

NORMAN MAILER,
“THE WHITE NEGRO,” AND
NEW CONCEPTIONS OF THE SELF
IN POSTWAR AMERICA

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DAVID KIRTZER, THE CURRENT PROVOST AT BROWN UNIVERSITY, tells an interesting story about Norman Mailer. In 1967, while an undergraduate at Brown, Kirtzer was enrolled in an English literature class focusing on Mailer's writings. Kirtzer was also the chapter president of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and a day before a scheduled examination he left for Washington to take part in the March on the Pentagon. Unfortunately, Kirtzer was arrested in the march and, on the following day, he was despairing because instead of being in the classroom, he was in jail—completely missing his exam on Norman Mailer. However, as fate would have it, locked up in jail with him was none other than Norman Mailer.

So Kirtzer went up to Mailer and said, “You know, I'm missing an exam today—on YOU!”

To which Mailer replied, “Really? Where do you go to school?” When Kirtzer told him it was Brown University, Mailer responded, “Stop worrying. I'll take care of it.” Then, right there in Jail, Mailer wrote a little note which read: “Dear Professor, Please excuse David Kirtzer from his exam, as he is with me, protesting against the carnage in Vietnam.”

As Kirtzer relays the episode, when he finally returned to Brown University his professor got into a big fight with him ... over who got to keep the letter.

As this little story demonstrates, by the late 1960s Norman Mailer was already a cultural icon, widely seen as an irreverent rebel with a progressive vision. Mailer's scathing critique of social conformity, his championing of existentialism, his warm support for the Civil Rights Movement, and his opposition to the war in Vietnam made it clear to most that he was no friend of conservatism. However, when it came to issues of identity—specifically, race and gender—Mailer's progressive credentials during the late 1960s and early 1970s came under heavy attack. Feminists like Kate Millett and Susan Brownmiller denounced him bitterly, while his standing amongst many of the Black intelligentsia continued to plummet due to his authorship of the infamous 1957 essay, "The White Negro." In explaining why the Black Americans should serve as the inspiration and model for enlightened white Americans, Mailer had written:

The cameos of security for the average white: mother and home, job and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible. The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro has stayed alive and continued to grow by following the needs of his body when he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence, that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm (214).

Needless to say, most Americans today—particularly those in the academy—would be disturbed by Mailer's characterization of the African-American experience. However, in the late 1960s when black pride was in the ascendancy—a development reflected in the growing popularity of afros, dashikis, cornrows, the proliferation of Black Studies programs, and in the very term "Black Is Beautiful"—many African Americans found Mail-

er's words particularly offensive. Writing only a few months after the March on the Pentagon, Gary Marx observed that cultural rebels like Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac had an image of African Americans that was strikingly similar to the stereotypes embraced by the likes of John E. Rankin, Theodore Bilbo, and James Eastland. "Mailer and Kerouac," he wrote, "differ from them only on the emotive dimension of prejudice; they like super-sexed, narcotics-using, primitive, easy-going, spontaneous, irresponsible, violent Negroes while racists dislike them" (168). However, there is another way we can read "The White Negro." Putting aside, for the moment, the negative racial stereotyping, "The White Negro" succeeded in articulating an alternative vision of the self—a vision reflecting a new mood which was culturally resonant and in the ascendancy during the Age of Eisenhower.

This analysis is at odds with the standard narrative, not to mention Mailer's own account, of the decade of the fifties—a period seen by most journalists and academics as a time of complacency, conformity, and conservatism. In arguing that "The White Negro" did not simply tap into an oppositional undercurrent but, in an exaggerated form, actually reflected the dominant mood of the culture is to break with nearly everything we thought we knew about the early cold war years. Upon closer inspection, it would seem our distorted image of the 1950s has been caused by a failure to distinguish between social conventions and private behavior—or, to state the matter a little differently, by a failure to differentiate between what people professed publicly to believe, and what they actually practiced privately.

If one focuses not on social conventions but, instead, on private behavior, what one sees during the early cold war years is a picture of dramatic change—a time when a religiously oriented vision was fast losing its hold over the American Mind and the American Soul. How else are we to explain the emergence of the Sexual Revolution during the forties and fifties—a development attested to by soaring rates of single-motherhood and premartial pregnancies occurring during the supposedly staid Eisenhower years?

In "The White Negro," Mailer seemed to regard white middle-class America as uptight and sexually repressed. While partially correct, Mailer failed to see what the majority of Americans at the time, and till this day, fail to see: a great and broad liberalization that was unfolding almost unnoticed during the fifties. In 1949, for example, when the public discovered Ingrid Bergman was planning to leave her husband and daughter for Italian

director Roberto Rossellini, she was essentially banished from Hollywood. For more than seven years, Bergman resided in Europe—neither appearing in an American film, nor setting foot on American soil. By contrast, when Eddie Fisher left his wife and two children to be with the recently widowed Elizabeth Taylor nearly a decade later, the repercussions were relatively light. Although the behavior of Taylor and Fisher infuriated some fans—according to Eddie Fisher’s memoirs, at the height of the scandal he and Taylor were receiving about 7,000 nasty letters per week—both Taylor and Fisher immediately resumed their successful careers (149–150). Indeed, it was only a year after the scandal erupted, in 1959, that Taylor received an Academy Award nomination for her role in *Suddenly Last Summer*, and only two years after the scandal when Taylor became the first actor to sign a million dollar contract to appear in a motion picture (Leonard 9).

The different responses to the Bergman and Taylor scandals suggests attitudes were evolving during the 1950s, but even more significant than shifting attitudes were notable changes in behavior that were occurring. Despite the greater availability of effective birth control, the rate of single motherhood soared during the middle decades of the twentieth century, rising by more than threefold in the years between 1940 and 1960 (Bureau of the Census 52). What these figures indicate is that at the time of “The White Negro,” when Mailer was bemoaning the reticence and conformity of the culture, a sexual revolution was already well under way.

The medicalization of alcohol dependency provides us with another way to gauge changes in popular attitudes. In 1944, less than 10 percent of Americans considered alcoholism to be an illness rather than a personal failing. However, by 1949, public opinion had so shifted that a full third of Americans considered alcoholism to be an illness, and by the mid-1950s a clear majority of Americans held this opinion (Rothe 398–399).

The success of *The Lost Weekend* is an early indication of the public’s openness to a more sympathetic portrayal of the alcoholic in the immediate postwar period. The story of a troubled man who goes on a five-day drinking binge, *The Lost Weekend* was one of the most acclaimed movies of 1945. Initially, however, the success of *The Lost Weekend* seemed anything but certain. As actor Ray Milland recalled, when he first accepted the leading role in the film “some of my friends told me that I was committing professional suicide.” Yet, in the end, critics and audiences alike responded favorably and sympathetically to the character of Don Birnam. As the movie made plain,

although Birnam lied, stole, and appeared weak and irresponsible, these vices were more indicative of a terrible medical illness than of a deficiency in moral character. Thus viewers cheered at the movie's conclusion, when Birnam's girlfriend foils his suicide attempt and convinces him to seek help for his drinking problem. Far from sabotaging his film career, Milland's portrayal of an alcoholic received critical acclaim and an Oscar for Best Actor ("Movie of the Week" 133–136).

By the close of the 1950s, public attitudes toward alcoholism had undergone a complete revolution in less than a generation. What is more, some of the country's leading corporations—including General Motors, IBM, Shell Oil, General Foods, and Revlon—were contributing money to the National Council on Alcoholism (NCA), the chief advocate of the disease model; and, in 1959, President Eisenhower designated the first week of December as "Alcohol Information Week" (National Center 3).

Even in the family, the area one would least expect it to occur, a great liberalization was under way during the fifties. As a wealth of sociological studies make clear, parenting in America was moving in a more permissive direction in the fifteen years following the Second World War. The publication of Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946) did much to persuade parents to adopt a milder, less regimented approach in the rearing of their children. In his manual, Spock encouraged parents to abandon the behaviorism that had dominated child-rearing strategies since the 1920s and, in its place, accept a style of parenting that was more relaxed. In Spock's understanding, the strict discipline of the child was entirely unwarranted. "The things that keep us from doing 'bad' things to each other," wrote Spock "is the feelings we have of liking people and wanting them to like us." Consequently, if parents are "sure in their own minds how they expect him [the child] to behave, and tell him reasonably, not too irritably, they will have all the control over him that they need" (271). One sign of the popularity of Spock's message was the success of his book. With the exception of the Bible, *The Common Sense Book* has sold more copies than any book in the history of the English language.

Part of the reason a more permissive approach to parenting resonated so strongly after World War II is because of mounting concerns about the dangers of authoritarianism. As Americans emerged victorious from the Second World War, they sought to understand how a country as advanced as Germany could have allowed a man like Hitler to assume power—and they

wondered if the same thing could happen in America someday. Could the combination of forces which turned an educated German citizenry into a herd of obedient foot-soldiers have a similar effect on the American population? Among leading thinkers and opinion makers, the answer was a resounding “yes.” As they saw it, the problem with the German population, and potentially with any population, was an excessive submissiveness toward authority.

In the decade following the Second World War, a golden age for psychology, this explanation acquired a great deal of currency. Accordingly, a number of social scientific classics written during this time, such as Theodor Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality*, Erich Fromm’s *Man for Himself*, David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, Gordon Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice*, and William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, attempted to grapple with the issue of personal submissiveness.

While not as well known today as in the fifties, the image of the subservient German remains strong today. An episode in the Fox-Television cartoon series “The Simpsons” speaks to this point. In the episode, a self-help guru lecturing in Springfield advises the audience to let go of its hang-ups, and try to be more like the mischievous boy Bart Simpson who is in touch with his “inner child.” As a result, many of the adults in Springfield begin imitating Bart, acting in a spontaneous, carefree way and generally shirking their responsibilities. At the height of the frenzy, local anchorman Kent Brockman makes the on-air announcement: “Springfield will have its first annual ‘Do What You Feel’ Festival this Saturday. Whenever you feel like showing up, it will be a welcome change from our annual ‘Do What We Say’ Festival, started by German settlers in 1946” (“Bart’s Episode” #88).

In the effort to define themselves in opposition to the stereotypical obedient German, the spotlight in the 1950s quickly centered on child rearing. According to the conventional wisdom of the day, the origins of the “Authoritarian Man” were to be found in his childhood. That is to say that the chief reason submissive people were willing to follow an authoritarian strong man like Hitler or Mussolini was to be found during their childhood when they were forced to submit to excessively domineering parents whose strict discipline and exacting rules facilitated an uncritical obedience to authority. As Samuel Flowerman, a leading proponent of this view, explained, “research findings indicate that so far the key to the difference between the authoritarian and democratic personalities lies in the relationship between parents

and children. Learning to disagree with one's parents may be the capstone of a democratic personality" (28). In light of these broad cultural concerns, the less exacting approach to child rearing promoted by the likes of Spock received the enthusiastic praise of experts, and the broad backing of parents.

The medicalization of deviancy, liberalizing attitude toward sex, and a more relaxed approach to parenting represented a departure from an older and more traditional Christian morality. Yet more than any factor, the explosive growth of psychology during the forties and fifties gave rise to an increasingly secular culture. Mailer may have regarded White America as repressed, but, if true, that was a condition many Americans were attempting to escape. Between 1940 and 1960, clinical psychology came into its own, with membership in the American Psychological Association growing more than sixfold (American Psychological Association, 1960).

One of the reasons clinical psychology grew so briskly was because, in the aftermath of the war, many mental health professionals decreased their focus on the problems of the severely ill or the criminally insane, and instead turned their attention to the relatively mundane problems of ordinary people. Joining the proliferating ranks of psychologists were psychiatrists, psychiatric social workers, and, as we will discuss later, an explosion of pastoral counselors. Together, these mental health professionals democratized psychology, bringing it out of the prison and asylum and into the larger American community.

No less important than the growth of psychology was the changing emphasis of psychological counseling. While Freudianism reigned in the early forties, by the close of the 1950s, it was fast losing ground to the humanistic school of psychology, best exemplified by Carl Rogers. According to Rogers, at the core of every person lies the actualizing tendency—an internal mechanism that is positive, forward-looking, and attempts to push the individual toward his full potential. The job of the therapist, therefore, is not to somehow "cure" the patient, but something far more modest. Through the creation of an accepting atmosphere, the goal is to get the individual to unleash the actualizing tendency and, by so doing, assist the clients in healing themselves (Rogers 415–421).

One would think if forced to choose between humanistic psychology and Sigmund Freud, between the so-called client-centered approach championed by Carl Rogers and orthodox psychoanalysis, most Christian leaders would cast their lot with the Freudians. Freud may have held that most of

man's anxieties arose out of his sexual repression, but, at the same time, he believed much of man's repression—and the anguish that accompanies it—are a part of human existence and a necessary development for the functioning of civilization. Likewise, while Freud may have thought psychoanalysis could be helpful in some limited situations, he did not believe in the perfectibility of man—insisting internal conflict and disharmony were an inevitable part of human existence. In short, traditional Christianity's understandings of the human condition and Freud's secularized vision of man were not altogether incompatible: in the case of the former, there was the belief in original sin; in the case of the latter, there was a clear-eyed appreciation of mankind's limitations.

Humanistic psychology, however, had few of these restraints. Its emphasis was on man's ability to persevere, to overcome, to triumph. Thus, throughout the writings of Carl Rogers and his close colleague Abraham Maslow, the themes of "potential" and "growth" continually reappear. Therefore, it seems counterintuitive Protestant churches would choose Rogers over Freud, but embrace Rogers they did—and with great enthusiasm.

As Seward Hiltner, editor of *Pastoral Psychology* and the author of the most frequently used book in the teaching of ministerial counseling, observed, Carl Rogers was "more concretely influential" in the pastoral counseling movement "than any other individual" (Holifield 265). This mattered a great deal during the 1950s because Americans were approximately three times as likely to go to a minister to assist them dealing with a problem of psychological nature than they were to consult a psychologist or a psychiatrist (Gurin 121). In other words, there was a lot of psychological counseling going on during the fifties, but the bulk of this counseling was not occurring on the psychologist's couch, but in a minister's office.

The Protestant churches' acceptance of Rogers, and their lack of enthusiasm for Freudian analysis, speaks to a larger question. During the 1930s and 1940s Freudian analysis was rarely embraced by religion because it was seen as too liberal. However, during the 1950s churches were slow to embrace psychoanalysis because they tended to see it as too conservative. Put simply, during the peace and prosperity of the Eisenhower years, when trust in the government was high and faith in the future abounded, psychoanalysis was simply seen as too dark, too depressing, too inflexible, and too inhibiting for an increasing number of Americans. To be sure, the politics of the 1950s were conservative. However, once we scratch the surface, what we find underneath

are far-reaching changes unfolding on a grassroots level during the Age of Eisenhower—changes which should have heartened feminists, secularists, progressives, and even Norman Mailer himself.

Yet these developments should not surprise us altogether. In order for values to liberalize to any appreciable extent, as they did a decade later, such a shift in private sentiments *had* to occur first. As long as there was a dominant personality type that looked upon impulses with suspicion and hostility, that took seriously the notion of original sin, and that placed a greater value on self-mastery than self-expression, the extent to which behavioral codes could loosen would have been severely limited.

So, like other critics of the era—such as David Reisman, Gordon Allport, Erich Fromm, and William Whyte—Norman Mailer's hand-wringing about the lack of individuality in American Society was not a substantiation of his claims but of the reverse. In an ironic way, the resonance of "The White Negro" during the late 1950s was further evidence of an ascendant spirit during the postwar era—one which was more secular, more expressive, and—in the aggregate—less conformist than anything that had come before.

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