

Reporter's Sketchbook

...an American in Montréal

American Identity Crisis

(*homo economicus without work*)

by Dan MacLeod

D“own-sizing”, “out-sourcing”, “just-in-time workers”-- none of these terms existed 30 years ago.

If language defines the borders of perception, reality gives birth to words in the first place. Expressions are based on shared impressions at a given point in time and, throughout most of its history, American speech reflected a new nation describing itself in dynamic terms.

Time is money! summed up the brash impatience of a people conquering a continent. *Put up or shut up!* mixed haste with the businessman's defiant challenge in the boom-years after 1945, as did the far more picturesque *Money talks, bullshit walks*.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” says the lady holding the torch in New York's harbor.

In a country where virtually everyone was an immigrant and “liberty and justice for all” the mantra, democracy was a sacred thing--all the moreso given the founding fathers' ingenious “separation of Church and State”.

The sky's the limit! was how it looked to my parents when I was born in 1957. “Anyone can grow up to become the president,” was what everyone said when I was a kid and by then it was true: thanks to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, blacks were finally on the national bus.



“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breath free”

Things changed in the 1980s. Conservative Ronald Reagan and his myriad supporters looked back to an illusionary world where white-collar whites lived in “Leave it to Beaver”^{*} neighborhoods and the masses huddled as discreetly as possible.

The American legacy of FDR and JFK--like the post-war evolution of social democracy in Western Europe--was abhorred by corporations and financiers who preferred individual initiative to government intervention. In a return to the Roaring Twenties business-model, both unions and minimum-wage increases for non-unionized workers were vilified as “socialism”.

Proclaiming “government is the problem”, Reagan deregulated Wall Street and the banking industry (paving the way for the Savings and Loan scandal of the early '80s). But reactionary economics were only part of it.

From an intercultural point of view, neo-conservative politics were *wrapped in the flag* and *sworn to on the Bible*. It was the beginning of what has now been a Thirty Years War on gays and foreigners, abortion and euthanasia, evolution and education, art and science in general.

Meanwhile, after all the down-sizing and out-sourcing, a new

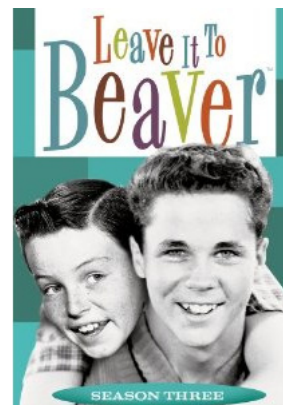
^{*)} “Leave It to Beaver” was the most popular TV series in the late '50s and early '60s, symbolizing the ideal suburban neighborhood where happy families looked toward the American Dream.

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Idealizing the American dream, the “Leave It To Beaver” show was the number one TV program in the late 50s and early 60s.



linguistic pearl launched the '90s: “recovery without jobs”. Taken to its logical conclusion, it would mean the end of capitalism as a viable system.

A generation later, as Wall Street surges and banks thrive while people continue to lose their jobs and homes, both the expression and the concept behind it are back with a vengeance.

Activists, academics, and some interculturalists talk about kids who grew up in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, various parts of Africa. “They’ve known nothing but war...”

What about everyone who grew up in the U.S. in the past forty years? By the time ten-year-olds read their first front pages in the '80s, the headlines told of large sectors of the economy being restructured or phased out altogether. People were being “laid off” by the millions--was Dad going to be next?

If you lived in the American Midwest, the transition was from *steel-* to *rust-belt*. I was in West Virginia in 1990, talking to unemployed coal-miners about the long-wall excavators they'd been replaced by. Springsteen sang it best: “*Those jobs are goin', boys, and they ain't comin' back...*”

Still, you can't fight progress. This was “cutting-edge technology”, “space-age engineering”, “good old American know-how”!

Michael Moore's “*Roger and Me*” was about something else entirely. GM closed plants in Michigan, opened others in Mexico and swore the two were unrelated. Executives continued to receive bonuses while families who'd shaped the company for three generations received food stamps.

Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, alluding to the rise of multinationals in an increasingly global economy. summed it up in seven words: “*IBM is no longer an American corporation.*”

There was now a complete disconnect between the folklore about private enterprise building the country and the fact that it had always been based on profit, not patriotism.

Imagine what it must have looked like to a sixth-grader. Kids don't get all the words but that can be a plus; in both PR and politics, words transform meaning more often than they convey it. What kids *do* get--intuitively--is when people in authority aren't telling the truth.

Also, a world in which the middle class can become “welfare-poor” overnight is a house (a real one, with parents and a sibling or two) built on existential quicksand.

And I say “parents”... By the '80s, almost half of marriages ended in divorce. It wasn't just a question of economics, the entire concept of permanence was shaky.

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Culture Wars



As in the 1840s and 1850s, the USA is currently going through a culture war.

Kid goes to the local 7-11 for milk and, though he's walked there before, takes a wrong turn. He returns home and says, matter-of-factly, "They moved the store."

I don't remember where I read that but it captures the spirit of the times. Suburban malls had hollowed out the downtown core of American cities. Hundred-year-old companies had ceased to exist but ten times as many new ones appeared, leaner and meaner and built for short-term gain. The American Midwest migrated to the Southwest--demographics were all over the map!

Even maps were changing. The Berlin Wall fell and the planet was no longer divided in two, it was exploding into dozens of new countries, "semi-autonomous regions" and "breakaway republics". The world was suddenly becoming a much bigger place.

Three wars later, the U.S. is both broke and broken in half along an ideological divide. The Culture Wars rage on and the spirit of Reagan rides again. Only 14% of America's latest Know-Nothings**, the Tea Party, believe global warming is the result of human activity. A sign I saw last week on CNN: "*Climate Change = Fascist Plot!*"

These are the people who'll have changed the course of the country on November 2nd. And although they talk about re-

***)The Know-Nothing movement was an American political movement of the 1840s and 1850s empowered by popular fears that the country was being overwhelmed by German and Irish Catholic immigrants (Wikipedia)

ducing taxes and deficits, it's really a question of semantics: whether or not that most iconic expression of all--the "American Dream"--should include a black man in the White House.

Or gays in public, or *wops* ("without official papers") in public schools, or Muslims in general. Or public health-care, welfare, social security, gun control, environmental protection, abortion rights, or the fact of evolution. Or, in fact, the separation of Church and State.

The kids who read their first front pages 30 years ago were having kids themselves by September 11th, 2001. "They moved the store" became "They blew up the store."

A decade later my American relatives include a 13-year-old niece and an 11-year-old nephew. They're old enough to follow the news and, like the president, they're half-black.

What does the thinly-disguised racist rhetoric sound like to them? And what do they think about the millions of families who've lost their homes in the past two years in the biggest case of banking fraud in history?

Historians often talk about the centuries of damage to the German psyche done by the Thirty Years War.

I contend that the past 30 years of U.S. history will have much the same effect on the American people.

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