggle between opposing ideologies and ideas, willing to risk both the responsibilities of victory and the possibility of defeat, to play a role in defining what Mailer often refers to as "the American reality." Democracy is existential for precisely these reasons, because it involves risk, because its end is unknown, because it evokes in the individual citizen psychologies of both

fear and courage, and because when it is pursued vigorously democracy has the potential of "discovering more of the American reality to us" (Mailer 1964 26).

Central to Mailer's unique brand of political etiology is his understanding that American politics, particularly after the war, has become less and less a process for discovering, shaping, and defining the reality of America, and increasingly concerned with managing and organizing it. Due to its growing obsession with stability, organization, and productivity, America seems content to relinquish the keys to many of its most important political and social structures to technocrats. These anointed middlemen who seem determined to banish risk, conflict, and any trace of the revolutionary from the American political scene, are for Mailer, the chief clerics of America's new political culture of rationalization—a political culture based on management and administration which values efficiency and organization above all else, and threatens to completely undermine the existential potency of American democracy.

Mailer recognized, in the ascendancy of the technocrat, a fundamental shift, not just in American political culture, but in America's style, its psychology. The American democratic mind possessed imagination and vision, it drew its vitality from the conflict of ideas and possessed the ability to sustain itself purely on the promise of what is possible. The psychology characteristic of the technocrat, which Mailer identifies as totalitarian, is perhaps best described as a great yawning void, a psyche unseduced by new ideas and existentially ravaged by the ubiquity of corporate rationality and the security of the organization. In General Cummings' words, "the techniques had outraced the psyche" (Mailer 1948 342), or perhaps more to the point,

for Mailer, the spirit, or lack thereof, of the technocrat has hijacked the American psyche. In the *Presidential Papers* Mailer refers to it as a plague "that has slipped into the body parts and psyche of each of us" (184); in *Of a Fire on the Moon* he calls it "the psychology of machines" (184); and in *Armies of the Night* "the walking American lobotomy" (102). What Mailer is approaching, as he comes to terms in these books with the growing influence and efficiency of the administrative and technological organization of America since the end of WW II, is the increasing impossibility of politics in America, and the dawn of a new age of technocracy and corporatism.[1]

*The Armies of the Night*, Mailer's novel/history dealing with the 1967 anti-Vietnam war demonstration at the Pentagon, may be seen as Mailer's attempt to assess the true state of postwar American democracy, to mark the depth to which plague psychology has contaminated the American imagination, to gauge the viability of dissent and resistance in so corporatist a system, and to discover if, in fact, the possibility for the existential and the revolutionary in American life could somehow be rescued from the technocrats. Mailer is not, in the book, arguing for special status or even attempting an interpretation of the historical event on which he has chosen to focus in order to attend to these matters—in fact Mailer asserts early on in the novel that "the March on the Pentagon was an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may or may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever"

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[1] Mailer's growing awareness of the impossibility of politics in America was suggested by Paul Levine in his article "Norman Mailer's Civil War" in his discussion of Mailer's *Cannibals and Christians*.

(Mailer 1968 64). Rather, he approaches the march as a symbolic event, a chance to test the dialectic vitality of American politics. In *The Presidential Papers* Mailer laments that "the play of political ideas is flaccid here in America because opposing armies never meet" (Mailer 1964 25). The question Mailer explores in *The Armies of the Night* is whether or not the symbolic battle between "the villains who were hippies" and the "corporation-land villains" (Mailer 1968 108) turned out, in reality, to be as impotent as the ideological struggle between Cummings and Hearn in *The Naked and the Dead.*

The answer, for Mailer, rests primarily on the possibility of a revitalized political Left in America, a Left able to free itself from its adoration of what Mailer calls the "sound-as-a-brickwork-logic-of-the-next-step," that is, the logic of the technocrat, and to rediscover the imaginative aspect of democracy and the existential value of dissent and the revolutionary. Those in authority, as Mailer sees it, have a vested interest in the predictable, in controlling and managing politics and political action to the point where the very essence of democracy is lost, and politics is transformed from a process for the expression of a country's creativity and progressive energy, into a mere matter of ensuring continuity and stability. Mailer's hope for the March was that it represented a new political aesthetic for the Left, an aesthetic that embraced the beauty of possibility, and the existential necessity of risk.

> The aesthetic of the New Left now therefore began with the notion that authority could not comprehend nor contain nor finally manage to control any political action whose end was unknown. They could attack it, beat it, jail it,

> misrepresent it, and finally abuse it, but they could not feel a sense of victory because they could not understand a movement which inspired thousands and hundreds of thousands to march without a coordinated plan. (102)

In a corporatist society the very notion of a politics which appeals to what is most imaginative in people, based on beliefs rather than systemic imperatives, and proposing vision and risk rather than greater organization and the emotional comfort of stability, is a challenge to prevailing logic and a danger to those who would have us believe that rational analysis and efficient administration are the only basis for a system of government.

In the promise of the March Mailer detects the first faint pounding of a "new drum of the Left." In the postwar period, Mailer contends, "the Left had been... the secret unwitting accomplice of every increase in power of the technicians, bureaucrats, and labor leaders who ran the governmental military-industrial complex of super-technology land" (108). In the hands of the technocrats of both the Right and the Left, democracy had been drained of one of its essential elements—tension—the productive coexistence and conflict of opposing visions for the country which, along with individual empowerment and responsibility, constitute the life blood of American democracy for Mailer.

Unimaginative and dominated by "middle-class political organizations," the Left mirrored, if it did not inspire, the self-indulgence and professionalized self-interestedness of the technocratic classes that had done so much damage to American individualism. For Mailer the best manner for assuring the continuing possibility of

the revolutionary within a democracy has always been the nurturing and protection of the power of the individual citizen. Further to that, it is Mailer's contention that the responsibility lies with the individual citizen for arbitrating the necessity and scope of revolutionary action. Organizations, political interest groups, leftist sects, and all of the "alphabet soup" of liberal causes are fine for proposing certain programs and organizing protests, but in the long run, as Mailer argues, they serve "as piping systems for the brain, and flushing systems for the heart" (Mailer 1968 111) inspiring only self-pity, self-righteousness, and mediocrity, and taking the emphasis off the political consciousness of individuals—so vital for a democracy—and focusing instead on producing political technocrats who are only capable of running, or serving, large organizations.

Mailer detects the presence of a corporatist spirit in a political left so dependent on organization and organizations. For this reason Mailer:

> Scorned the organizational aspects of revolution, the speeches, mimeograph machines, the hard dull maneuvering, to keep power, the intolerable obedience of each objective period . . . such revolutions were the womb and cradle of technology land. (92)

Mailer refers to the various sects, groups, clubs, and committees which seem to dominate Leftist politics in America as being "like rusty tin cans ...in the apocalyptic garden of his revolution" (109). He goes on to say "that the best to be said was that they were probably like vitamins, injurious to a healthy stomach, smelling like the

storeroom of a pharmacology company's warehouse, doubtless productive of cancer over the long haul, but essential perhaps, perhaps! to a Left forever suffering from malnutrition" (110). In his critique of *The Armies of the Night* Robert Meridith responds to Mailer's views on the organizational impulse of the Left by suggesting that,

> Mailer's view of left organizations has little or nothing to do with reality because it has nothing or very little to do with making a revolution. Revolutions are made, in part, by organizations and orders of men engaged in extended struggles, and they are prepared for, in part by organizing and organizers and organizations. (445)

Merideth asserts that Mailer resistance to organizations is "a form of liberal posturing posing as radical perception" (445); the gist of Meridith's critique is, in short, that Mailer spurns organization because he is, at heart, a liberal and not a revolutionary.

This is, I would argue, a useful assessment of Mailer's position in the novel, though I do not believe that Mailer could be accused of making claims to being a revolutionary, at least not in the sense that Meridith uses the term; Mailer's Left Conservatism, his term to describe the nature of his politics, is best summed up in his belief that "radical measures were sometimes necessary to save the root" (Mailer 1968 207). Mailer is more interested in the possibility of the revolutionary, and of radical politics, than he is any specific revolution. For Mailer the March represented a significant political opportunity to reaffirm the existential nature of democracy, to

prove to those in authority that not every aspect of America could be managed, that it was still possible, in America, to practice a kind of political action whose end was unknown, which could inspire "thousands and hundreds of thousands to march without a coordinated plan" (62). What Mailer confronts, as both a participant and observer of the March, is the increasing impossibility of such a politics in contemporary corporatist America.

Saddled with squabbling factions, conflicting demands, and inflexible interest groups, the focus of the March, for those organizing it, quickly shifted from its ideals of mass disobedience and the expression of individual protest to an exercise in coalition management and interest arbitration. In a particularly instructive turn of events, the Mobilization Committee, a coalition of leftist groups committed to the March, in order to keep moderate peace groups, with their significant membership and influence, on board, found itself in negotiations with government representatives concerning the particulars of the proposed March. Mailer, with great irony, describes the mood of one such meeting as "not too dissimilar, although probably less intense, than an arbitration proceeding between a corporation and a union," finding it impossible to resist adding that "any time two bodies of men whose names end in Mobilization and Administration get together, even a revolution can be negotiated" (264).[2] Mailer recognizes in these meetings a new political paradigm for American politics, which, considering his description, could fairly be characterized as corporatist:

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[2] Mailer is referring here to the General Service Administration, which was the government body assigned to negotiate with the Mobilization Committee.

> In fact, the meetings could have served as another paradigm of American civilization in this decade of the twentieth century, for two groups with absolutely incompatible ends and an irretrievable lack of final resolution between them, were nonetheless adjudicators in effect with one another over the few small items of common ground which were negotiable, and this through its sheer instrumentalism—since it is somewhat more difficult to take militant action after negotiating quietly with one's enemy for weeks—was to work to pacify and finally curtail the more unmanageable aspects of the Antiwar March. (264)

In the end the two sides reached an agreement, through negotiation and compromise, and the demonstration proceeded by permit.

In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer revisits the argument that he first offered through Lt. Hearn in *The Naked and the Dead*—that there was very little chance of the Left being successful if it entered into the battle of organization which would increasingly constitute what would pass for politics in post-war America. From Mailer's perspective, a Left which allowed itself to be drawn into a political culture obsessed with structure, technique, and the relinquishing of individual citizenship in favor of association and interest politics would become so compromised, so complicit in the larger corporatist organization of America, that it would soon find itself in danger of being completely absorbed, of disappearing into the stable and mediocre realm of the transpolitical, of becoming just another 1 or 0 in "the absolute computer of the corporation" (210). Such a Left, functioning as just another interest group or

para-bureaucratic organization, would surely only further diminish the state of democracy in a period of American history already increasingly dominated by the power of the technocrat.

## Chapter Two

### Corporatism's New Deal: Liberal Entropy in Thomas Pynchon's Domestic Novels

> "I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy—but that could change."
>
> --Vice President Dan Quayle, *Dan Quayle in His Own Words*

In the preface to his volume of essays entitled *The Liberal Imagination* published in 1950, liberal critic and intellectual Lionel Trilling famously wrote:

> In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. (ix)

As alien as such a sentiment may sound in the post-Reagan era of American politics, where the term "liberal" is often viewed and treated as the political equivalent of leprosy, Trilling's statement demonstrates the grip that liberalism had on the political, cultural and social consciousness of post-WW II America. Modern American liberalism, and its accompanying set of ideas and policies that had descended from Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, shaped the American early post-war period with its promise of continued prosperity, greater political stability, and a broader sense of fairness for the country. In the late 1940's and throughout the 1950's, the

achievements of liberalism seemed evident everywhere: the American economy was growing, postwar prosperity combined with New Deal social policies helped to lift millions of Americans out of the despair of poverty, and liberals of all kinds were backing the emerging civil rights movement. Most liberals, like Trilling, were confident that conservatism and other anti-liberal forces inhabited only the margins of American life, and posed no real threat to the continued centrality and durability of liberal ideas.

Of course, the liberal confidence of the early post-war era would prove short lived for by the mid 1960's liberalism's seeming invulnerability had begun to erode and the process of liberalism's decline, culminating with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, began to gain momentum. Historians and political scientists have offered various explanations for liberalism's collapse in post-war America and, as one might expect, the subject remains a matter of some contention. One of the more compelling arguments, particularly considering our purposes, is the notion that beginning in the 1930's with the set of political initiatives that constituted Roosevelt's New Deal, liberalism in America underwent an ideological change of direction and began down the path of what Theodore Lowi calls "interest group liberalism," a path that sowed the seeds for the kind of corporatist system that took root and eventually blossomed in America after WW II. As a result, a chasm soon began to open up between the values and ideals espoused by American liberalism--equality, individualism, participatory democracy, concern for the disadvantaged, justice, etc.--and the reality of the America that was being shaped by corporatist policies disguised as liberal politics. It is the argument of this chapter that Thomas

Pynchon's two most American novels—*The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland* --offer an astute, though often circuitous, exploration of this chasm.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland* Pynchon depicts a postmodern America that is, at least partially, the legacy of a failure of liberal idealism in America. America's liberal tradition, with its strong belief in individual political freedoms and democratic governance, is front and center in Pynchon's fiction, not as an object of cynicism or parody, but as a matter of utmost relevance to his vision of contemporary America. Critical attempts to come to terms with this vision have often led those Pynchon scholars interested in the political aspects of his fiction to characterize Pynchon's politics as nihilistic or absurdist, as constituting what Lois Tyson refers to as Pynchon's "politics of despair" (Tyson 8). It is my argument here that, while Pynchon's engagement with postmodern America does indeed include a substantial and recognizable political perspective, that perspective is not best understood as a kind of convenient nihilism, postmodern pessimism, or epistemological relativism. Rather Pynchon is first and foremost a liberal, though most certainly a discontented one, who attributes much of the responsibility for the ascent of corporatism and the decline of democracy in America to the winding down of the liberal spirit and its gross ineffectuality in the face of the many political, social and cultural challenges of post WW II America.

## *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Legacy of New Deal Liberalism

In the *Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas, a typical Californian housewife comfortably married and ensconced in suburbia, is drawn out of her middle-class consumer hibernation by a summons to travel to San Narcisco to execute the will of her recently departed ex-lover, tycoon, and corporate capitalist extraordinaire Pierce Inverarity. Oedipa's journey down the state highway into the heart of postmodern America provides a rich opportunity for Pynchon to comment on and parody such ripe subject matter as consumer culture, silicon-obsessed Southern California, and the pervasiveness of television in American cultural and social life. However, it is the umbrageous presence of Pierce Inverarity which is of principal concern to us, and which offers the key to Pynchon's political perspective in the novel.

Chasing after Inverarity's legacy, Oedipa is soon overwhelmed by the complexity and scope of the shadow that he has cast over the social and political landscape of her beloved America. Jerry A. Varsava argues that, when approached as an ideological critique, Inverarity's presence in the novel exemplifies the values of libertarianism, in particular economic libertarianism, an ideology that raises unfettered capitalism and the pursuit of individual interest to the status of moral absolutes. Discussing Inverarity's ubiquity in the novel, Varsava writes:

> The vestiges of this rogue entrepreneur are apparent everywhere that Oedipa looks—in the multiplying conspiracies, in the tangled web of his commercial enterprises, in the urban sprawl of Southern California, and, most notably, in

> the rigid economic stratification that defines American society. All of these conditions can ultimately be traced back to Inverarity's (and unnamed others') successful pursuit of the ideals of economic libertarianism. (70)

Certainly Inverarity can be read as the incarnation of the destructive nature of greed and economic inequality in American society. However, I would hesitate to lay the blame for the social, political, and economic concerns that Varsava lists solely at the feet of an ideology, however objectionable, whose ideals had more or less been relegated to the political margins during the period in question—a period which historians Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle argue was dominated by "New Deal [. . .] ideas, public policies, and political alliances" (ix).

Certainly the kind of unfettered capitalism that is the economic system of choice for libertarians was much in evidence in America in the early part of the twentieth century. Highly unregulated and unresponsive to progressive social ideas, the capitalist elite in America, those whom Roosevelt in his inaugural speech referred to as "the rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods," pursued the production of capital and accumulation of individual wealth largely unrestrained by regulatory institutions or interventionist state policies. The result was, of course, the high unemployment and social distress of the Great Depression.

Taking office in 1933, at the height of the greatest economic collapse in American history, President Franklin Roosevelt promised America a "new deal" and introduced a flurry of policies and government initiatives designed to attend to the many immediate problems of the Great Depression, as well as to frame reforms to

provide the federal government with a larger, hopefully stabilizing, influence on America's economic and social development. The notion that the state had a significant role to play in the way that capitalism functions in America had its origins in the progressive reform movements of the early twentieth century, which recognized the social and political dangers of large corporations having too much power and influence over the lives of individuals and over the American economy as a whole. The New Deal promised to institutionalize this progressive spirit by recognizing that capitalism in America needed to be saved from itself, and that a duly elected democratic government, concerned with the plight of the individual citizen and prepared to enact significant social and economic reforms, was the instrument best suited for the job. This fundamentally anti-libertarian project became the basis for modern American liberalism.

That "New Deal liberalism" was not entirely consistent with the strong belief in "laissez-faire" capitalism that characterized traditional American liberalism, and yet was supported with enthusiasm by liberals of the period, is a strong indication of just how out of favor libertarian ideals had become. As Brian J. Cook argues, Roosevelt's redefinition of liberalism was in fact a shifting of liberal ideology away from its traditional emphasis on economic liberty towards an emphasis on pragmatic reform, a shift which significantly changed the liberal understanding of the role of government in American life:

> Roosevelt had to label his program distinctively and banish to the political wilderness any opponents who might claim the same label. FDR achieved

> this by adopting the title "liberal" and forcing his opponents to accept the designation "conservative." [. . .] This was an especially meaningful achievement, for the American creed was fundamentally liberal. According to John Dewey, the creed consisted of two strains of liberalism—laissez-faire and humanitarian—with the former dominant and latter associated with personal and voluntary effort. FDR successfully raised the political status of humanitarian liberalism and redefined it in connection with government activism, generating a still-increasing sharp competition between the two streams of liberal thought—now in the guise of liberalism and conservatism. (106)

While Cook implies that the term "liberal," as it was applied by Roosevelt to the amalgam of initiatives, policies and ideas that constituted the New Deal, reflected Roosevelt's keen political sense more than his ideological sympathy, the fact remains that New Deal liberalism, with its emphasis on the expansion of state intervention in social and economic matters central to American life, was the dominant force in America's political culture well into the post-war era.

If Inverarity's story is indeed the story of contemporary America, as the novel repeatedly suggests, then I would argue that the social and economic conditions that Oedipa discovers in his wake are more the result of the failure of contemporary American liberalism than the success of Inverarity's libertarian ideals. The story of Pierce Inverarity appears to be that of just another successful American capitalist. However, his legacy is given form and meaning, not by Inverarity the man, but by

Oedipa, by her obsessive drive to reconcile the America she thought she inherited, with the poverty, disenfranchisement, and paranoia she confronts on her journey through postmodern America.

Oedipa, as a child of the Cold War, self-described as being nurtured on the principles of "Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear daft numina," referring of course to three prominent American Cold War ideologues, inherited an America with a clearly defined enemy and an accompanying faith in its sense of itself as the great symbiosis of democracy and capitalism. This central liberal notion, that democracy and capitalism can coexist in America, intertwined as the great systemic guarantors of equality and liberty, is one Oedipa finds impossible to reconcile with the economic despair and social and political alienation which she seems to uncover around every corner. Oedipa discovers, and is forced to deal with, an America where the great systemic symbiosis seems to have broken down, where, rather than working together to ensure a healthy balance between individual freedom and civic equality, capitalism and democracy appear to be working at cross-purposes at all levels of American life. Determined to make whatever sense she can of the "scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity," Oedipa begins to sense that while America's liberal order seems to be deteriorating, another order, its ideals less determinate and its nature less conspicuous than liberalism's, an order which is somehow tied to Inverarity, is tightening its grip on America.

In this regard the textual evidence that Jerry Varsava provides to justify his characterization of Inverarity as "a paragon of libertarian heroicism" points constructively in another ideological direction—though I would like to argue that the

orientation in question is more decisively described as corporatist than libertarian (71). Varsava writes:

> Yoyodyne Inc., a large defense contractor—suggestive of Pynchon's onetime employer, Boeing—comes into view and with it the specter of the "military-industrial complex" President Eisenhower warned America about in 1961, just before leaving office. (Indeed, Eisenhower realized that the military-industrial complex posed a threat to American liberty and justice unprecedented in the nation's history.) A major shareholder in Yoyodyne, Inverarity, after the fashion of the robber baron, secretly arranged the special tax break that brought the company to this location in the first place. Inverarity's machinations give new meaning to Adam Smith's notion of the "invisible hand." (In a perverse, libertarian reading of *civitas*, Inverarity sees his self-interested scheming as the proper office of a "founding father" [26].) (71)

What emboldens a self-interested capitalist like Inverarity to legitimize himself as a "founding father" is a political environment in which the collaboration between the state and the interests of capital encourages the development of quasi-governmental structures and dangerously influential private interests groups. Such a political environment is made manifest in the novel, as Varsava rightly indicates, by the imposing presence of Yoyodyne Inc. and the "military industrial complex" that it suggests. Inverarity's statesmanlike status is indicative of the emerging corporatist

reality of postwar America's political development, a reality that Alan Brinkley describes in this passage from *Liberalism and its Discontents*:

> In the postwar era there emerged [. . .] what became, in a sense, a second government: a national security state, powerful, entrenched, constantly expanding, and largely invulnerable to political attacks; a state that forged intimate partnerships with the corporate world, constantly blurring the distinctions between public and private; and a state that produced some of the very things—strengthened private monopolies and expanded state power to sustain them—that the liberal vision was supposed to prevent.

Certainly Inverarity's actions in *The Crying of Lot 49* are in his own interests, but behind each of his "machinations" is a corporatist-style relationship to a state structure or governmental function that plays an instrumental role in his success.

**Corporatism as Conspiracy**

Corporatism, as a political or ideological system, is very rarely associated with the United States, a country whose historical traditions are strongly "liberal"—that is, steeped in a belief in individual freedom and representative democracy. However, it is the case that America, in the twentieth century, has seen an increase in the influence and practice of corporatism, though it is seldom identified as

such. Americans tend to be profoundly uncomfortable with non-liberal political ideologies and thus, as Howard J. Wirada reasons, "if corporatism is ever to find a foothold in the United States, it has to come in through the back door, disguised and by stealth, and be called 'liberalism' rather than 'corporatism'" (132).

In the 1930's, corporatist forces found just such a back door in the redefinition of liberalism that accompanied the experimental atmosphere of the New Deal. The National Recovery Administration (NRA)—an agency created out of legislation which Roosevelt passed in his famed "First Hundred Days"—was overtly corporatist in the way it was given the authority to assist private economic interests in organizing business associations which, along with organized labor and government representatives, would establish production quotas, price rates, wage rates and codes of conduct for America's industrial sectors. As historian Alan Brinkley writes, "The NRA [. . .] has often been described, with considerable justification, as an effort to create an American form of corporatism," and while it was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court after just over a year of disastrous implementation, it legitimized corporatist ideas and practices as fundamental aspects of American liberalism. While Pynchon makes no direct mention of the NRA, or of the New Deal for that matter, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, I would argue that it is instructive to keep in mind how the legitimization of corporatist ideas and values as an ideological legacy of New Deal liberalism—a development that I have argued provides a useful historical context in which to consider the political significance of the nature of Pierce Inverarity's success in the novel--contributes to the postwar political atmosphere of secrecy and paranoia that Pynchon portrays in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

The pervasiveness of secrecy, in a corporatist society, is a direct result of the confusion between public and private that arises when private interest groups are allowed to function as quasi-governmental agencies without democratic legitimacy and beyond the standards of transparency that are supposed to govern public processes in a democracy. Corporatism invites secrecy into the political process, not just as a means for protecting state secrets—that is in the interest of the public good—but rather in the service of private interests as an effective means for the exercise of power. Power, in a corporatist society, consistently flows towards those who develop, understand, and control the structures of organized interests that dominate the political process and dictate the direction of public policy. Therefore, the possession, manipulation, and control of information within organizations and systems, rather than its democratic communication, becomes paramount—in a corporatist political environment secrecy is both a political and a systemic imperative.

Such a system treats secrecy, not as a specific tool for the concealment of particularly sensitive facts or bits of information, but as a general condition for all knowledge; everything is secret unless it is incompetently controlled, or there is a conscious decision to the contrary. Citizens are encouraged to accept both the presence and the influence of non-democratic and publicly taciturn organizations as a normative aspect of the political process. In such a hyper-organized and closely guarded environment, individual citizens are often led to perceive information which they do not know, that which is "kept" secret, no matter its actual worth, as inherently fascinating and, by mere virtue of its secrecy, particularly valuable.

Rather than encouraging a democratic dissemination of information and an atmosphere of empowered citizenship, corporatism encourages the careful control of even the most innocuous bits of information, creating an atmosphere of paranoia and paralysis in which citizens begin to constantly question the availability of information, and thus their ability to make decisions and form opinions. In short, the corporatist normalization of secrecy as part of the political process endangers democratic praxis by undermining the confidence of individuals in the power of their democratic citizenship. John Ralston Saul describes the corrosive nature of pervasive secrecy on a democracy in this passage from *Voltaire's Bastards*:

> The generalized secret has introduced such a terrible uncertainty into our society that citizens' confidence in their own ability to judge public matters has been damaged. They constantly complain that they don't know enough to make up their own minds. They have a feeling that the mass of information available would not be available if it were truly worth having. The result is a despondent mental anarchy which prevents them from actively using the considerable powers democratic society has won. They are convinced that essential information is being held back. (288)

Thus when, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Nefastis states that "Communication is the key," he may be making a scientific argument (105). However Pynchon makes it clear in the novel that Nefastis's observation also has political implications; to understand the state of communication in postmodern America is to gain profound insight into the

state of its politics.

The conspiracy that Oedipa pursues in the novel is, of course, the communication network of Tristero, an underground postal system that, despite its secretive nature, seems present everywhere in the form of its emblematic postal horn. However, the real conspiracy that Oedipa unwittingly uncovers, if it can be characterized as such, is the not so secret control that various organized interests, in particular corporations, have over the lines of communication in America. One of the over-arching ironies of the novel is that despite the historically unique opportunity for connectedness and increased community offered by the accelerated development of communication technology in postmodern America, communication networks are treated as nothing more than a "cash nexus" for increasingly massive corporations like Yoyodyne Inc.

Tristero, for Pynchon, represents the erosion of liberal democracy that marks this corporate control of communication in America:

> For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. (124-125)

Of course Tristero also represents the possibility of resistance for Pynchon, the hope

that indeed "there had to exist [a] separate, silent, unsuspected world" (Pynchon 1986, 92) where diversity, individual ingenuity, and "a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating" can exist apart from the corporate and corporatist surface of American social and political life (170).

Of course the great question of the novel always remains—is Oedipa's determination to "create constellations" from the apparent disorder of Inverarity's affairs the result of paranoia, or of a fortuitous unearthing of a perversely complicated intrigue—the shadowy Tristero conspiracy? Critics often call attention to the fact that this question remains unanswered and unresolved by the novel's conclusion. Oedipa is left unsure of herself, certain only of two possibilities that she is willing to entertain:

> Either Oedipa in the orbiting ectasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero behind the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (182)

What is not given consideration often enough, however, is that both conditions—secrecy and paranoia—are not mutually exclusive as solutions to Oedipa's dilemma, but are rather intimately linked symptoms of the dilemma itself, measures of a larger political and social system that is able to employ both to its distinct advantage.

What frustrates Oedipa most about Inverarity is not what his legacy communicates—greed, wealth and influence—but what it fails to communicate, what she is convinced it is hiding about the nature and structure of power in America. Haunted by the ghostly shadow of destructive self-interest—Pierce Inverarity—and surrounded by signs of the decline of liberal democracy—most prominently the ubiquitous post-horn symbol which comes to represent alienation, indifference, and the growing "withdrawal from the life of the Republic"—Oedipa's paranoia is, in itself, a good indication of just how far she, and by extension American society, has strayed from any meaningful affinity with liberalism and democratic citizenship. During a discussion of the importance of "the system" in Pynchon's work, Joseph Slade alludes to the larger political implications of paranoia when he describes it as:

> A secondary illumination with one advantage: that it may drive the individual to recognize that the system does exist and that he is a pawn: and with the greater disadvantage: that it may encourage him to view himself as helpless victim and thus to shirk human responsibility. (65)

Either way paranoia sustains the notion that systems of power in America are best understood as corporatist, based on private interests and closed organizations, rather than democratic, transparent, rooted in the informed judgement of the individual citizen, and concerned with the public good.

**The Erosion of Liberalism in *Vineland***

A couple of decades after Oedipa sets off for San Narcisco in search of Inverarity's legacy, Pynchon revisited California as the setting for *Vineland*, his Reagan-era drama of compromised ex-hippies, power-mad bureaucrats, and media-saturated teenage nihilists. Like *Lot 49*, in *Vineland* Pynchon is clearly concerned with developments in America's political direction, once again focusing his gaze on the ascension of corportism, the dissipation of liberal progressivism, the corporate tyranny of post-industrial capitalism and the threat of the development of a new style of fascism in contemporary America. However, the historical context of *Vineland* is profoundly different from that of *Lot 49*. *The Crying of Lot 49* is a novel that certainly confronts the social and political problems which beset America in the early post-war period, but it also boldly looks forward to the radicalization of political consciousness that would characterize leftist progressivism in the second half of the 1960's. Oedipa Maas, Pynchon's representative of an America rediscovering the importance of engaged citizenship, political activism, and the questioning of authority, gives way, in *Vineland*, to Frenesi Gates, who, it could be argued, represents an America in which the progressive left has become so co-opted, its fundamental liberal ideals so compromised, that as an ideological force it has more or less disappeared from the mainstream of American politics— a political reality that the election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 made unmistakably manifest. One of the more significant signs of this co-option and dissipation of liberalism is the political decline of social progressivism, particularly the corruption of the labor

movement in America since the end of WW II, and the stunted development of a new progressive left in the 1960's and 1970's, subjects that garner a lot of attention in *Vineland.*

The decline of the labor movement, the demoralization of the New Left and the counter-cultural revolution, and the ascension of Reagan and ideological "neo-conservatism," three major events which define the eclipse of post-WWII American liberalism, are recounted and explored in *Vineland* via the history of three generations of the Becker family. In this manner Pynchon is able to present the historical evolution of the postwar political situation in America, as well as reveal how American liberalism, once so progressive and passionate, has descended into its present degraded state.

The American trade union movement in the immediate pre-war era, as Pynchon depicts it through the stories told to Frenesi by her mother Sasha, was a vibrant, active and growing movement. Profoundly angered by her father's crippling at the hands of Croker "Bud" Scantling, a member of an anti-union organization called the "Employers' Association," Sasha leaves home and settles in a "rip-roaring union town, still riding the waves of euphoria from the General Strike of '34" and proceeds to involve herself in the local labor struggles (77).

> Growing up, Frenesi heard stories of those prewar times, the strike at the Stockton cannery, strikes over Ventura sugar beets, Venice lettuce, San Joaquin cotton . . . of the anticonscription movement in Berkeley . . . Somewhere Sasha had also found time to work for Tom Mooney's release,

> fight the infamous antipicket ordinance, Proposition One, and campaign for Culbert Olsen in '38. (77)

Then WW II came along and, as Sasha recounts for Frenesi, for herself and for the American labor movement:

> The war changed everything. The deal was, no strikes for the duration. Lot of us thought it was some last desperate capitalist maneuver, a way to get the Nation mobilized under a Leader, no different than Hitler or Stalin. But at the same time, so many of us really loved FDR. (77)

Indeed labor in America did enter into economic arrangements with business and government in the interests of mobilization and wartime production. FDR had set the stage for such co-operation by passing legislation such as the National Labor Relations Act, which guaranteed collective bargaining rights for workers, and by creating the National Labor Relations Board, which was given the authority to police unfair labor practices. While FDR's policies made organized labor more powerful than at any time in American history, they also succeeded in wedding labor to New Deal liberalism by corporatizing it, that is, by making the relationship between labor and capital a matter of institutional governmental process and thus subject to, and dependent on, the constantly shifting legislative and political environment of state structures and systems.

When the need to mobilize for war arose, Roosevelt sought to greatly

strengthen this New Deal tripartite partnership between government, capital, and labor in order to provide the economic stability and promote the increased production necessary to accomplish the massive task of preparing for war. The theory was that both business and labor would subordinate their own interests under the direction of the government in order to serve the larger interests of the public good. However, as Pynchon reminds us in *Gravity's Rainbow*, referring specifically to WW II: "Don't forget the real business of the War is buying and selling [. . .]. The true war is a celebration of markets" (105). It was the interests of capital that dominated much of the agenda and policies of the War Industries Board, the bureaucratic entity which oversaw the bulk of America's mobilization effort, largely because the agency was staffed "almost entirely from the private sector, relying on lawyers, businessmen, and financiers (many of them drawn directly from the industries they were then called upon to regulate)" (Brinkley 83).

Labor was never able to achieve anything like equal standing in this wartime partnership, while capital, able to dominate and manipulate the central mobilization agencies, reaped enormous profits and solidified its influence over the regulatory mechanisms and bureaucracy of the New Deal state. Thus Hub Gates, returning from fighting the war, confronted a vastly different political situation in America, a situation in which the wartime arrangements between government and capital provided the framework for a postwar state and conservative politics that was explicitly anti-union.

Participating in one of the wave of postwar strikes, Hub is confronted with this new political reality for labor:

> The struggle between the IATSE [International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees], a creature of organized crime in collusion with the studio, and Herb Sorell's Conference of Studio Unions, unapologetically liberal, progressive, New Deal, socialist, and thus, in the toxic political situation, "Communist," had been going on all through the war but now broke into the open in a series of violent strike actions against the studios. All the newspapers pretended it was an organizing dispute between two unions. In fact it was the dark recrudescence of that hard-cased antiunion tradition which brought the movie business to California in the first place, where it had gone on to enjoy till only recently its free ride on the backs of cheap labor. The minute this was threatened, in came the studio-created scab locals of IATSE and their soldiers, often in battalion strength. And the outcome was foredoomed, because of the blacklist. In one of American misoneism's most notable hours, a complex system of accusation, judgement, and disposition, administered by figures like Roy Brewer of IATSE and Ronald Reagan of the Screen Actors Guild, controlled the working lives of everyone in the industry who'd ever taken a step leftward of registering to vote as a Democrat. (289-90)

The clear contrast between the co-opted and fragmented situation of organized labor in post-war America reflected in the above passage, and Jess Traverse's pre-war "dream of One Big Union" (76) shows Pynchon's acute awareness of the crippling

effect of the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, a piece of legislation which confirmed that the kind of political influence enjoyed by business interests during the war, vis-à-vis its wartime economic partnerships with the state, continued to dominate public life in the postwar period. Historian Nelson Lichtenstein describes the impact and importance of the Taft-Hartly Act in the following passage:

> Passage of the Taft-Hartley Act over President Truman's veto proved a milestone, not only for the actual legal restrictions the new law imposed on the trade unions, but as a symbol of the shifting relationship between the unions and the state during the late 1940s. The law sought to curb the practice of interunion solidarity, eliminate the radical cadre who still held influence within trade union ranks, and contain the labor movement to roughly its existing geographic and demographic terrain. The anti-Communist affidavits, the prohibition against secondary boycotts, the enactment of section 14b allowing states to prohibit the union shop, the ban on foreman unionism—all these sections of the law had been on the agenda of the National Association of Manufacturers and other conservative groups since 1938 [. . .]. Union leaders correctly recognized that the act represented the definitive end of the brief era in which the state served as an arena in which the trade unions could bargain for the kind of tripartite accommodation with industry that had been so characteristic of the New Deal years. (133-34)

Stripped of its most powerful organizational tools by Taft-Hartley, and ideologically

neutered by the chilling effect of the Cold War on American domestic politics, labor began to abandon its progressive political agenda and "unions settled for guarantees of their own institutional survival and higher wages for their members" (Brinkley 129). More or less abdicating the reformist and socially democratic ideals that defined it in the prewar period, American organized labor had been reduced from an active and expanding progressive force on the American political scene before the war, to the status of a mere special-interest group after it. As for Hub Gates, he sums up the capitulation of the labor movement to the developing corporatist organization of America with his own short personal story: "I let the world slip away, made my shameful peace, joined the IA, retired soon's I could, sold off my only real fortune—my precious anger—for a lot of got-damn shadows" (291).

The kind of progressive and social democratic politics which characterized labor-liberalism in the prewar period, but had been driven to the margins of the American political scene by the period of conservative politics which narrowed the labor movement and further entrenched the systemic relationship between business interests and the state following the war, reappeared on the national political scene in the 1960's with the civil rights movement, the emergence of the New Left, and the explosion of political radicalism on the campuses of America's universities. Certainly Pynchon's sympathy with the democratic and progressive impulses and ideals of the sixties "revolution" can be strongly felt in *Vineland*. However, it is a novel that is written from a clear historical perspective, a perspective that has witnessed the almost complete evaporation of the progressive energy which drove the New Left, as well as the corruption of its democratic ideals by conservative and

corporatist forces in America—a development allegorized in the novel by the co-option of Frenesi Gates by Brock Vond.

Brock's obsession with conformity and order is certainly depicted as out of control and destructive in *Vineland.* However, what is perhaps most politically disturbing is not Vond's maniacal and fascist behavior, as much as the fact that he is so easily able to convince Frenesi, a member of a family steeped in the history of the progressive struggles of the American left, to be a part of his plan to destroy "The People's Republic of Rock and Roll," perhaps the central representative of revolutionary ideals and spirit in the novel. Some critics, including Joseph Tabbi, have suggested that Brock Vond was able to turn Frenesi "mainly through the force of his sex" (96). However, Frenesi herself, at the very moment when Brock asks her to betray her friends and her ideals and help him bring about the dismantling of PR3, suggests a different reason, a motive which has very little, if not nothing, to do with Brock himself—

> She understood as clearly as she could allow herself to what Brock wanted to do, understood at last, dismally, that she might even do it—not for him, unhappy fucker, but because she had lost just too much control, time was rushing all around her, these were rapids, and as far ahead as she could see it looked like Brock's stretch of river, another stage, like sex, children, surgery, further into adulthood perilous and real, into the secret that life is soldiering. (216)

Frenesi is not captivated by Brock's sexual prowess, at least not enough to betray her friends, but her desire for control, for order, for the stability that Brock represents compels her to accept his perverse conception of duty, and fulfill her role in the larger system as just another log making its way—here Pynchon extends the water motif of the above passage—"down the river to the sawmill, to get sawed into lumber, to be built into more America" (216).

In *Vineland* Pynchon draws attention to this weakness, not just in Frenesi Gates, but in the sixties revolutionary movement as a whole. The generation which marched against the war in Vietnam, protested inequality, and fought for all manner of progressive and liberal causes was, finally, unable to resist the temptations that the forces of rational order, mass culture and consumer prosperity offered. In the end, Pynchon seems to judge the revolutionary spirit of the sixties and early seventies in America as hopeful and full of noble intentions, but too immature and self-indulgent to do little more than moderate the growing postwar trend in America to fashion its politics around the corporatist ideals of stability, prosperity, and organization above all else. In fact, Pynchon goes so far as to suggest that the sixties revolution may just have been a particular variation of that deeply felt desire for order and stability that propelled Reagan and the neo-conservatives to power in the eighties:

> Brock Vond's genius was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolutions against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep—if he'd allowed himself to feel

> it, the sometimes touching—need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family. (269)

Pynchon's suggestion here, reinforced by Frenesi's relationship with Vond, is that postwar liberalism has betrayed its democratic ideals and compromised its social vision by collaborating with the forces of corporatist organization and structure that have dominated postwar America.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon interrogates the nature of postwar power in America by insistently asking: "What terrible structure behind the appearance of diversity and enterprise?" (165). In *Vineland* this line of inquiry leads Pynchon to posit the presence of an underlying, but unspoken, continuity between the various ideologies, institutions, and political figures which have shaped the nature of postwar politics in America:

> One by one, as other voices joined in, the names began—some shouted, some accompanied by spit, the old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia—Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwide remotenesses of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor, that nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (372)

It has often been suggested that what Pynchon is concerned with here is a fascist presence in America. Indeed DL, Frenesi's friend and fellow radical in *Vineland*, accuses Ronald Reagan of wanting to "restore fascism" to America (265). And certainly Pynchon's depiction of the expanding police state structures under Nixon and Reagan seems to justify the on-going Traverse/Becker family debate concerning "the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago" (372). However, taking into consideration Pynchon's third Proverb for Paranoids: "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers" (1973 251), I would argue that Pynchon is after something more insidious than fascism, something which in *Gravity's Rainbow* he calls the "corporate state" (419).

Reagan and the new conservatives had no intention of establishing fascism in America. They knew enough not to attack liberal democracy itself, but rather to attack the way that liberal democracy functions, branding its basic institution—government—as inefficient, and its essential tenets—equality, individual citizenship and personal liberty—as inferior concerns to corporate prosperity, social order, and moral conformity. It is certainly true, as DL points out, that part of the Reagan program in the 1980's was to "flee into the past"(372). However, for Reagan, the glorious past he wished to emulate did not mean Germany in the 1930's, as DL's accusation of fascism implies, but rather America in the 1950's, and the postwar expansion of corporatism and quasi-governmental structures, along the lines of the "military industrial complex," that firmly established the agenda of business at

the center of American public policy. This accounts for the unmistakable connection that Pynchon evokes, in *Vineland,* between the strongly polarized political spectrum and McCarthyism of the immediate postwar period in America, and the vociferous anti-liberalism and state-sponsored conformism of Reagan Republicanism. Reagan's program is presented by Pynchon as an attempt to reclaim America from the leftists, progressives, and revolutionaries of the sixties in order to shape a nation of "Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy" (222). In the phrase "official economy" lurks a strong suggestion that Pynchon detects a marked corporatist tendency behind the Reagan Revolution.

Pynchon's most candid statement concerning the development of corporatism as a central aspect of postwar politics does not appear in *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Vineland*, but rather in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Discussing a character named Walter Rathenau, a late German foreign minister and wealthy industrialist (in many ways the historical precursor of Pierce Inverarity), Pynchon writes:

> He was a philosopher with a vision of the postwar State. He saw the war in progress [WW I] as a world revolution, out of which would rise neither Red communism nor an unhindered Right, but a rational structure in which business would be the true, the rightful authority. (165)

Recognized for his impatience with the dominant Western political paradigm of the twentieth century, that "intolerable double vision [. . .] Right and Left; the hothouse and the street" (Pynchon 1961 469), and for his support of "excluded middles" (1966

181) (which critics such as Mark Conroy and Jerry Varsava have used as evidence of his liberal political inclinations), Pynchon also shows a keen awareness of the democratic consequences of liberals, social progressives, and engaged citizens vacating the political middle ground of reasonableness and tolerance, in exchange for the dangerous corporatist proposition that "if techniques developed by the corporations could be brought to bear, might not nations live rationally?" (1973 81) The state-sponsored self-interest of Pierce Inverarity and the endemic alienation and secrecy that Oedipa discovers in *The Crying of Lot 49*, combined with *Vineland*'s depiction of the decline of labor progressivism and left idealism in postwar America, and the co-option of interest group liberalism and the New Deal interventionist state by Reagan and the New Right, are strong signals that, for Pynchon, Ratheneau's vision of a postwar corporatist state structure is increasingly becoming a reality in America.

## Chapter Three

# "The System Had Blessed My Life": Corporatism and the Degradation of Democratic Citizenship in *White Noise* and *Underworld*

> It would seem that if despotism were to be established among the democratic nations of our age, it might assume a different character; it would be more extensive and more mild; it would degrade men without tormenting them.
>
> Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*

> The future belongs to crowds.
>
> Don DeLillo, *Mao II*

In an article published in *The New Yorker* in 1997, Don DeLillo, responding to George Will's accusation that his novels constitute "bad citizenship," is quoted as saying:

> "I don't take it seriously, but being called a 'bad citizen' is a compliment to a novelist, at least in my mind. That's exactly what we ought to do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we're writing against what power represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer

> consciousness has come to mean. In that sense, if we're bad citizens, we're doing our job." (Remnick 48)

In many ways what DeLillo does in his work is depict an America in which good citizenship has come to mean acting and thinking in the service of corporations, consumer culture, and the assorted organizations and systems which define the postmodern world. In both *White Noise* and *Underworld* DeLillo explores a constellation of themes related to the nature of democratic citizenship in postmodern America—ranging from the fragmentation and the weakening of political community to the nature of death, the technological, and America's obsession with administration. DeLillo's work is by no means a political treatise on the status of citizenship in America, but it is quite clear in *White Noise* and *Underworld* that he is interested in the role that the individual plays in contemporary American society and politics. That this interest also brings into focus the influence of corporatism in postmodern America, and its damaging effect on the nature of individual participation in contemporary American democracy, is the argument of this chapter.

**Hitler and the Bombheads**

The primary foremost political figure in *White Noise* is that most infamous of twentieth-century politicians, Adolf Hitler. For most citizens of the post-WW II world, Adolf Hitler stands as the very incarnation of evil, a symbol of madness and

inhumanity and a figure forever synonymous with genocide, mass murder, and death. The mere mention of Hitler, in any context, immediately raises the stakes of discourse, including fiction, a fact not lost on Don DeLillo.

In an article focused on DeLillo's treatment of Hitler in his novels Paul A. Cantor writes:

> Clearly DeLillo is fascinated with the phenomenon of Hitler, and presumably believes that to understand the twentieth century, we must somehow come to terms with Hitler and Nazism. If we want to appreciate DeLillo's achievement fully, especially in *White Noise*, we must accordingly examine his portrayal of Hitler. (41)

As Cantor himself points out, if one should choose to follow his advice and endeavor to examine DeLillo's portrayal of Hitler as a matter central to a full understanding of DeLillo's perspective, one is struck immediately by the distinct lack of direct condemnation or moral indignation in his handling of Hitler. Defending DeLillo against charges of moral indifference, Cantor points out that Hitler appears in *White Noise*, not as a character, but rather as an academic subject, suggesting that "DeLillo may be trying to characterize the contemporary world by showing that such a phenomenon as Hitler studies has become possible," and that "in fact, DeLillo could find no better example of the flattening-out of contemporary existence than the routinization of Hitler's charisma at the College-on-the Hill" (40). In fact, Cantor

argues, "the whole idea of Hitler studies quickly becomes comic in DeLillo's portrayal, especially when he links it to the study of another twentieth-century giant, Elvis Presley" (40).

The scene to which Cantor is referring is one in which Jack Gladney and his academic colleague, Murray Siskind, co-lecture one of Murray's popular culture classes, drawing numerous parallels between the lives of Hitler and Elvis for the assembled students. Far from being absurd, as Cantor suggests, DeLillo's association of Hitler and Elvis is disturbing in its appropriateness in terms of contemporary American cultural and political values. Hitler and Elvis are both undeniably famous, and this celebrity stature, in contemporary America, ensures their value as cultural commodities. In *White Noise* notoriety, whether of the kind associated with Hitler or with Elvis, functions as a kind of currency, as a product to be traded on the open marketplace of the culture industry in exchange for, amongst other things, professional advancement, television ratings, and tuition fees. Hitler and Elvis co-exist so comfortably in DeLillo's America, not because they share similar status, cultural relevance, intellectual importance, or political impact, but rather because they have been incorporated into the same rational structure, a structure which seems to function free of the burdens of moral or intellectual discrimination.

Significantly, it is Jack's utilization of Hitler within this larger structure that provides the model for success in the novel, a fact well understood by Murray:

> You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You [Jack] created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college

> or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction, literally or metaphorically. This is the center, the unquestionable source. He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler. It must be deeply satisfying for you. The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler studies. It has an identity, a sense of achievement. You've evolved an entire system around this figure, a structure with countless substructures and interrelated fields of study, a history within history. I marvel at the effort. It was masterful, shrewd and stunningly preemptive. It's what I want to do with Elvis. (11-12)

Apparent in this passage is that whatever success or standing Jack garners from his study of Hitler is derived not from the quality or discernment of his research but rather from his ability to organize and control his subject, that is his ability to manage Hitler inside the larger structural concerns of academia and the culture market. Jack's role in the system is less that of scholar or researcher than that of administrator or manager of Hitler's celebrity. While it is certainly disturbing that DeLillo's depiction of postmodern America in *White Noise* reveals a culture which appears on the brink of accepting the kind of moral and intellectual relativism that would have Adolf Hitler and Elvis Presley share similar status and standing in a university classroom, what is even more disturbing is the suggestion that the impetus for such a development is edificial, that is, it is the result of what are essentially structural or institutional concerns rather than intellectual or moral ones.

Academia, in *White Noise*, resembles nothing more than a marketplace, and it

is Jack Gladney's job, and his primary function at the College-on-the Hill, to compete in that marketplace as successfully as possible. That the commodity he brings to market happens to be Adolf Hitler, the most infamous purveyor of death and terror of the twentieth century, seems of little significance or special concern to either Jack or the university. In fact Jack has internalized the commercial imperative of corporate academia to such an extent that Hitler, as a subject of immense historical, cultural, and political significance, loses its moral import and becomes a matter that, for Jack, is fundamentally "not a question of good and evil" (63). Jack reduces Hitler to a mere structural tool, a means for career advancement and the accumulation of power within the administrative system that dominates the university. Despite teaching a course which claims to "cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny" (25), Jack manages to completely lose touch with any larger understanding of Hitler, the danger of his ideas, and the historical dilemmas which do indeed make Hitler a question of good and evil for any democratic civilization.

America, for DeLillo, is quickly becoming a country of specialists and technocrats, individuals for whom knowledge exists as nothing more than currency, and for whom privilege and influence are sought through the accumulation of ever more specialized knowledge and expertise to be controlled, organized, and administered in the service of corporatist structures and systems of power. Jack is able to shape a successful academic career based on the study of Hitler, despite being unable to speak German, because he is a shrewd technocrat. He understands that success, in the contemporary academic environment, is more a matter of structural

and administrative resourcefulness than authentic scholarship or academic work.

In *Underworld* DeLillo's evocation of the American military-industrial complex raises many of the same issues as his depiction of academia in *White Noise*. Matt Shay, a talented scientist, is involved in a secret weapons research operation called "the Pocket," an endeavor that his brother Nick describes as "government work that involved classified projects and remote locations" (199). Matt and his fellow scientists and researchers undertake their work without knowledge of its full consequences or implications. They simply fulfill their systemic role, working in their small area of expertise in the service of the secretive larger structure.

> There were people here who weren't sure whether they were doing weapons work. They were involved in exploratory research and didn't know exactly what happened to their findings, their simulations, the results they discovered or predicted. This is one of the underlying themes of the systems business, where all the work connects at levels and geographic points far removed from the desk toil and lab projects of the researchers. (401)

Like Jack, who eventually loses sight of the moral entailments of his work, the most successful scientists of "the Pocket" are the ones who are best able to distance themselves from the implications of their research, and focus on the technical details of the project and the functional demands of the system. Matt calls these scientific technocrats "bombheads" and he describes them in the following manner:

> The bombheads loved their work but weren't necessarily pro-bomb [. . .]. They were the people of superior sensibility, the ones who'd gained a rational mastery over themselves, who were not subject to moral ambivalence, to the sentimental babyshit of consequence and anguish. They were the ones who understood the hard-ass principles of the conflict. (404-405)

"Bombheads" represent the corporatist ideal. Men and woman of reason who are completely given over to the logic of the system, "bombheads" manage the creation and dissemination of information within a large system of power, in this case the military-industrial complex, unconcerned with the larger political, social or moral implications of their actions.

In *White Noise* and *Underworld* large structures of power, be they state, military, corporate or cultural, consume individualism. It is part of their structural imperative to impose a singular vision, a corporatist ethos that emphasizes the subordination of one's individual and moral identity to one's professional or systemic role. In this regard the preeminent organizational structure confronting the individual in contemporary America, and the one which, for DeLillo, functions as the model for postmodern political, social, and cultural structures of all kinds, is the corporation. Through Nick Shay, the central character of *Underworld*, DeLillo offers this description of the danger that the increasing ubiquity of the corporate structure poses to the individual:

> Corporations are great and appalling things. They take you and shape you in

> nearly nothing flat, twist and swivel you. And they do it without overt persuasion, they do it with smiles and nods, a collective inflection of voice. You stand at the head of a corridor and by the time you walk to the far end you have adopted the comprehensive philosophy of the firm, the *Weltanschauung*. (282)

Corporate structures, for DeLillo, are fundamentally undemocratic. They reward conformity, are systemically indisposed to plurality, and discourage the existence of individual perspectives and alternative ideas.

DeLillo's equation here is simple: as more and more of the systems and structures that define postmodern American life become corporatized, as the academy adopts the structural values of the capitalist marketplace and the methodology of industry and the state grow indistinguishable, the role of the individual in America becomes increasingly degraded. DeLillo's recognition of the threat that the growing corporatization of America poses is demonstrated in the following passage from *Underworld*, in which a young radical draws attention to the systemic nature of power in contemporary America:

> We can look around us . . . and see the business executives, the fashion photographers, the government officials, the industrialists, the writers, the bankers, the academics, the pig-faced aristocrats in exile, and we can know the soul of one by the bitter wrinkled body of the other and then know all by the soul of the one. Because they're all part of the same motherfucking thing .

> . . The state, the nation, the corporation, the power structure, the system, the establishment. (575)

The exercise of power, in a corporatist society, is focused around the refinement and control of complex structures. Individuals operate within these structures as managers, experts and consumers, but ultimately corporatist systems function in their own interests, and in a manner that disregards any notion of the public good and makes the contribution of the individual citizen increasingly irrelevant. Why the postmodern individual, as depicted by DeLillo in *White Noise* and *Underworld*, is especially vulnerable to this corporatist obsession with organization and structure, to the great detriment of the role of democratic citizen in contemporary America, is the principal subject of the next section.

**Community, Immortality and the System**

At some point while reading *White Noise* and *Underworld* one begins to understand that, beyond the clever social and cultural commentary, beyond the cogent depiction of contemporary family mores, mass media, and the vagaries of postmodern America lies DeLillo's central preoccupation—"Let me whisper the terrible word, from the Old English, from the Old German, from the Old Norse. Death" (DeLillo 1984 73). Indeed, death is more a shout than a whisper from Don DeLillo in *White Noise* and *Underworld*. In many ways it defines not only his central theme but also

his perspective, the angle from which he approaches the many facets of America's postmodern landscape which are explored in the two novels. DeLillo understands death, not just as an essential element of the human condition, though most certainly that, but also as an inescapable social, cultural, and political fact.

Death is an issue which may not appear in election campaign advertisements or provoke memorable sound-bites during presidential election debates, yet in all of its uncertainty, fearsomeness, and existential angst, death is as central to postmodern American politics as it was to the politics of ancient Rome, medieval Britain or Napoleonic France. Despite remarkable advances in medical technology, considerable increases in average life expectancy, and important political developments which provide substantial protections for individual citizens against arbitrary state power, the political importance of death endures and, as Michael J. Shapiro puts it, "death remains effectively if not officially on the policy agenda" (125). *White Noise* and *Underworld* constitute, in many respects, DeLillo's exploration of the current state of death in America—how it is constructed culturally, how America's postmodern society deals with the anxiety it creates, and, most importantly for our purposes, how death figures in the contemporary American political scene, in particular how it functions as an ideological tool in the service of those political forces in America we are calling corporatist.

Issues relating to death, and the fear of death, intersect with our concerns about corporatism around two central themes of DeLillo's work—technology and the system. Our attentions, being mainly political, will focus on the manner in which contemporary America's obsessions with technology and systems help to create what

John Ralston Saul calls a "politics of immortality," or a democratically unhealthy belief in the eternalness of instrumental systems and structures. This kind of politics, which speaks to the very human desire for immortality, leaves a democratic polis directionless and dependent on systems and on those who control systems for a sense of community, a political environment which serves only to entrench further corporatist practices and values.

Ours is undoubtedly an age obsessed with technology, and it is technology that is the focal point of DeLillo's unravelling of the cultural logic of death and immortality in *White Noise* and *Underworld*. For DeLillo technology has replaced religion and metaphysics as the faith of choice when it comes to confronting the reality of mortality for the postmodern individual, as Murray Siskind articulates in *White Noise* when he councils Jack concerning the best way to deal with his fear of dying:

> You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other [. . .]. It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life, isn't it? It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound. Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it. (285)

True to his character's words, technology in *White Noise* and *Underworld* is

portrayed as both the agent of unnatural death and the harbinger of death deferred, of immortality. DeLillo unmistakably illustrates the paradoxical nature of modern technology in *White Noise* through the co-existence of the two major technological phenomena in the novel—"The Airborne Toxic Event" and Dylar.

Though certainly "The Airborne Toxic Event" does not finally cause Jack's death, and Dylar turns out not to be the "cure" for her fear of death that Babette hoped for, both are trenchant symbols of what DeLillo believes is most dangerous about postmodern America's obsession with technology. "The Airborne Toxic Event," like the atomic bomb in *Underworld*, is the kind of development that alienates the individual from the existentially rich experience of his or her own mortality. With the threat of death so intimately linked to technology in the contemporary world—or as DeLillo succinctly states it in *Underworld* "all technology refers to the bomb" (467)—the postmodern individual is encouraged to view death as the professional concern of those who control and manage technology—scientists and technocrats. There is a sense in DeLillo's work, as Jack in *White Noise* puts it, that technology "makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying," that our obsession with technology is stripping us of an essential connection with our own mortality (142).

This technological alienation is, however, counterbalanced by the modern faith in technology, the sense that it represents unbounded possibilities. Faced with his own mortality, Jack responds to Murray's question concerning whether he feels his suspected impending demise would be premature, with the following:

> Every death is premature. There's no scientific reason why we can't live a hundred and fifty years. Some people actually do it, according to a headline I saw at the supermarket. (283)

For Jack, modern science represents the promise of immortality and technology the capacity to transcend death. As Michael Valdez Moses argues, Jack's attitude towards death is the result of postmodernism's "technological understanding of the world, what Heidegger calls the 'essence' of technology" (67). As Moses explains:

> For DeLillo as for Heidegger the danger of technology is greater on the metaphysical level than on the physical level. At the very least, Jack and his family can see the airborne toxic event and can recognize in it a potential threat to their physical existence. But the most sinister and insidious aspect of modern technology is its more or less undetectable effect on the psyche. (71)

In effect technology threatens to alienate the individual from his/her own existence, from the possibility of experiencing life and death authentically rather than as "simulacra" (to use Baudrillard's term), as an "illusion" (to use Heidegger's term), or as "artificial" (to use Jack's term). It entices the individual into thinking that technology can provide a solution to every problem, an answer to every question and a balm for every pain, and uses as its chief lure the promise of the ultimate solution to the individual's ultimate anxiety—it promises immortality.

Certainly it is true that in *White Noise* Dylar is a drug that does not promise an

individual that he/she will live forever, rather only that it can eliminate an individual's fear of death; that is, it can simulate immortality. Of course DeLillo's point has nothing to do with whether or not technology can actually deliver immortality, but rather that it is its promise that is so alluring for the individual. The significance of Dylar, as a particularly postmodern response to the anxiety of death, lies not in the notion of the technology itself, that is in the idea of a pill that relieves an individual from his/her fear of death, but rather in the methodology it represents, a methodology, as Moses indicates, that is quintessentially corporatist:

> The technocratic and behaviorist approach of Grey Research, the firm in *White Noise* that manufactures Dylar, follows the instrumental reasoning of a purely representational conception of the world; manipulate the signs, deconstruct the symptoms and the cause or referent in effect disappears. (76)

If one believes Jean Baudrillard's contention that postmodern America is a utopia of signs, a culture without referents and a people that "believe in facts, but not facticity" (85), then it is easy to understand how an ideology like corporatism could flourish. As the "technological understanding of the world" increasingly dominates contemporary American culture, and the line between simulation and reality becomes an increasingly blurry one for the individual American psyche, corporate structures have adapted their technocratic methodologies to exploit the power of simulation for their own interests, as DeLillo points out in this passage from *Underworld*, in which he describes the corporate manipulation of the democratic process:

> In the bronze tower we used the rhetoric of aggrieved minorities to prevent legislation that would hurt our business. Arthur Blessing believed, our CEO, that true feeling flows upward from the streets, fully accessible to corporate adaptation. We learned how to complain, how to appropriate the language of victimization. (119)

Corporatist organizations have become experts at appropriating the signs and language of democracy, while simultaneously betraying the fundamental values and ideals on which it is based, and in fact often go so far as to represent themselves as its defenders and protectors.

Early on in *White Noise*, during a conversation with his wife Babette, Jack rather flippantly remarks that in contemporary America "maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands" (6). What this comment suggests, that postmodern America has become so administration obsessed that even death can be conceived of as nothing more than a mere bureaucratic process, is indicative of a perception that DeLillo carefully cultivates in his work, that in contemporary America death is organized and managed in the service of a larger structure, a system which has taken the place of existential or theological understandings of mortality. In the same way that Dylar offers a chemically induced respite for the individual from the anxiety associated with death, corporatism and its obsession with administration and systems tap into the individual fear of mortality by offering a technocratic fantasy of immortality, a world where the possibility of eternity is built into the universal methodology of instrumental reason. Discussing this aspect of corporatism, John

Ralston Saul writes:

> We have, in effect, replaced beliefs with systems, and this has created a new kind of calming device which proposes eternity on earth. The web of Western rational society offers the individual a fixed place as an expert in a self-fulfilling and apparently eternal structure. The very lack of clarity, the lack of clear goals and conclusions, the very ease with which the structure weaves endlessly about us is what makes it resemble the eternal bed of nirvana. (1992 348)

The individual, under corporatist influence, exchanges the power inherent in the idea of democratic citizenship, that is, the power to contribute to the direction and form of society, for the sense of comfort and reassurance that accompanies the corporatist promise of eternal structural stability.

Fixed in his or her position within the system, the individual naturally comes to the conclusion that understanding, clarity of purpose, and a sense of public responsibility are less important than focusing on whatever area of expertise defines one's instrumental usefulness. Corporatist structures offer a sense of belonging for the individual, but it is a sense of belonging that contradicts the very principles of participatory democracy. Jack describes his experience of this corporatist sense of belonging in the following passage from *White Noise*:

> In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to that automated teller machine

> to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval [. . .]. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. (46)

The system from which Jack receives such a strong sense of support and well-being is both distant and invisible, a structure that is beyond either his understanding or control. He is overwhelmed by its efficiency and impressed with its intricateness and size. It demands nothing more from him but that he witness its functioning and accept its blessing; it makes him a passive recipient rather than an active participant in its exercise of power. But most of all Jack finds in the system the promise of eternity, the reassurance that his life and society are being given form and shape by forces which function beyond the limits imposed by mortality.

In *Underworld* both Matt Shay and Sister Edgar are disturbed by the implications of America's growing faith in technology and especially the passivity of their roles in "the all-knowing systems that shape them" (251). Matt who had originally set out to do weapons work because "he'd wanted the edge, the identity, the sense of honing his silhouette, knowing himself a little better" (402), soon discovers that "the Pocket" is certainly no place for individualism or self-knowledge. Assigned a role in a project whose goals and dimensions, beyond the general

knowledge that he "was definitely doing weapons work" (402), are kept secret from him, Matt is unable to fully divorce his sense of personal responsibility and moral conscience from his work. Unlike Jack Gladney, Matt finds no comfort in the grand promise of the system, the knowledge that "Everything connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line" (408).

Matt is haunted by "doubts about the rightness of his role" (404), and, in the kind of visionary moment that Paul Maltby finds characteristic of DeLillo's work, Matt experiences a drug-induced epiphany concerning the shape of power in contemporary America—

> He was surrounded by enemies. Not enemies but connections, a network of things and people. Not people exactly but figures—things and figures and levels of knowledge that he was completely helpless to enter [. . .]. He was bent to the weight of the room, distrustful of everyone and everything here. Paranoid. Now he knew what it meant, this word that was bandied and bruited so easily, and he sensed the connections being made around him, all the objects and shaped silhouettes and levels of knowledge—not knowledge exactly but insidious intent. But not that either—some deeper meaning that existed solely to keep him from knowing what it was. (421)

The next day, sober and "thinking about his paranoid episode at the bombhead party the night before," Matt contemplates the significance of his vision:

> He felt he'd glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can't tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing. (446)

Death, for Matt, like any other commodity in contemporary America, is produced within a system that demands mass uniformity, and which flattens any nuance or individualism in the interests of capital and the marketplace. "And how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension" (465)? This central question posed by Matt in *Underworld* mirrors the failure of Jack to really understand the difference between Hitler and Elvis in *White Noise*. For DeLillo, it is indicative of the precarious situation of the individual in contemporary America that weapons of mass destruction (death) and basic consumer items (prosperity) are systemically connected, that is, they are produced and managed by the same corporate structure in the interests of the same marketplace system.

America has, as Murray counsels in *White Noise*, put its faith in technology. Sister Edgar, in *Underworld*, goes so far as to suggest that the power of modern science, to both destroy and prolong life, has produced in America a "faith that replaces God with radioactivity, the power of alpha particles and the all-knowing systems that shape them" (251). Technology in the contemporary world holds both the promise of immortality and the potential of oblivion for the individual, and thus the individual is confronted with the immense power of those systems and structures

which manage and control technology—the state, corporations, the military, universities—all of which are connected in extraordinarily complicated ways. The power and pervasiveness of these systems are overwhelming for the individual, and, as Sister Edgar realizes by the end of *Underworld*, ultimately bring about the degradation of the role of individuals in determining the shape and direction of society—"the intersecting systems help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped" (826).

The psychological and social influence of the promise of, and desire for, immortality in postmodern America, may have its roots in America's obsession with technology, but it is a drama that ultimately plays itself out on the American political stage. The politics of any country is first and foremost a human endeavor and thus is subject to the influence of what is the most essential of human concerns—the fear of death. The great lesson of Hitler for American democracy, and the key to understanding the nature of Hitler's significance in *White Noise*, is that while culturally Hitler does and always should represent mass murder and death, politically it is essential that he be understood as representative of the dangers inherent in "the politics of immortality," or the effective use of fear of death on the public stage. DeLillo's critique of postmodern America in *White Noise* includes the presence of Hitler for just this reason, for Hitler is the latest and most famous example of a leader who effectively manipulated the great desire for immortality in his country's people for his own political advantage.

Jack's own course on "Advanced Nazism" endeavors to explore the relevance of Hitler to contemporary politics, but significantly it is not Jack who finally offers an

explanation for "the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny" in America. Focusing on the plight of the individual psyche rather than on ideology, it is Murray who offers his understanding of the appeal of Hitler while discussing death with Jack.

> "Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom."
>
> "You're talking about Hitler, I take it."
>
> "Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you [. . .]. You wanted to be helped and sheltered. The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death. 'Submerge me,' you said. 'Absorb my fear.' (287)

Paul A. Cantor rightly argues that this passage shows that "DeLillo understands the psychological appeal of totalitarianism" (48), and John N. Duvall goes so far as to suggest that "*White Noise* posits fear of death as the ground of fascism" (450-451), but this passage also serves to demonstrate that the focus of Hitler's presence in *White Noise* is less concerned with revealing the appeal of ideological totalitarianism than it is with identifying the continuing political relevance of the desire for immortality in contemporary American politics and society. What one recognizes in DeLillo's portrayal of Jack's fascination with Hitler is the implication that, while certainly Hitler's ideas and ideology are more or less banished from the contemporary American political scene, Hitler's methods and heroic political style are still both pervasive and effective in postmodern democratic politics.

The illusion of immortality, a political tool of which Hitler was a master, is so common a fixture of contemporary political theatre that we have come to accept it as a model of leadership. In *White Noise*, at the height of the crisis surrounding the "airborne toxic event," when those in the exposed area, including Jack, are feeling most vulnerable and afraid, Jack cynically awaits the arrival of the state governor—

> It was said that the governor was on his way from the capitol in an executive helicopter. It would probably set down in a bean field outside a deserted town, allowing the governor to emerge, square-jawed and confident, in bush jacket, within camera range, for ten or fifteen seconds, as a demonstration of his imperishability. (130)

Like Jack, we have come to expect our leaders to play the hero, however false and illusory that dramaturgy might be, because leadership, in a corporatist society, is a matter of methodology and image rather than substance and reality. Leaders are merely expected to reflect the values and characteristics of the structures they manage—that is, we expect them to offer the same reassurance of the eternal that we feel in our dependence on rational structures for our sense of belonging and community. Imagining the mock-heroic spectacle of the governor "cheating death" for the TV cameras has the same effect on Jack as watching the evacuation of the local asylum—"It seemed to mean the structure was intact" (128).

As long as the system continues to function in something like a reasonable manner, Jack seems unconcerned about the nature of its leadership or the identity of

those who exercise power within it. Trying to reassure his son that the "airborne toxic event" crisis was being duly managed by some kind of authority, Jack confronts how little he actually knows about the nature of those who have power in postmodern America:

> "They seem to have things under control," I said.
>
> "Who?"
>
> "Whoever's in charge out there."
>
> "Who's in charge?"
>
> "Never mind." (147)

The system has become so complicated that a simple question—"Who's in charge?"—a question whose answer is the very measure of the democratic health of a society, is impossible to answer for Jack.

Jack's son Heinrich seems to understand that Jack's response of "never mind" is indicative of a larger condition—a sense that the postmodern individual inhabits a world that, despite the prolific and unyielding production of data and knowledge, is beyond his/her understanding. Heinrich challenges Jack with the notion that the pervasive acceptance of complication, confusion, and unintelligibility as a natural part of modern social existence is indicative of the diminished status of the individual in contemporary America. "What good is knowledge," Heinrich asks Jack, summing up his argument that the modern individual knows precious little more than the ancient Greeks, "if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It

changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything" (148-49). If it is true, as Jack is informed by SIMUVAC, that as an individual in America "you are the sum total of your data," then it is Heinrich's point that the lack of control and understanding of data and information on the part of the contemporary individual is as defining a characteristic of postmodern America as its technological advancements (141).

It is Neil Postman's contention that the inability to process and control the glut of information which surrounds the individual in our technology-obsessed culture constitutes the development of a new kind of social order, a social order which robs the individual of his/her social perspective. Postman writes:

> The relationship between information and the mechanisms for its control is fairly simple to describe: Technology increases the available supply of information. As the supply is increased, control mechanisms are strained. Additional control mechanisms are needed to cope with new information. When additional control mechanisms are themselves technical, they in turn further increase the supply of information. When the supply of information is no longer controllable a general breakdown of psychic tranquility and social purpose occurs. (72)

In a democracy such a condition is undesirable. When it becomes virtually impossible for individual citizens to understand how their society is directed, that is, how power is exercised, the sense of democratic empowerment and purpose within a

polity is eroded, and citizens are made almost completely dependent on those who either better understand the technology which generates information, or on groups and organizations which have influence on the systems and structures which control information and for which it functions as a currency of power.

As these corporatist groups and organizations increasingly come to dominate the democratic process, citizens begin to feel isolated and increasingly distant from that process. They begin to sense that their participation in the process has little or no real effect on public policy and the shape of their nation. No longer able to identify with a civitas, with the larger political community, individuals increasingly turn to organized interests to represent them, while they turn their attention away from their democratic roles as citizens and instead focus their energies on their systemic roles as consumers and managers. Charles Taylor calls this political condition "fragmentation," and explains the damaging effect that it has on contemporary democratic practice in a passage in *The Malaise of Modernity*:

> The danger is not actual despotic control but fragmentation—that is, a people increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose and carrying it out. Fragmentation arises when people come to see themselves more and more atomistically, otherwise put, as less and less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances. They may indeed feel linked in common projects with some others, but these come more to be partial groupings rather than the whole society: for instance, a local community, an ethnic minority, the adherents of some religion or ideology, the promoters of some special

interest. (112-13)

For Matt Shay in *Underworld*, "the Pocket" functions as just the kind of "partial grouping" which supplants "the whole society" that Taylor describes:

> The Pocket was one of those nice tight societies that replaces the world. It was the world made personal and consistently interesting because it was what you did, and others like you, and it was self-enclosed and self-referring and you did it all together in a place and a language that were inaccessible to others. (DeLillo 412)

However, Matt soon comes to recognize that "The Pocket was just a cozy donut-dunk in a vast hidden system," a corporatist system which constitutes an antagonistic presence for a democracy which depends on the participation and contribution of individual citizens, not their formation into functional groups and organizational interests, for its authority and vitality.

Corporatism, at its heart, is just this kind of weakening of democratic purpose amongst a citizenry. Jean Bethke Elshtain points out that as the drive towards democratic initiative slips away and individual citizens find it more and more difficult to identify with their democratic polity as a political community, that is in the absence of a strong and functional sense of democratic public responsibility and empowerment, "we are thrown back on ourselves in the ever-raging currents of consumer excess, or the cold comfort of ever more computerized and centralized

bureaucracies" (23). To put this another way, one of the inevitable consequences of an increasingly corporatist political culture is a loss of democratic identity, or sense of political citizenship, on the part of the individual, a void which, in contemporary America, is too easily filled by the superficial individualism of consumer culture and the fragmenting identity politics of organized interest groups and the corporate co-option of the American political agenda.

DeLillo's work shows a strong interest in the crisis surrounding definitions of political community and democratic citizenship in postmodern American, a concern he makes apparent early in *White Noise* with the following description of the parade of station wagons which accompanies the start of the new school year at the university where Jack teaches:

> The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. Their summer has been bloated with criminal pleasures, as always. The parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans. The well made faces and wry looks. They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition. The woman crisp and alert, in diet trim, knowing people's names. Their husbands content to measure out the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage. This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything else they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parent they are a collection of the like-minded and the

spiritually akin, a people, a nation. (3-4)

What seems to connect these people, Jack observes, what defines their nationhood for them, is their prosperity, their sense of satisfaction in their shared material lifestyle. In this passage DeLillo suggests that within the mass conformist culture that characterizes postmodern America in his work, community is largely defined by a sense of shared exuberance in the postmodern deluge of signs and commodities which constitute the surface of contemporary America's consumerist way of life. Individualism in such a society, as DeLillo puts in *Underworld*, is swept away by "the convergence of consumer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of choices" (785). For DeLillo, consumerism manages cultural and social possibilities by incorporating individual expression and desire into a system which "burns off the nuance in a culture [. . .] making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream" (785-86). Politically, corporatism does much the same thing, preserving the appearance of individual choice while systemically ensuring that all political possibilities serve the interests of the larger structure.

In *White Noise* Jack tells his students that "to become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone" (73). Jack, as a man longing to release himself from the fears and burdens of his own individualism, is drawn to the powerful images of glorious and eternal nationhood ("parades, rallies and uniforms" [25]) that were so central to Hitler's

political style, because they represent the convergence of community and immortality, the sense that he is part of something larger, something eternal, and thus shielded from both death and loneliness. As an individual he is both lost and preserved in a crowd; he is able to transcend his personal anxieties and responsibilities by being subsumed within a larger, more powerful entity, an entity which imbues him with a magnitude and sense of belonging not available to him as an individual citizen. In *Underworld* the corporation poses the same dilemma, articulated in the novel by Nick's friend and corporate colleague Brian—"Disappear in the company and die. Only I don't do it to disappear. I do it to be visible and audible" (256). The price to be paid in both cases is the forfeiture of one's autonomy, self-consciousness, and self-determination.

Corporatism, of course, is the political and social manifestation of Jack's and Brian's capitulation writ large. The crowd, the system, the corporation, the professional guild, all of the corporatist entities that DeLillo depicts in his work, present the same challenge to America's image of itself as a democracy. To repeat John Ralston Saul's words, "We have, in effect, replaced beliefs with systems," and in doing so have done great damage to the role that the individual citizen must play in deciding the direction of American politics, culture, and society if the nation is to resist the forces of corporatism and continue to legitimately call itself democratic.

*

It would certainly be overstating the case to suggest that *White Noise* and *Underworld*

are Don DeLillo's attempt at a rigorous theorization or systematic analysis of contemporary American corporatism. The specifics of interest group politics and the democratic legitimacy of functional associational pluralism are, at best, matters of marginal concern in DeLillo's work. However, what is of central concern to DeLillo is the damage that postmodern culture and society have done to the individual psyche. Consumerism, the relationship between death and technology, the changing nature of postmodern community, and the growing pervasiveness of corporate structures and marketplace systems in contemporary culture and politics are some of the issues which converge in DeLillo's examination of the nature of postmodern individualism and the role of the individual in contemporary America. Such subject matter is unavoidably political, especially when one considers that DeLillo's novel is set in a society which purports to be democratic, that is, a society that is supposed to define and direct itself based on the participation and contribution of its individual citizens. Put simply, my aim in this chapter has been to suggest that the constellation of themes which DeLillo outlines to express his perspective concerning the degradation of the individual in postmodern America, points inescapably to the growing influence, in contemporary America, of an ideology that is anti-individual and anti-democratic. It is my argument that the best, most useful term to describe this ideology is corporatism.

## Conclusion

Certainly the period of American history which frames my discussion here, from the end of WW II (Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* was published in 1948) to the brink of the end of the twentieth century (DeLillo's *Underworld* was published in 1997) is a significant, varied, and complicated era. It is a period in which America has achieved unprecedented levels of prosperity, and unparalleled influence on the international political stage. It is also a period in which American democracy has faced significant challenges and undergone remarkable transformations. From the civil rights movement and the increased political participation of woman, to the increasing power of television in the political process, democracy in America is not the same as it was before 1945. That much, I would venture, is indisputable.

Today America is confronted with many challenges to the integrity and vitality of its democracy. As even a cursory glance at a current newspaper or political magazine will indicate, corporatism is an unavoidable aspect of the contemporary American political environment. While such issues as corporate welfare, the ever-expanding influence of Washington lobbyists, and an American foreign policy increasingly dominated by the narrow interests of the corporate agenda point unavoidably in a corporatist direction, no issue speaks to the dangers of corporatism to American democracy as directly as the current system of financing elections. Discussing the most recent presidential election of 1996 in a 1998 article in *Atlantic Monthly*, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman writes:

> The fundraising scandal of 1996 was a very real tragedy, with very real consequences for our democracy. People at the highest levels in both political parties did more than just strain credulity: they betrayed the public trust. In their breathless, unbounded rush to raise even more money for even more television advertising, they effectively hung a giant FOR SALE sign on our government and the whole of our political process. They also gave Americans, already beset by cynicism, good reason to doubt whether citizens have a true and equal voice in their own government. (15-16)

As Senator Lieberman's words indicate, corporatism in contemporary America is more than just an abstract political theory or ideological concept. Rather corporatism is a very relevant and immediate political presence with real consequences for American democracy.

To witness and to theorize American democracy in the second half of the twentieth century is, of course, the province of historians, political scientists, journalists, and intellectuals. Yet, historically, the state and health of American democracy have also been a great concern of the American writer, in particular the American novelist. Following in the great tradition of Whitman, Emerson, Melville, Irving, Twain, Adams, Dos Passos, Steinbeck and Sinclair, the so-called "postmodernist" novelists Mailer, DeLillo, and Pynchon, or so I have argued, show a marked attention to issues surrounding the vitality of democracy in America.

That I have chosen to focus on one particular issue, the issue of corporatism, is no indication of a narrow range of political concern in the works that I have

discussed. Certainly the breath and scope of political observation and comment in the novels of Mailer, Pynchon, and DeLillo stretch well beyond the specific concerns of this thesis. However, as I stated in the introduction, it is not my intention to brand any of these writers as single issue novelists or anti-corporatist advocates; rather, I simply set out to confirm that corporatism is a useful political reference to have available when approaching the constellation of themes that appear in the literature discussed. The fundamental argument on which this thesis rests, that corporatism is a shared political and thematic concern of three major American postwar novelists, ultimately demonstrates that corporatism is insufficiently noted by critics of this literature to the significant detriment of a full understanding of the work of each respective writer, and at the cost of firmly grasping the full range of political concerns represented in the postmodern American novel.

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