

MICHAEL HARRINGTON'S  
**THE NEXT AMERICA**

STEVEN R. VAN HOOK  
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

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*"The next America is at hand, inevitable and indeterminate. The last America, a coherence inherited from the 1930s, is going, going, almost gone. The problem is, there are several next Americas which have now become possible, some of them frightening, one of them worth at least two cheers and a passionate commitment."*

Such is the basic premise of Michael Harrington's latest book, *The Next America*. We stand, says Harrington, on a precipice of possible futures: several leading to the further devolution of our country; and one, "deserving two cheers," presenting an opportunity for a pseudo-utopian, economically democratic socialist society.

In this work, Harrington expands some concepts presented in his previous books (*The Other America, Toward a Democratic Left Socialism, Twilight of Capitalism, Decade of Decision*, etc.), chiefly concerned with the evident -- perhaps inherent -- poverty-producing economic disparity perpetuated and profited on by a capitalist/corporate system. Harrington examines contributors to the postulated decline of American culture, and presents a scenario where current trends may "signal not decline and fall, but decline and rise."

## **THE FALL**

The "declining America" Harrington finds witnessed in the three cocktail-party-taboo topics: sex, religion, and politics. Without pinpointing their exact relationship to the "decline," Harrington cites some statistics showing, for instance, a faltering faith in the church, and a growing public hedonism. In 1953, he notes, only 33 percent of women over age twenty-five had had premarital intercourse. By 1975, the figure had risen to 90 percent. Among Catholics, sharp increases are shown in approval for premarital sex, marital intercourse for pleasure alone, and remarriage after divorce.

Harrington turns to a Gallup poll to demonstrate a major reversal in public opinion of religion's influence. In April, 1957, 69 percent of those polled thought religion on the whole was gaining influence on American life. In 1968, eleven years later, 67 percent of the nationwide sample thought religion was *declining*. While Harrington acknowledges the role of religion in modern life -- it "allows people to cope with the suffering and evil and chaos in which they live" (hints of opiated passivity?), and harnesses people's self-interest because they are "subject to built-in restraint derived from morals, religion, custom and education" -- he advocates an agnostic civilization since God "cannot symbolize its unity."

Various poll reports in the seventies showing a sharp decline in the perceived legitimacy of government and "all of society's official institutions" Harrington credits to Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal. Because of this, in the campaign of 1976, politicians "who ran on an anti-politics platform -- Jimmy Carter and Jerry Brown -- scored surprising successes in the Democratic Presidential primaries."

## **THE RISE**

From the rubble of crumbled bastions such as the church, our political system, and sexual morality, Harrington suggests that the signs and times perhaps "portend not decline and fall, but decline and rise." He hopes that as our resilient American public grows weary with our disintegrating culture, his suspicions of the existence of "angels -- or, more prosaically, of men and women capable of making a new beginning from our ruins" are realized. And, from the perspective of a man freshly turned fifty that has "lost the serenity of one's dissatisfaction with the present," Harrington seeks signs in the present that his vision is progressing. These signs he finds in a dead mother, a cup of coffee, and Mickey Mouse.

Harrington, a strong leader and advocate of the Socialist movement in America, submits proof that government intervention and social spending can soothe suffering from "the injustices of the distribution of wealth and services" is seen in the contributions of social security and Medicare to our national well-being, without which his "mother's protracted death ... would have disrupted, and perhaps destroyed, my own family." There is no mistake, Harrington says, that "it is better to be over sixty-five in America today than in 1934 before Medicare ... the major American reform program has worked, not failed, and there is thus no eternal, neoconservative law which says that all governmentally induced change is bad."

Another of Harrington's hopes -- that of progressing civil rights -- was strengthened by a simple sight: a white waitress in a Southern coffee shop serving a "grizzled, old black man in workclothes." Recalling his battles in the 50s and 60s alongside the blacks, including Martin Luther King, to secure the right portrayed as he observed that coffee shop scene, Harrington cried.

Harrington's third reason for hope is a "popular, glittering superficiality called Disney World." Beneath the color and characters of Disney World lie impressive innovations which "could be the basis for the creation of environmentally decent, clean and unpolluted cities." Harrington adds: "There is a real utopia hidden underneath Cinderella's Castle in central Florida."

Other factors contributing to Harrington's Next America he mentions in passing: unions (he supports them), the women's movement, urban renewal, and -- on the negative side -- lack of corporate motivation for economic and social justice.

For the Next America, Harrington proffers a simple prescription: democratize the investment process. "By that," he explains, "I mean that the fundamental decisions now made by giant corporations about what to produce and where to produce it and whom to hire and what to charge and what needs to meet must involve the actual producers, the affected communities and the political system, from the neighborhood on up to the nation as a whole and ultimately to global

institutions." And that is the heart of Harrington's democratic socialism. "If enough people realize that this possibility exists, then it might just become real. Therefore, two cheers."

Three problems I have with Harrington's analysis and prescription. First, his proposal of a democratic investment process would certainly necessitate an educated, enlightened electorate (i.e., one with a Harringtonian perspective). Harrington shows no evidence that this is even a remote possibility.

Second, as even Harrington concedes, a Disney-World-like utopia utilizing the "magnificent technology under the Magic Kingdom could be used for the creation of a bureaucratic, orderly, mesmerized society dominated by corporate planners." He observes, "that is what Disney World in fact already is." Technology is not synonymous with social justice.

Finally, no matter how ideologically sound Harrington's arguments may be, he fails to offer in the Next America a pragmatic, non-insurrectionary mechanism for instituting them. In fact, Harrington ruefully remarks that often he encounters adverse reaction from the very people his socialism would benefit.

What Harrington's Next American ideals of justice, ethical social interaction, parity, peace, cooperation, etc., need for realization is a palatable package for the public, presented in a non-threatening, non-radical, perhaps even subtle form that would appeal to the wide spectrum of economic and social diversity in our nation, so that we might then work for change on the footing of mutual effort. (Such as the concept of "community resource sharing" expounded upon elsewhere.)