"An Indictment of Our Social Morality",
a review by Carroll Quigley in The Washington Sunday Star, xxxx 1966,
of a book:
THE CORRUPTED LAND: The Social Morality of Modern America,
by Fred J. Cook.
New York: Macmillan, 1966

"An Indictment of Our Social Morality"

THE CORRUPTED LAND: The Social Morality of Modern America.
By Fred J. Cook.
Macmillan. 352 pages. $5.95.

This book is a searing indictment of America’s social morality. In successive chapters it exposes recent cases of corruption, such as the electrical equipment industry’s price-fixing conspiracy of 1951-59, the antics of wheeler-dealers like Billie Sol Estes and Bobby Baker, the TV quiz show scandals of 1958, and such widespread activities as income-tax chiseling, business bribery and kickbacks, industrial espionage, and the use of executive-suite call-girls as salesmanship gimmicks.

These are all described by Cook in a vividly-written volume, replete with direct-discourse conversations and exact monetary details. The recital is fascinating, startling, alarming. There is no doubt that the stories are true and that they give only a part of the picture. Nevertheless, I have an impression that the picture shown, of a society so deeply corrupted in its essential nature as to be beyond salvation, is misleading.

It is misleading, it seems to me, on several grounds. In the first place, Cook is talking about organizational activities, about how people behave as occupants of positions in our complex world. He is not talking about the behavior of persons as individuals in their private personal relationships. And it seems to me that these latter are, despite Cook’s indictment, becoming increasingly honest, generous, and kindly, above all in America. This has been noted, again and again, by foreign visitors, especially Europeans, who come here with expectations based on their experiences with American exports of movies, TV shows, magazines and books or with, perhaps, some contact with the behavior of middle-class Americans abroad. In case after case, such Europeans are surprised to discover that we are more relaxed, more thoughtful, less violent, and less materialistic than they had expected.
Nature of the Problem

The reason for such misconceptions rests on the difficulty any observer has in determining which manifestations of a culture are evidence of the culture's real nature and which are compensations for lacks or deficiencies in the culture's nature, or in the life patterns of the society's members. Much of the sex and violence in the more public aspects of American life are compensations for the lack of these things in the increasingly humdrum and nonviolent lives of ordinary Americans. And, in the same way, many of the social practices which so arouse Cook's alarm arise from the lack of challenge to the adventuresome qualities of man in ordinary living.

In the second place, the activities described here arouse the alarm of Cook and his readers, and are even condemned by the men whom he describes as doing them in this book, because they are parts of the patterns of our lives and are not evidence of widespread internal moral corruption. As long as perpetrators of corruption unite in decrying corruption, the society is not beyond salvation.

This volume is a far better book than a casual glance at it might indicate. It is deeply researched, documented by notes, and is brilliantly written with a welcome spice of ironic humor. Its author is obviously a very well-informed and intelligent man, who penetrates beneath the surface and is deeply concerned with social and moral implications. The book should be read, not only for its clear exposition of scandals which inevitably remain fragmented and confused in the minds of even the most careful newspaper readers, but because it does ask the right questions about the underlying implications of these events.

Understanding Events

To Cook as to most of his readers, these implications will appear shocking. But I submit that much of this shock rests on the fact that we try to understand the events of today in terms of conceptual and legal ideas and assumptions of an earlier historic period. The world in which the individual now finds himself has two quite distinct aspects. On the one hand, we have changes going on in the material world, the manipulation of resources into wealth, with its drastic transformation of the observable environment, and its immense outpouring of goods. On the other hand, we have a parallel, but not identical, flow of claims on those physical objects, claims which may be specific, as titles and deeds, or which may be general, as money is. These two, the flows of wealth and the flows of claims on that wealth, are not only different, but they are constantly changing. Scattered throughout these patterns of flowing objects and claims are individual persons seeking to divert the flows of claims so that they can increase their control over objects. Note that I do not say that they are seeking to increase their ownership of objects.

About this situation Cook makes a number of assumptions which, however true they may have been at one time, are now rapidly ceasing to be true. He makes no real distinction between the flows of wealth and the flows of claims on wealth, although he is constantly amazed when they do not coincide. Secondly, he is still in an old-fashioned way concerned that ownership of wealth is no longer as significant as the control and use of wealth. And he assumes that the individuals trapped in this double network of flows are free to act differently from the way they do act, when, in most cases, if they acted much differently, they would either be removed from their positions or the flows of claims on which they live would be diverted away from them.

Cook, for example, is amazed that Billie Sol Estes, who lived like a millionaire, had debts much larger than his assets, so that he was not a rich man at all.

In the same way, Bobby Baker never had any money to put into any deal, business or personal, yet large
amounts of other persons' money and property flowed through his area of usage.

**Moral Issue**

Cook treats all these matters as moral issues, sees our world as deep in the mire of moral corruption, and calls, without much hope, for moral reform.

No reform will be possible until the situation is faced in the terms in which it really functions, not as moral issues but as the patterns of relationships in which people actually live. These patterns obviously need to be reformed so that rewards conform more closely to social contributions and so that personal responsibility is increased in both. Failure to make reforms in this direction rests at the door of conditions in our society which Cook hardly considers. They are three: The mass media, such as the press, broadcasting, and magazines, which are rewarded for their advertising rather than for their efforts to inform the people of the actualities of today's world, and which, accordingly, continue to portray that world as personal and individual activities in obsolete social contexts and expressed in obsolete concepts and words; (2) the whole legal profession, including the judiciary, who are trained and practice in out-of-date concepts and whose rewards are increased because the obsolescent nature of their concepts increases their work and their incomes; and (3) the corruption of legislative bodies, from the Congress through the states down to municipal councils, who are prevented from doing what is needed to improve the situation by the fact that their campaign expenses can be obtained most easily from those persons whose incomes reflect the existing objectionable patterns.

Cook comes closest to these aspects of the situation in his chapter on Bobby Baker and in his remarks about what happened to income-tax reform (especially the curtailment of expense accounts), honesty in labeling, in the whole morass of utilization of national resources, especially those concerned with petroleum and natural gas, above all with the 27 1/2 percent depletion allowance, the federally-financed superhighway construction program, non-price business competition, and other aspects of today's world. As Cook says (page 230): "Since man in so much of his life no longer deals with fellow men but with a vast and impersonal them, his ethics based on a code of man-to-man honor no longer apply; each to himself becomes a David pitted against the all-powerful Goliath of them—and, in this climate, no means of getting his, of getting even, carries with it a moral stain."

— CARROLL QUIGLEY

Please email the editors (editors@carrollquigley.net) with corrections, questions, or if you have other works by Professor Quigley you would like to see posted.

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