

REAGAN'S  
AMERICA

GARRY  
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PENGUIN

## CHAPTER 41

## Original Sinlessness

*how man fell**Degraded by himself, on grace depending. -*

Paradise Regained 4.311-12

At Disneyland, one can meet a real President, real as the racetrack on the TV spot was real, realer than the ordinary world. We enter through an anteroom of old clippings and photographs; curtains are drawn; we find Lincoln sitting at his ease, delivering immortal lines as in conversation; he rises, moves about, stands tall, his voice resonating from speakers around us. Technology has brought us living history, not bunk, its limbs disposed and moved artificially but realistically (under the right light), delivering an ancient and beautiful message. Who would have thought, until recently, that such a President was to be found outside Anaheim?

The Reagan presidency is not a mere exercise in nostalgia. It must be *modern* as well. The message must travel to us by way of complex intermediation, labyrinthine as the electronics that work Lincoln's in-nards. Reagan must be not merely a *laudator temporis acti*, but a celebrant of the future, both simultaneously and equally insistently. Only in this way can Reagan, simply by being who he is, where he is, alleviate a deep ideological contradiction in American life. According to the American myth he advances, capitalism is both individualistic and conservative, though the terms of that proposition are mutually contradictory.

It is hard to understand why people should think capitalism is identical with, or even conduces to, individualism. The classic exponent of

free markets, Adam Smith, argued that accumulation of a "store" (capital) left over from immediate use makes possible vaster projects than the individual can undertake, either as a matter of handicraft or of trade. The way to reach larger markets than the immediate use area is to specialize (making a surplus of, say, pins) by collaborative effort (a number of people dividing up the labor of making pins). After consumption of the first "store" that made possible the specialization in pins, the workers would be deprived of other products (neglected in their concentration on the pin) but for the goods obtained in the larger market reached by the pins' traveling agents (themselves part of the division of labor that makes pins for the multitudes).<sup>1</sup> Increased efficiency in the cooperative specializations, which produce all the traded goods, will produce the "wealth of nations" (not, primarily, of the individual). The leading note of the operation is, at every level, interdependence-of the workers on each other as they make parts of the pin (each useless in itself), of the workers on their factors as the latter peddle the product in ever wider markets, of both makers and distributors on the specialists in other products. The first victim of this system would be the *individual* pin-maker, who tried to compete using his slower process of manufacture and limited range of customers. Making his obsolete pin the center of a community that turns out the things in quantity, he would be trying to sell coals in Newcastle. That is the story of the demise of individual handicraft (and individualism) before the division of labor based on capital.

Once this operation is under way, individuals in the management, distribution, or ownership of materials and tools can try to get more than their share out of the vast cooperative venture. But that is not capitalism; it is theft (and very common). And even an individual parasite on the joint system must *keep up* the cooperative effort in order to reap an unfair share of its profits. He must keep the workers performing their converging tasks, and keep traders and stockers busy at their interlocking functions. To the extent that individuals try to divert the wealth of nations to their private use, they subvert the process that creates the wealth-Veblen's complaint against the wastefulness of merely pecuniary managers.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that other pin-making groups may try to supplant the first one with a better process. It must, usually, be a *very* much better process, to make up for the advantages the first pin factory has established in patterns of workmanship, supply, and trade, which have also created habits of buying and use in all the pins' customers. Smith's pin

factory had "at least eighteen" separate operations. An individual might think of a way to cut the steps to fifteen, thus decreasing labor and lowering price; but he would still need the fifteen people in his plan. It would still be a cooperative project that prevailed, however equitably (or not) the advantages, gained in this way, were afterward divided.

Modern technology has been created by the efforts of people using stores of abundance in increasingly complex patterns of interdependence. Each time we use such a typical product of the system as (say) a jetliner, we are trusting a vast army of unseen collaborators in our journey—all those who designed, built, sold, service, fly, guard, and guide the plane. One slip in the huge operation, and it ends in disaster. We are depending on the social responsibility of others—that the maintenance man was not doped up, the inspector was not lazy, the pilot is not hung over, the air controller is not too harried to see straight (or too tranquilized to resist the harassment). Any breakdown in this web of social links makes us vulnerable, no matter what our individual force of will or play of ingenuity. The self-reliant test pilot, strapped in his seat in the travel section of a jetliner next to the dimmest bureaucrat, will die along with him if the maintenance people have not done their work properly.

In fact, most of us will be happier with the individualistic test pilot sitting next to us in the travelers' section rather than at the controls of the plane. If Tom Wolfe (who spent a good deal of time with them) is to be believed, test pilots love risk, and try to give each flight an individual mark. They also like to drink and fly.' Daredevils are needed in the early tests of a product not yet reduced to rule; but the aim of the process that uses them is to make them obsolete as soon as possible, to make the finally tested function performable on a routine basis. After that, in a complex operation, individualism is irregularity, a nuisance and obstruction.' That is why the use of test pilots as astronauts was determined partly by a concern for public relations rather than efficiency. Actually, trained monkeys had flown the most dangerous first experiments, and the first astronauts learned (to their frustration) that they were not really flying the capsule into which they were inserted like hams in the oven, to be warmed and basted, their temperature taken, other measurements made. The early satellites had side portholes until the pilots' demand (and the public relations claim that they "flew" the satellites) led to the insertion of a front "windshield." This is another example of the way technology sells the new by imitat-

ing the old, making the space capsule (a word the astronauts did not like either, and had changed) resemble a "real" spacecraft—i.e., more like Flash Gordon visualizations of it. The new frontier called for new cowboys, and their horsepower had to look as if it had horsepower—as

the first automobiles had carriages like those drawn by horses.'

As we saw in Chapter 9, the American frontier was not settled by lone cowboys but by federal troops, civic organizations, community posses, and railroad combines, organizations whose first concern was to get guns out of the hands of lone operators (often lone psychopaths). The West was not settled by the gun but by gun-control laws. In our day, the same concerns are evident. If the test pilot in a jetliner's coach section can die because of some maintenance man's error, he can die just as well from a bomb concealed by a single traveler. The maintenance man with a drug problem can sabotage all the other skills and goodwill involved in a flight, simply by inadvertence, with no particular intent of his own. The lone bomber, by contrast, is imposing his or her will, and winning, against the joint wills of all those who lifted several hundred people into the air inside their large tubular capsule. That is why the terrorist is the true individualist of our time, the lone defier (and defeater) of the common will.

A society orchestrated out of the varying specializations that capital makes possible is so dependent on cooperation that it is extraordinarily vulnerable to even one uncooperative person. Like the jet capsule, the Tylenol capsule can be sabotaged, and then the very efficiency of the product's wide distribution becomes a menace—as the telephone's obliteration of space becomes a menace if it is used by an anonymous threatener, unreachable, unlocalizable. More force of will, more accumulated power, does nothing to remedy this. Executives of large corporations are the private citizens most endangered by kidnapers for-profit precisely *because* they have resources to pay the ransom. What people call for in a Tylenol scare is more regulation and investigation, more controlled steps in the processes of production and distribution—more cooperative effort. The threat of bombs on planes is answered most effectively by exhaustive search procedures, to which people must submit with good grace in order to achieve mutual protection.

But though these are the workaday realities of life, they do not fit Americans' self-image, nurtured by myth, ideology, and special interests. *We*, not the terrorist, are supposed to typify modern individualism and its success. The truth about our actual behavior, whether on the

old frontier or the new, is as threatening to our sense of identity as the terrorist himself. The truth is that the delicate capitalist machinery has lifted itself, like a lumbering jet that overcomes the tug of gravity, by a social discipline of standardization. Yet we fly on, connected to each other, dreaming of a disconnected past-as if each passenger on the jet had floated up independently into the air and settled into the seat he or she aimed for, using separate skill and willpower. In our social dream, the individual passengers are carrying the dead weight of the airplane, rather than vice versa.

I Reagan makes this absurdity believable, partly by believing in it so thoroughly himself. He believes that terrorists will stay away from jet planes if America acts like a cowboy. He believes that the moving vehicle has not altered the goal of modern life. He professes and prolongs a mystique of the individual that is obstructive when not destructive in a world of meshing needs, increased as well as satisfied by the growing pleasure machines of our time. He has used his annual messages to institute a cult of "heroes," the extraordinary individuals who redeem modern life, brought before Congress to rebuke mere "government," which shackles the individual. He would arm the passengers on our national "jetliner" of history, and have them "settle things" on their own. And, like jet passengers intently watching a movie, unaware of their own motion, Americans are determined to retain the individualist fantasy while others are doing the job that keeps them aloft.

If it is strange to see capitalism posing as individualist, it is even odder for it to act as the voice of conservatism. Conservatism, in a minimal definition, wants to conserve; but capitalism is an instrument for change, for expansion, driven toward ever new resources, markets. It reorders life drastically. Even at the paradigmatic simplest model, it changes people from providers of self-sufficiency to specialists in a pin factory, whose reward for this odd imposition of and regularity in their lives is the hope of a richer return from ever more distant parts of an expanding market. If they sop up all the need for pins in the nearest pool, they must have transportation and communication experts who take the pins out to new areas; and this process is never-ending and accelerating, because all the *other* specialists are under the same mutually stimulating pressures. In this flow of products created by a growing surplus, "capital has no home," in the words of Bernard Shaw.<sup>6</sup> It is a roving, restless, innovative force. It must have newer models at shorter intervals. It literally remakes lives in order to have new customers for new models. As we saw in Middletown, resi-

dents became different people after they had made, and borrowed for, and driven, and fought with the children over, and learned to update, their automobiles. We are a different people after we have made movies on the scale that we have, and televisions and jet airplanes. We become a different people when we have made nuclear weapons on the scale that we have.

There is nothing less conservative than capitalism, so itchy for the new. It expends, in order to expand; it razes, to rebuild; it destroys, to employ. Whatever merits it may have, conservatism is not among them. In the sixties, when black ghettos were exploding, I talked with some businessmen who blamed it all on radicals. I thought them too modest. I suggested they drive (quickly) through black neighborhoods and notice the forest of TV antennas rising above the most rundown housing. The sets had originally been sold "on time," by aggressive methods that convinced buyers they would share in the good life. But what the dream box told buyers was that they must have this *further* toy or that *newer* product in order to enjoy the good life. The buyers' children were brought up with the imperatives of a consumer society dinning at them day and night, tantalizing them with things withheld. The result was a certain raising of aspirations, some fulfillable, most destined to frustration. There was an inevitable redefinition of needs and demands, one that radicals may applaud. But capitalists deserve the credit for that development.

The most conservative expressions of a society are ordinarily religious. Attitudes toward the divine tend to be stable, as their object is thought to be. They look back to a past revelation. They observe a prescribed ritual, repeat sacred words, replicate the requirements for priests or initiates. They judge the world against some otherworld of the supernatural and find it wanting-this life is but a falling off from, a dim reflection of, or arduous preparation for, a better one.

It is not surprising, then, that the support given Reagan by religious groups should be considered "conservative" in this general sense given to all religion. Reagan himself calls the present time a period of great religious revival, and revival means a return of life; it looks to some prior state which must be reanimated.<sup>7</sup> The leaders of various "moral majority" groups yearn back to the "good old days," especially in matters of sexual morality. They feel uneasy or indignant about what they take to be tolerance (if not encouragement) of homosexuality, heterosexual infidelity, pornography, illegitimate births, abortion, teen use of contraceptives. A dozen or so prominent preachers have become

highly visible and affluent deploring these changes. Their very salience, however, is a confession of their failure. They are trying, from a few scattered rooftops, to shout back a flood that was once contained, quietly, by the joint efforts of most preachers and their supportive parishioners. The few now deplore what the many once prevented. The TV evangelist's personal success, as an individual, indicates that his cause is lost.

He is undermined by the very conduit of his jeremiads, television. Changes in moral attitudes have been accomplished with the help of the cameras and other instruments the preachers rely on. Childhood and adolescent appetites undergo perpetual hedonistic solicitings which are, in commercial terms, proofs that capitalism can create ever new levels of demand to be satisfied. These pressures are inescapable because they are, at the economic level, admirable. In stodgy Middletown, for instance, thinly disguised advertisements for prostitution could not be refused by the newspapers since they were in agreement with the economic belief in profit-unlike the advertisements for cheap labor which *were* refused, because they interfered with profit.' The conservative Christian temperament will find in modern hedonism just a continuing manifestation of fallen human nature. Such a temperament holds, that is, to the doctrine of original sin. But this is a point on which our Lesser Awakening fatally hesitates. Original sin, the belief in shared human corruption, treats religion in what William James called the "sick soul" manner. But America's contribution to the history of Christian practice has been an institutional effort to cure the sick soul, here and now. It has a therapeutic character, moving readily from fundamentalists' faith healing to the more sophisticated mind-cure of positive thinking. Christian Science is the type toward which other American religions are subtly deflected precisely because it is "the most radical branch of mind-cure in its dealings with evil."<sup>9</sup> Only mind-cure, James thought, might rank, in America, with earlier great reforms and awakenings like Luther's or Wesley's: as the century opened, he guessed that mind-cure would "play a part almost as great in the evolution of the popular religion of the future as did those earlier movements in their day," constituting America's "only decidedly original contribution to the systematic philosophy of life." There has rarely been a more accurate forecast of American history. The motion of American religion away from a belief in original sin can be traced, progressively, in the softening of Calvinism, from the belief of Presbyterians in a "moral sense" retained despite depravity, through Barton

Stone's rejection of the need for substitute redemption of human nature, to the Disciples' progressive dilution of their one major requirement for cleansing of sin (baptism), and-more rapidly as we pass the year in which James delivered his lectures, 1899-in the vague religiosity traceable, generation by generation, down from Nelle Reagan through Ronald Reagan to the Reagan children. Reagan is an intermediary figure here, easing the transition he seems to deny.

Like most accurate predictions, James's looks almost inevitable when seen in retrospect. The American ethos, as shaped by our history, resists the concept of original sin, which describes not only the Fall of Man but the ruin of Eden. Nature is recalcitrant, after the Fall, since man Adam's act had consequences, an entrainment of progressively crippling circumstances. According to the classic expositor of original sin, St. Augustine, it was the very attempt to be free of constraint "You will be like gods"-that led to linked sequences of disaster, the *series calamitatis* of history." Defective human choices have multiple consequences, some unforeseen, some unintended; one tries to help one's child by sending him or her to this or that school, and such a choice has effects one cannot be sure of, trammelled up in the consequences of many other acts (by other parents sending children to the same school that year, by educators coming to or staying at or departing from the school, by those educators' educators, and so on). We are involved in each other's miscalculations, inadequate foreknowledge, hasty or regretted acts; minute by minute made part of Augustine's *massa damnata*, hostages to each other in a deadly interrelatedness." There is no "clean slate" of nature unscrambled on by all one's forebears, no neat break from an "old world" to begin again on a "virgin continent." There is no "America" as Americans have often conceived it.

At one time, a woman of unsavory enough experience was delicately but cruelly referred to as "having a past." The doctrine of original sin states that humankind, in exactly that sense, "has a past." And much of American theorizing has been intended to exempt this country from that stigma. Yet the only way to avoid such trammels would be to have no other person's act affect us; and the only way to do that would be to exist in a state where one's own actions were equally inconsequential in others' lives. That would be the perfect triumph of individualism, where "men should be as gods" to themselves, each ruling his own "universe."

If the doctrine of the Fall entangles humans in each other's errors the doctrine of the Market disentangles each fumbled attempt toward a

finally concatenated good. Modern capitalism lives by a counter-myth to the Fall of Man—one where benign nature makes everything go, miraculously, right. We no longer have a reluctant nature made worse by further errors, but a silent machinery of correction that turns private vices to public good, by the ministrations of the invisible hand. Individual greeds add up to general gain. Aimlessness leads straight to the goal, so long as it is unseen; we need no roads. One achieves good only by refusing to intend it or plan it. All the individual's actions are good until they are interfered with. The Market thus produces a happy outcome from endless miseries, a sinless product of countless sins and inadvertencies. Eden was lost by free choice in the Fall of Man. It rises again, unbidden, by the automatic engineerings of the Market.

The earlier myth called for a repenting awareness of sin. The later one calls for a dutiful innocence and optimism. As James noted, mindcure prohibits sad thoughts. It is the psychic concomitant of *laissez-faire* economics:

Give up the feeling of responsibility, let go your hold, resign the care of your destiny to higher powers, be genuinely indifferent as to what becomes of it all, and you will find not only that you gain a perfect inward relief, but often also, in addition, the particular goods you sincerely thought you were renouncing."

James is describing, in religious terms, the free lunch. The very preachers who deplore certain modern developments are celebrators of the greatness of America, its way of life, its capitalist system, its moral claims on the world. A happy Jeremiah is not a convincing scourge of sin. Optimism accepts; it blesses what is; it transmutes initiative into acquiescence—one rides the process and thinks one is guiding it.

In Reagan's campaign and presidency, the principal accusation against Democratic predecessors and rivals has been that they were guilty of pessimism. Reagan, speaking at a Notre Dame graduation as Jimmy Carter had before him, lamented that "little men with loud voices cry doom." The alternative Reagan offers is a discipline of cheer. As he said in the 1980 campaign: "Our optimism has once again been turned loose. And all of us recognize that these people who keep talking about the age of limits are really talking about their own limitations, not America's."<sup>14</sup>

Reagan can never be accused of a failure to know his audience; and it was precisely the religious part of his audience that heard echoes of many sermons in Reagan's words, echoes of all the happy Jeremiahs.

In 1980, even Southern evangelical voters deserted a President who, in most ways, reflected their background better than Reagan did. Jimmy Carter was more devout by ordinary standards (like church attendance), better acquainted with the Bible, far more active in church affairs (like doing missionary work), more willing to talk about his born-again experience. Despite all these discrete points of contact between his experience and theirs, religious voters found that Carter lacked the higher confidence in man, man's products, and America. He talked of limits and self-denial, of tendencies toward aggression even in a sacred or "saved" nation like America. He believed in original sin."

Ronald Reagan, by contrast, is so energetic a believer in the countermyth to the Fall that, when he was asked to discuss his religious experiences as President, every instance he could think of was a matter of seeing the bright side to death or disaster. In the first three cases, the President was comforting relatives of the deceased—of the 101st Airborne Division soldiers (276 of them) who died in a plane crash, of the seven astronauts killed in the shuttle accident (whose families told him "it was all worthwhile"), and of casualties on the D-Day beaches. The President hesitated, till "a fourth recollection was prompted by White House chief of staff Donald Regan," who said of the visit to the death camp at Bergen-Belsen: "I know it affected you almost in a religious experience." Reagan agreed ("Oh my, yes!"), and said the change from camp to museum proved that Germans are a good people: "This Germany of today is not trying to cover up." Like all his stories, this one ends on an "up" note, with 10,000 German teenagers singing the American national anthem for him in English. "I had a tennis ball in my throat. I couldn't have [sung along]. It was just wonderful.""

It can be argued that the myth of the Market, like the myth of the Fall, contains elements of truth (or makes its own truth in the minds of believers). But why should believers in the Market call themselves conservatives? *Laissez-faire* means letting go—of the past, among other things. It is nontenacious of the old, from a trust in good to come. Yet capitalists, like Ford and Edison, do not want to be held responsible for some of the things they have produced: for restiveness in Harlem or Africa, for youthful hedonism or rebellion, for modern discontents. Change is disturbing even to its celebrants; it provokes, of itself, a countereffort to hang on to something—to one's self, at the least; to identity. A sense of identity is based on the experience of perdurance through shifting circumstances; and since all actual situations up to the present were, by definition, past situations, identity always has to be

sought in the past. That is why continuing scrutiny of the real past is so important to human growth.

If one settles, instead, for a substitute past, an illusion of it, then that fragile construct must be protected from the challenge of complex or contradictory evidence, from any test of evidence at all. That explains Americans' extraordinary tacit bargain with each other not to challenge Reagan's version of the past. The power of his appeal is the great joint confession that we cannot live with our real past, that we not only prefer but need a substitute. Because of that, we will a belief in all his stories. His team, sure enough, won the football game during Eureka's strike, and lost it when he told the referee about a foul. He saw the black navy man end segregation, just as he *heard* the dying colloquy of the pilot and his tail gunner. He photographed the death camps. He found the Kremlin in Hollywood and defeated it. SAG struck no deal with MCA, and the Justice Department was just "anti-business" (like govment in general) when it thought so. Reagan cut welfare costs and raised welfare benefits as Governor of California. He has been to Nicaragua. All these things are "true to life" in Reagan's America since they help people live their lives. When I asked a group of American businessmen assembled abroad what they thought of Reagan's claim to have photographed the death camps, they supported the President for expressing a "higher truth" of concern for the persecuted. Heads nodded when one executive's wife said, "Even Jesus spoke in parables."

That was a "conservative" use of religion very like Reagan's own. We support each other's belief in the performance, much like Disney World workers ("cast members") handling a mix-up in Stanley Elkin's *The Magic Kingdom*:

The others follow, hustled along by the remaining cast members, openly winking, not at each other but at the children, at the two adults, flashing secret agreement, doling these out somehow-the winks-managing the delicate choreography of their high-sign ar-

rangements so that no one is winked at twice by the same person or is even observed to have winked."

It is a difficult assignment, after all, to hold the components of illusion together-a Greenfield Village past, a space-bliss promised in the future, and a present that obliterates the former while demanding belief in the latter's inevitability. There are so many contradictions in this larger construct that one cannot risk entertaining serious challenge to any of its details. In Reagan, luckily, all these clashes are resolved. He

is the ideal past, the successful present, the hopeful future all in one. He is convincing because he has "been there"-been almost everywhere in our modern American culture-yet he "has no past" in the sinister sense. He is guilelessly guiltless. If, to recognize that miracle, one must reject historical record for historical fantasy, fact for parable, it is a small price to pay. One had to pretend to think Disneyland's Lincoln did not jerk at all when he moved. There is no such effortful make-believing with Reagan. Indeed, he has made pretending the easi-

est thing we do.

What Irving Howe said about Emerson's importance in the nineteenth century applies positive *need* for Reagan in wider circles now:

He starts from where people actually are-slipping away from but still held by religious faith-and helps them move to where, roughly, they want to go: an enlightened commonality of vision justifying pride in the republic, a vision akin to, yet distinct from, religious faith. The remains of religious sentiment-ideality, yearning, spiritual earnestness-thereby become the grounding for a high public culture."

Substitute "broad" for "high" in that passage and you get Reagan. We look at him and see the singleness we lack. He "skins and films the ulcerous place" where disparities open between what we think of ourselves and what we do. He casts a surface unity over elements that have long been drifting apart-religious beliefs away from religious posturing, conservative nostalgia from capitalist innovation, interdependence from nonconformism. He spans the chasm by not noticing it. He elides our cultural inconcinnities.

Even young people who did not grow up with Reagan, or grow up hearing him on the radio or watching him at the movies, have accepted his version of the past as their own best pledge of the future. That is not as surprising as it might seem. A visit to his past is always a pleasant experience. Visiting Reaganland is very much like taking children to Disneyland, where they can deal with a New Orleans cut to their measure. It is a safe past, with no sharp edges to stumble against. The more visits one makes to such a past, the better is one immunized against any troubling incursions of a real New Orleans, a real racetrack, the real American West. If capitalist "conservatism" cannot be rooted in the real past it works to obliterate, then it will invent a deracinating past, a nostalgia for the new, a substitute history to lull us

in the time machine that travels on no roads, reaching goals no one could plan.

An older model of conservatism (to be replaced in the market by new models of the old") held that the past is necessarily a guide to the future. Since the future has not happened, it is not knowable by the tests we apply to things that have occurred. Driving forward, we see nothing ahead through the windshield. To steer at all, we must go forward looking into the rearview mirror, trying to trace large curves or bending forces in prior events, to proceed along their lines. But what happens if, when we look into our historical rearview mirror, all we can see is a movie?

It is appropriate that the teenage hero of *Back to the Future*, when he reached the time when his parents met, should find a Reagan Western at the local theater. The aim of *Back to the Future* is to unite the generations, to make the hero see his parents with new eyes, as not outmoded but still young. Here is the most optimistic imaginable completion of the anti-myth to the Fall. Parents redeemed erase the sins of

the past and become Paradise regained. As the economic Market remedies private faults, because money inserted anywhere into the economic circle courses quickly around and benefits people everywhere, *so Back to the Future* closes a temporal cycle, making efforts (even mistaken ones) exerted at any time conduce to a happy outcome for all times. At the final eucharistic table of the free lunch, Ronald Reagan is the rehabilitated parent par excellence, the faded idol as reachable ideal.