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David Riesman, Alexis de Tocqueville and History: 
A Look at The Lonely Crowd after Forty Years

by WILLIAM PALMER

Early forty years ago the Yale University Press published a sociological investigation of the American character titled The Lonely Crowd, written by David Riesman, Reuel Denney, and Nathan Glazer.1 Expecting a modest return on the book, Yale initially commissioned a press run of only a thousand copies. But, to almost everyone's surprise, The Lonely Crowd became a blockbuster best-seller. By 1954 it appeared in paperback and had sold over 500,000 copies. Its principal author graced the cover of Time magazine, and in 1958 he accepted the Henry Ford II Chair at Harvard.2

The astonishing success of The Lonely Crowd cannot be attributed to its inspirational or uplifting message. The authors described a doubt-ridden, leaderless America, whose people lack a sense of values, are overwhelmed by conformity, dominated by friends and peer-group pressures, and slouch toward a Bethlehem none of them is certain still exists or is even worth seeking.

Some of Riesman's conclusions had been anticipated more than a century before by the French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville undertook an extended journey through America in the 1830s and wrote a book, Democracy in America, and numerous letters reflecting on his experiences. His conclusions remain riveting today. Before Democracy in America, Europeans perceived America as a reflection of Europe in its infancy. Tocqueville stood this idea on its head. America, he informed Europeans, is not your childhood; it is your future. Democracy and the rejection of an aristocratic past, which Tocqueville perceived as the principal products of American culture, mark the future of Europe as well.

Equally important, Tocqueville did not fear the impact of individualism in early America. Instead, as early as the 1830s, Tocqueville detected evidence of a growing conformity in American life and the potential for developing a “nation of sheep,” which disturbed David Riesman a century later. Tocqueville attributed the lack of individualism in America to the tyranny imposed by majority rule. Too many aspects of American life, he thought, must be diluted for mass consumption. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press, for example, mean

2. For the purpose of simplicity, I have generally referred to David Riesman as the author of The Lonely Crowd.
very little because the majority will not tolerate divergent or eccentric opinion and complex ideas must be simplified for mass consumption.3

Riesman employed many of Tocqueville’s insights, but Tocqueville’s work was only a part of a larger historical vision in The Lonely Crowd. Riesman’s interpretive framework spanned the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Reformation, and Jacksonian America in an effort to place modern American malaise in a broader historical context. Riesman admitted that he relied heavily on Tocqueville’s impressions since there was a lack of hard evidence on American political, religious, and social attitudes in the 1830s. Presently, however, there exists a great deal of new evidence, not simply on Jacksonian America but on many of the other components of The Lonely Crowd’s historical vision.

This essay will attempt to examine how well some of the historical contentions in The Lonely Crowd stand up today. It is, therefore, not a critique of The Lonely Crowd, which has been subjected to numerous exhaustive and searching examinations by sociologists, and surely David Riesman and his collaborators cannot be held responsible for evidence which has come to light since their findings were published.4 But it may be instructive to examine how one of the most remarkable books of the 1950s has withstood the test of time.

The Lonely Crowd depended very heavily on population theory. Riesman followed very closely the ideas of Frank Notestein, who isolated three distinctive kinds of societies. First, Notestein identified societies possessing both high birth and high death rates and described them as having “high growth potential” as soon as the death rate is reduced. Second, he defined societies of “transitional growth” as those where the death rate has actually decreased, allowing population to grow. Finally, Notestein placed societies which have passed both phases as entering a period of “incipient decline.”5

In The Lonely Crowd Riesman contended that the kind of culture possessed by a society could be linked in some cases to its stage of population growth. Societies of high growth potential, for example, create a culture that Riesman defined as “tradition-directed.” With high birth and death rates, little change occurs in the social order, and little energy is directed toward agriculture, technology, or medicine. Conformity in tradition-directed societies is ensured by clans, castes, and professional guilds. Riesman cited the western European Middle Ages (400–1500) as one example of a tradition-directed society.6

Population, of course, increased rapidly between 1400 and 1800 as Europe recovered from the Black Death, and Riesman suggested that increased social mobility and the possibility of rapid accumulation of capital, exploration, and intensive expansion in the production of certain goods created a more motivated and less conforming human being, which Riesman described as the inner-

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5. Ibid., pp. 10-26.
directed individual. The increased range of choices for early modern (1400–1800) Europeans made it possible for certain individuals to break away from the bonds imposed by traditional society and tradition direction. Riesman believed that inner-directed individuals have their values and goals implanted early in life by their parents and that inner-directed individuals are simply not satisfied with behavioral conformity. Instead they seek new directions in social conduct and religion (for example, the Protestant faith) and to establish concrete patterns of behavior and direction for their children.7

Riesman incorporated many of Tocqueville’s ideas in his discussion of societies facing incipient population decline. American population was growing in the 1830s, but Tocqueville still detected some signs of the problems Riesman suggested would plague societies of incipient population decline. People in these kinds of societies, Riesman argued in The Lonely Crowd, lack confidence in their own opinions and ability to make decisions. Their sense of direction comes from their peer group, friends, and the media. Riesman called taking direction in this fashion “other-direction.” The other-directed individual compulsively seeks approval from others, tends to withdraw from society because he finds it too complex, and leaves it to others to defend his interests. The insecurities of other-directed individuals are revealed most painfully in their attitudes toward child rearing. Where inner-directed parents have few doubts about how to raise their children, the other-directed parent doubts his own ability and, lacking confidence, looks obsessively to others and to child-rearing manuals for guidance.8

Written in 1950, The Lonely Crowd countered the Marxist critique of capitalism and those, such as Karl Polanyi or C. Wright Mills, who blamed America’s problems on the failure of elites. While the authors of The Lonely Crowd were not conservatives nostalgically recalling the individualism of earlier ages, they did reject explanations of American malaise which stressed greed, capitalism, and rampant individualism. Indeed, Riesman found a lack of individualism to be at the core of the problem.

In the 1950s the historical vision embedded in these contentions was widely, if not universally, accepted. Today, however, it can only be accepted if a number of provisos and qualifications are included. First, the static quality which Riesman attributed to the Middle Ages must be rejected. Demographers have discovered a population revolution in western Europe between 900 and 1200. This population explosion stimulated commerce, began a wave of urbanization, and contributed to the development of a stable business community. Such business practices as credit, interest, and check writing appear to have been developed (or redeveloped) by businessmen, by bankers, and by monks during this time.9

Nor can the Middle Ages be regarded as technologically static. Agricultural innovations such as the metal plow, the whippetree, and the three-field system

7. Ibid., pp. 14-17.
8. Ibid., pp. 17-25.
9. These developments are discussed in Carlo M. Cipolla, Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700 (New York, 1976).
may seem minor to us, but they provided the necessary food production to support the growing population. Water power was harnessed as a new and effective energy source. Stone quarrying, coal and iron ore mining, and cathedral building were other industries which formed the backbone of the medieval economy and required a sophisticated technology. Finally, the view of the Middle Ages as a rigidly conformist society has been demolished by the work of numerous scholars. Jeffrey Burton Russell, in an impressive number of books, has demonstrated the wide range of deviance from conventional religious practices. And, in his popular study of a medieval French town, Montaillou, Le Roy Ladurie uncovered a community divided by class tensions as well as religious and social deviance. Students of medieval intellectual history, such as Walter Ullman and Francis Oakley, have analyzed a thriving body of political thought. So Riesman’s picture of a static, conformist Middle Ages has not been sustained by recent scholarship.10

Some of Riesman’s conceptions of early modern Europe (1400-1800) have also been called into question. In analyzing the shift from tradition-directed to inner-directed societies during this period, Riesman relied heavily on Max Weber’s classic The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber, of course, argued that Protestant ideas had in them the spirit of capitalist free enterprise and a connection, if only tenuous, exists between Reformation theology and the growth of capitalism. Weber’s argument, however, has been criticized on the grounds that capitalism is neither a product of the Reformation era nor an exclusively Protestant phenomenon. It is medieval if not ancient in origin and was practiced by Catholics, such as the Medicis of Florence and the Fuggers of Germany, as well as Protestant Englishmen and Dutchmen. Calvinism also attracted Transylvanian nobles, the English and Dutch gentry, and Scottish tradesmen who were not the agents of capitalist development. Finally, many Protestant teachings on such things as usury and the proper treatment of the poor, alleged to link the Reformed Church to the pursuit of gain, were too remote from the core of Reformation doctrine to have the effect attributed to them. Thus the Weberian synthesis employed in The Lonely Crowd holds few supporters today.11

Moreover, in a larger way, it must seem a subtle irony that at the same time that Riesman and collaborators were stressing the importance of convulsive change in the early modern world, a French scholar named Fernand Braudel was completing a doctoral dissertation in which he stressed continuity and the absence of change in the early modern world. Braudel’s dissertation was published in 1948 as The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, and in it he developed a detailed, hierarchical system for the


study of history. The historian, according to Braudel, should examine first the essential economic and demographic facts of a particular period, proceed to social structure, and only in the final stage of analysis consider intellectual, religious, cultural, and political developments. Braudel derided these as “événement.” Only the first tier really mattered, and since the essential subject matter for the historian was the material condition of the masses, one could look at the period 1400-1800 and conclude that nothing, absolutely nothing, changed. Human beings remained shackled by economic and demographic variables. Indeed, Braudel’s colleague at the École pratique des hautes études, Le Roy Ladurie, has coined the phrase, “l’histoire immobile” to describe the period. 12

Most historians accept Braudel’s contention that the early modern period can no longer be regarded, as Riesman did, as a period of surpassing change and economic revolution. Europe remained rural and agricultural and its peoples dependent upon the economic and demographic variables that seemed always to have governed their lives. Most historians, however, would not accept Braudel’s dismissal of the importance of politics, culture, religion, science, and law. And historians of early modern Europe have explored a multitude of activities in recent years, including crime and the family, to arrive at a clearer picture of European society. The picture emerging from this recent work is of change not as pervasive as Riesman suggested but of a society not as static as Braudel suggested. On one hand, almost all Europeans seem to have conducted themselves under the guidance of a conception of the universe which stressed rank, order, hierarchy, and degree. Whether placed under a rubric of a “great chain of being” or a “body politic,” these concepts expressed an ideal of harmony and a conception of society as a living organism in which each human being had a clear role. Order was the ultimate goal of such a society and could only be threatened when some person or group wished to step out of its place in the hierarchy. This mental world, embraced by most men and women, presented a formidable social and intellectual obstacle to social change. A fairly rigid concept of order survived at least until the French Revolution and perhaps later, although it was forced to absorb numerous shocks and fractures. Even the beginnings of industrialization did not completely destroy it. 13

On the other hand, several developments during the early modern period did pose a threat to the social order. First, between 1400 and 1800 most cities experienced unprecedented population growth, accompanied by a series of other economic and social transformations. With this population growth, economic activity increased, and the towns, flooded with immigrant servants, laborers, apprentices, and vagrants, experienced a serious increase in crime. The countryside as well was inundated with smugglers, poachers, roving gangs of convicts, and food rioters. So pervasive is the evidence of criminal activity in England, for example, that early modern English society sometimes appears to be on the edge

of anarchy, the concept of order simply a thin veneer masking social tensions and class hostility.¹⁴

But, despite certain disruptive qualities, the impression of a hierarchical, stable Europe remains. Society continued to be predominantly rural, and most people spent their entire existence in the closely knit world of the local village. Rule of law and the perdurability of concepts of order and harmony survived while depending in most cases only on persuasion and propaganda rather than coercion. Justice and good government in most localities was maintained by unpaid, untrained amateurs who could easily have avoided their obligations. In England there was no militia to force compliance. Obedience depended mainly on the willingness of most people to conform. It certainly appears, then, that it was possible to inculcate a sense of order even in the midst of disorder.¹⁵

The concept of order, however, could in several respects uphold Riesman’s view of the inner-directed individual in early modern Europe. A critical component of the concept of order was the superiority of the parent to the child. And if that kind of direction and superiority was maintained by parents, Riesman may be right about the dominance of inner-direction of early modern society. In The Lonely Crowd Riesman described early modern parents in many cases as individuals who were able to conduct their lives without rigid or apparent tradition direction. Early modern parents, he contended, regarded child rearing as a conscious task, and they were able to implant their own sense of direction in their children. Riesman cited as examples the strict regimens maintained in Puritan families and the zealous training that John Stuart Mill received from his father. The elder Mill had his son learning Greek at three, Latin at eight, interspersed with regular rigorous training in history, arithmetic, and logic. The younger Mill recalled that his father “demanded of me not only the utmost that I could do, but much that I could by no possibility have done.”¹⁶ By contrast Riesman believed that modern parents are increasingly in doubt about how to raise their children. They lack confidence in their own values and abdicate their responsibilities by turning to the media for direction. Inner-directed parents, like James Mill, entertained no such doubts, and consequently the parental role has diminished.

Only sociologists and child development specialists can tell us if Riesman is correct about the modern diminution of parental roles. But his vision of the early modern family must be amended. To be certain, discipline was enforced by parents with a rigor that would shock many people today. Yet the purpose of that discipline is ambiguous. Parental discipline did seek in many cases to create a confident adult, but it also sought to create a child who would accept his place in the greater scheme of the universe and demand that others accept their place as well. Early modern parents also seem capable of greater doubt and introspec-

⁴⁴ The literature on crime is by now enormous. See especially E. P. Thompson, Whigs and Hunters (New York, 1975); and John Brewer and John Styles, An Ungovernable People (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980).
tion that Riesman would have allowed. In a work available to Riesman in 1948, Edmund Morgan’s *The Puritan Family*, parents in colonial New England were depicted as unable to maintain the rigorous demands their religion expected them to impose upon their children. Fearful that their children would be deprived of the blessings of church members, Puritan parents severely reduced the requirements for membership to ensure their children’s security, thereby allowing their anxiety over their children to exceed their love of God. In England in the 1630s governmental plans for compulsory apprenticeship of children were thwarted primarily by parental reluctance to part with their offspring. An important recent book by Michael MacDonald has also revealed that in the seventeenth century, as in the twentieth, mental distress often originated from family tension and conflict. Thus, the picture of the stern, rigid early modern parent and the obedient, deferential child can only be accepted with caution.  

At the same time, powerful pressures in early modern Europe existed to enforce village norms and conformity. In recent years several historians have contributed to our understanding of the charivari: a complex ritual by which such embarrassments as cuckolded husbands and childless couples were deliberately and publicly humiliated to force them to conform to community norms. Countless women suffered the humiliations of the dunking stool. As Derek Hirst has recently remarked, “the incessant nosiness and back-biting so characteristic of early modern village life made such controls stronger than might be thought today.” Thus, *The Lonely Crowd*’s picture of a largely nonconformist preindustrial Europe must be rejected.

The age of Jackson (1820-1840) in America is the point where the ideas of Riesman and Tocqueville merged the most closely, and the Jacksonian era has inspired a deluge of scholarship. For most of the twentieth century, perspectives on the Jacksonian era were expressed most forcibly by the “Progressive” historians like Beard, Trimble, and especially Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. These scholars believed that the age was dominated by a clash of business-oriented Whigs who were opposed by Jackson and his democratic, proletarian followers. Schlesinger, in his prize-winning study, *The Age of Jackson*, contended that Jackson vigorously opposed the business interests while fighting gallantly to protect the rights of the common man.

Over the past forty years, however, historians have challenged many aspects of Schlesinger’s interpretation. By the 1950s and ’60s, for example, “Counter-Progressive” historians, such as Richard Hofstadter and Lee Benson, demonstrated that Jackson and his supporters maintained as many links to capitalists,
bankers, and land speculators as they did to the workingman. Moreover, where Schlesinger saw Jacksonian America as sharply divided on the issue of the impact of capitalism, Hofstadter found that Democrats and Whigs overwhelmingly agreed in their ideas about America and its future. Hofstadter detected among most nineteenth-century Americans a "kind of mute organic consistency," binding Americans to the virtues of individualism, competitive capitalism, and anti-elitism.20

At this point the Tocquevillian perspective on America seemed to be upheld by the work of the Counter-Progressives. The Counter-Progressives, especially Hofstadter and Louis Hartz, like Tocqueville, saw American institutions breeding consensus and Americans themselves in rough agreement on basic beliefs and rejecting any genuinely radical ideas. It is, of course, probably not an accident that the major books of Hofstadter and Hartz as well as The Lonely Crowd itself, all stressing consensus, appeared in the late 1940s and early 1950s when America itself could be seen as embodying the values these men perceived historically.21

The Counter-Progressive viewpoint, unfortunately, has undergone some severe buffeting in recent years. Students of early nineteenth-century workers and working-class movements have discovered that not all American workers were as harmonious as Hofstadter suggested. Herbert Gutman, in Work, Culture, and Society, described an aware, aggressive work force which sometimes tried to forge its own destiny by engaging in political struggles and used a wide variety of religious ideas and symbols to protest injustice. Equally important, they resisted bitterly the innovative culture of industrial capitalism and adhered to the preindustrial, Jeffersonian values of the Declaration of Independence.22

Other historians have explored similar themes. Inspired by the earlier works of E. P. Thompson and William Sewell, Sean Wilentz, in his impressive and award-winning study, Chants Democratic, discovered a diverse and thriving radical culture in Jacksonian New York City. Examining New York's artisans and workers between 1800 and 1850, Wilentz discovered that workers employed a language of labor that proposed the complete reverse of industrial capitalism. Worker rhetoric stressed class consciousness, the importance of labor over property and social privilege, and the values of fraternity and brotherhood over selfish competition.23

It is perhaps fair to say also that the primary thrust of most recent work in early nineteenth-century American history has been to unearth an ever wider range of divergent opinions and disputes. Numerous studies have shown that working men and women exhibited ideas and values sharply antagonistic to those held by the professionals and entrepreneurs commonly described as the middle class.24

24. For just a few of the many other works along this theme see Alan Dawley, Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Bruce G. Laurie, Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-
Moreover, many Americans of both the working and middle classes often sharply opposed capitalistic values. In his compelling study of evangelical revival and social change in Rochester, New York, Paul Johnson argued that Whig politicians, temperance advocates, and family reformers supported Charles Grandison Finney's revival in an attempt to build a world that would replace “fire, barbarism, and unrestrained passion with Christian self-control.”25 Thus, the world view described by recent scholars shows, contrary to Tocqueville and Riesman, a dissonant and often factious America, full of conflicting ideas and values.

In conclusion, then, it seems clear that only parts of The Lonely Crowd have survived the onslaught of time and fresh historical evidence. Riesman and his collaborators, it must be stressed, should not be condemned for failing to address or include evidence unavailable to them. The Lonely Crowd is a work of sociology and after all does not stand or fall on its historical vision. But from the perspective of the 1980s, it is clear that its authors depended too heavily on conceptions of the Middle Ages, early modern Europe, and Jacksonian America that can no longer be accepted without serious qualification.