CHAPTER TWO

ALIENATION: THE SHORT VERSION

In terms of cultural ideals, less so in terms of cultural practices which reflected the European class system, 18th century American society and European society of the same era were much alike. However all these societies were at a point of equilibrium in terms of cultural evolution, and American society eventually evolved in the direction of increased individualism, and at least some European societies evolved in the direction of increased authoritarianism.

By now of course, all European societies have removed themselves from social order enforced by totalitarianism and now are becoming more like America culturally, though still with less emphasis on individualism than we have. Structurally of course, they were class-ridden at the end of World War II, and still are. For that matter, America with the ending of the social and economic frontier has seen a rebuilding of an European-style class system here. Thus Europe culturally has become more like America, and America structurally has become more like Europe, but there is probably less convergence now in both areas than there was in the mid-18th century.

One way to see how atomized American society has become is to compare it with a society that has plenty of problems of its own, but is less atomized. Let’s say they’re just more sociable.

French society can be described as emphasizing occasions for vanity, among other accomplishments. Such occasions in American life tend to be looked down upon, having an air of disreputable anachronism, like the days when rich, old families had servants who fawned upon them, or nowadays when bosses get the ego boost of having employees constantly smiling and agreeing with them, something which Americans may do on the job but find degrading off the job. Off the job is when they are merely socializing, unless of course they are brown-nosing for social advancement. The French mode of members of various social and ideological groupings meeting and essentially appealing to each other’s vanity, and often scapegoating those that are not present, is understandable but relatively rare in the American context. Nevertheless such occasions for vanity, be it among ideological
academics, or celebrities and their entourages, or similar gatherings of people obsessed with their own lifestyles, seem to be increasing in America.

As of now American society is just too atomized for such sociability occasions to occur on a regular basis and Americans, in their competitive individualism, tend to find such fawning demeaning. It is no surprise such occasions take a back seat to literally opportunities to compete, as if the major relationship atomized individuals have is to compete with each other. Thus in the American South students often want to be allowed to pray before football games, since they like the idea that God wants them to do what they want to do anyway, compete. It is also true that in America lack of personal closeness means that people take for granted that tension release comes more from things, less from emotional expression with others. These things may be liquor, trophies, sexual conquests, or turning to God, but they aren’t relationships with people. In effect we are not greatly tempted toward relationships based on vanity since fulfillment of vanity is a very weak source of accomplishment in our society, most accomplishments having little to do with people in fact, unless you consider competing with them a personal relationship. The only exception to this is not really an exception, since the best opportunity to be loved by others nowadays is considered to be becoming some sort of entertainer, and then you’re still relating to strangers.

I should add these kinds of safe sociability occasions so common in France (though of course not the only kind) are not only occasions for vanity, but also occasions for showing off whatever is au courant, be it intellectual systems, political ideas, or anything that falls under the category of fashionable. No doubt such activities, somewhat in the realm of posturing, reflect an aristocratic ethos based partly on their history, where even nowadays the relatively powerless play up to the more powerful and the powerful expect to be played up to, and in either case showing off one’s cultural and educational attainments comes easier than showing off other kinds of attainments. The idle rich which historically have served as their “celebrity” class often were not good at the kinds of attainments America’s business class takes for granted. Yet such tendencies exist in “idle rich” circles in the US too, and their posturing may soon be filtering down to the masses.

A slight variation upon this theme is where the rich and powerful don’t even claim to have accomplishments in the cultural realm, by at least being stylish, but are merely proud of their ancestors’ successes