

THE  
WRENCHING  
— OF —  
AMERICA

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN CRONIN



WITH THE END OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY NEARING, DAVID RIESMAN, ONE OF OUR GREAT SOCIAL SCHOLARS, SEES A NATION TORN BY THE STRIFE OF FEMINISM AND MULTICULTURALISM, AND SEES A COUNTRY THAT IS BECOMING UNMANAGEABLE AND UNGLUED. ►

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HEN I WAS A HARVARD UNDERGRADUATE, in the seventies, Professor David Riesman was known around the Yard as "God." He was a solemn, rather forbidding figure, with graying hair worn long in the fashion of the liberal professor, and there was something awesome about the way he delivered his unflinching pronouncements on the state of the republic in Soc. Sci. 136, his course on American character and social structure.

Impressionable undergraduates are not the only ones to fall under Riesman's sway. "I frankly consider David Riesman to be the most perceptive student of the American scene we have," says one Harvard colleague, economist John Kenneth Galbraith. "He's perceptive because he doesn't hesitate to be critical. If David doesn't like something, he can be eloquently adverse."

Like many other now-prominent thinkers, the sociologist and author Robert Jay Lifton credits his intellectual awakening to Riesman's influence, in his case experienced on long walks along the Charles River when Lifton was a Harvard graduate student in the fifties. "Most of what I know about American society, I learned from David on those walks," Lifton says. "I think he is one of the great figures of the second half of the twentieth century."

Born in Philadelphia in 1909, Riesman originally trained as a lawyer, clerked for Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis, and spent many years as a practicing lawyer and as a professor of law at the University of Buffalo. Eventually, however, he rejected that profession as mere point-scoring and shifted his attention to the more scholarly pursuit of sociology. Although he had no degree in the subject, Riesman became a professor of sociology at Harvard in 1958.

As a sociologist, he is probably best known for his 1950 book, *The Lonely Crowd*, with its now-famous delineation of Americans' then-emerging "other-directedness," or special sensitivity to peer pressure, as opposed to the "inner-directedness" of more traditional societies. "Other-directionalism wasn't just keeping up with the Joneses," he says now. "It was keeping down with the Joneses." And that, he notes, involved "benign elements of empathy to others." In Boston, that distinction helps explain the trendiness of today's yuppies, say, and the more permanent values of older-generation Brahmins. Although Riesman had expected it would reach only an academic audience, *The Lonely Crowd* has sold more than a million copies.

More recently, Riesman has studied American higher education and worked for nuclear arms control. Whatever the focus of his interests, his true calling has been to make sense of the great American experiment. And, as America creeps toward the third millennium, it seems a good moment to check back with him to find out how we are doing.

I paid a call on Riesman at his cramped, book-filled office in the William James tower at Harvard, where as a professor emeritus he continues his academic research. Now 82, he walks a bit shakily, but his mind is sturdy and

his voice is strong, with the earnest inflection of the proper Philadelphian he was raised to be.

He begins by pooh-pooing the whole premise that we're entering any sort of fin de siècle. He believes that it is the vanity of every age to see itself as a period of transition. "In general, I'm alert to the hazards of overestimating one's own time," he says.

When I insist that surely something significant is happening in the land, he pauses for a moment to take a sip of tea. "If I had to declare what were the most important set of movements of my lifetime, it would be the women's movements." He uses the plural intentionally, of course. Always the categorizer, he discerns several branches of feminism: the "more-macho-than-thou" activists, who pressed for the passage of the ERA in part so that women could go into combat; the "feminists," who "praise and glorify what is specifically female rather than what is androgynous"; the "assertive lesbians"; and the careerists, among others.

He points out that while the civil rights movement, by contrast, has left some regions of the country unaffected, these various women's movements have pervaded nearly every aspect of society. (This became especially evident in the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, when the entire country seemed to stand still for several days to ponder Thomas's alleged harassment of Anita Hill.) And in Riesman's view, the influence of those movements has not been entirely benign. They have driven up divorce rates, provoked retaliatory men's movements, created divisions between women of different beliefs, exacerbated the abortion debate (which he regards as partly a referendum on the "sassiness" of women), and introduced politics into everyday conversations, bringing "an uneasiness to men, who must watch their language and not say *freshmen* but *freshpersons*."

RIESMAN TAKES ANOTHER SIP OF TEA AND BROODS FOR A MOMENT. There has been another major shift in our time, he says. With the erosion of our industrial base, Americans now have to face the prospect of declining economic expectations—no small adjustment for a country that bills itself as the land of opportunity.

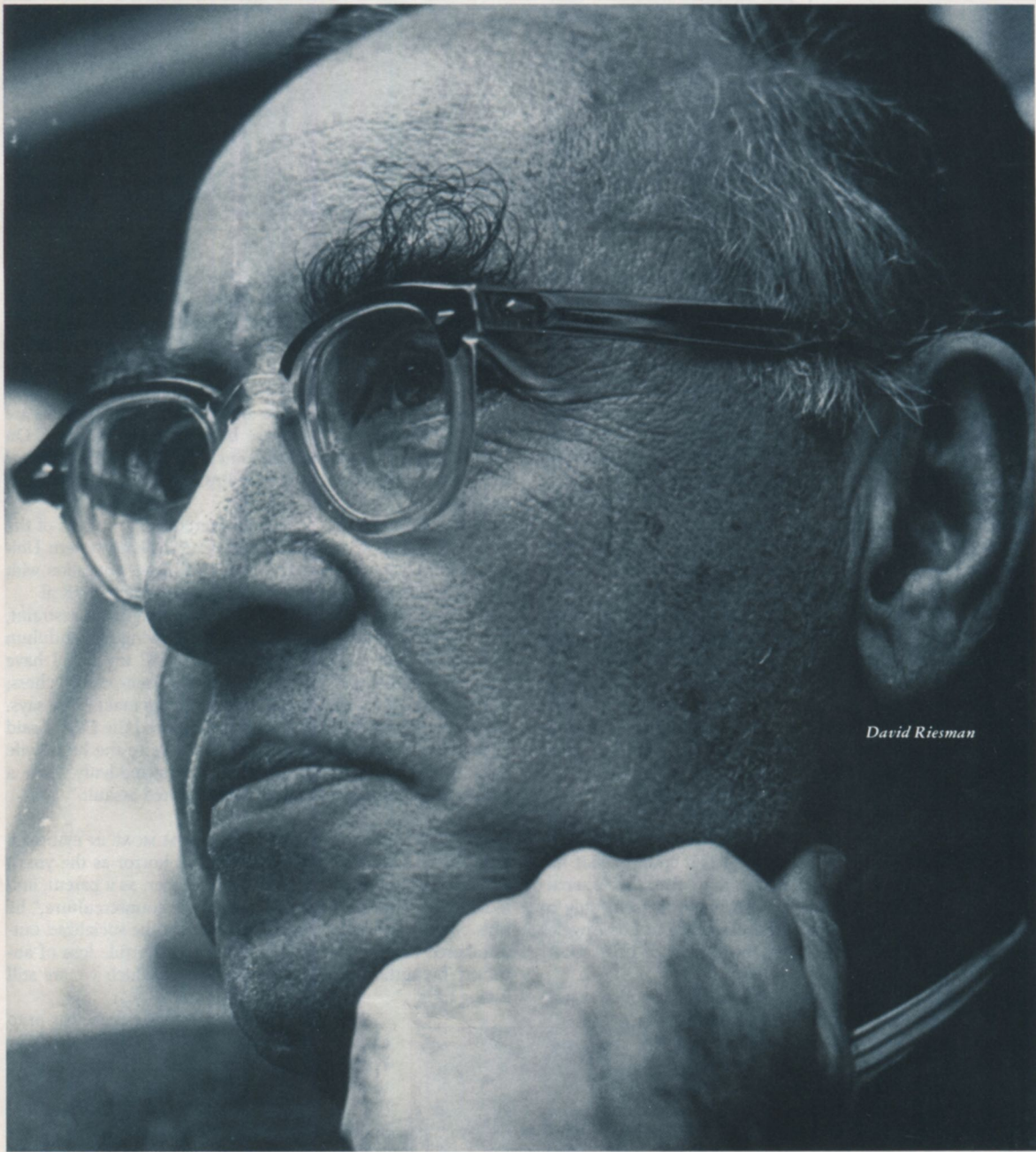
"From World War I through the New Deal right down through the middle seventies, Americans assumed that things would always get better," he says, "and that their children, given an education, would do better than they. Now, for the first time, we are facing a situation of real stagnation in which the expectation of doing better doesn't exist anymore. I think that has created a tremendous hiatus of unease and anxiety."

For all their balloons and tinsel, the Reagan years did nothing to alter the essential economic malaise that had set in under Jimmy Carter. "All through the eighties I was conscious of the latent anxiety in the country," Riesman goes on. "I did not think we were buoyant, as many people did. People were really frightened, and they still are. The backlash against welfare and all the other provisions of the safety net—it came from a people who were basically running scared."

Reagan's policies did little to assuage their fears, Riesman says. And he is still annoyed that Reaganism was mistaken for conservatism. "It was *not* conservative, it was adventurous,"



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*David Riesman*



THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS HAVE BEEN THE MOST IMPORTANT SOCIAL ISSUES OF OUR TIME, RIESMAN SAYS. THEY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE DIVORCE RATE, CREATED DIVISIONS BETWEEN THE GENDERS, AND CHANGED THE LANGUAGE.



RIESMAN IS DISTRUSTFUL OF COEDUCATION, NOTING THAT ONLY IN AMERICA ARE BOYS AND GIRLS PLACED TOGETHER IN A PERMISSIVE ATMOSPHERE THAT ALLOWS SEX TO DISTRACT THEM FROM THEIR WELL-BEING AND THEIR EDUCATION.

he says. I expect him to thump the table in anger, but he continues to sit very still in his chair, his voice steady. "In one issue after another the Reagan administration was reckless beyond belief—reckless in cutting taxes, reckless with the deficit, reckless in the management of the nuclear issue."

Riesman believes that this continuing anxiety is what has borne the strange fruit of multiculturalism. Far from being a celebration of pluralism, multiculturalism is in his view the squabbling of various ethnic groups for their slice of a shrinking economic pie, and he finds that a frightening turn of events for a country that has for so long made a virtue of being one nation, indivisible.

"I think about the Civil War all the time," Riesman says, taking an unexpected historical tack. "I think of how extraordinary it was that there wasn't more guerrilla action during the Civil War. There were supporters of the North in northern Alabama and eastern Tennessee, and West Virginia broke away, and yet there was relatively little guerrilla activity.

"Citizens on both sides of the conflict," he says, "still saw themselves essentially as Americans. The northerners believed that being American meant the union should be kept together; the southerners thought that, as Americans, they should be allowed to secede."

TODAY, RIESMAN BELIEVES, MULTICULTURALISM THREATENS TO blow the United States apart. "I see the country struggling to find some sense of itself," he says. "It is a country that has become almost unmanageable, in my view." And the nationalist forces unleashed to boost American spirits seem only to make things worse. "I think of the Olympics in Los Angeles four years ago," he recalls, "and the shouts of USA! USA! USA!"

"Some of the things that hold it together are not so nice—the enthusiasm for the Gulf War, for Panama. And there is the economic nationalism of Gephardt and some other Democratic party leaders. The Japan bashing is dreadful and not confined to the uneducated by any means."

"Religion in this country has shown extraordinary staying power. DeTocqueville thought that half the country a hundred years from his visit would be Catholic and the other half secular. It really hasn't worked out that way. Ours is still a religious country, and yet it looks as though the country is desperately looking for something else to hold itself together."

I tell Riesman that he makes it seem as though the United States is set to follow the example of the Soviet Union, with a flagging economy, deep ethnic tensions, and a hollow national leadership. I have meant it as a joke.

"That's a nightmare vision," Riesman says.

How could the United States have come so unglued?

"That's a question that haunts me," he says gloomily, "and I have no good answer for it. One part of it has to do with the celebrity culture and the lack of heroic leaders other than celebrities. But another part is that we no longer have any subordinate populations. Women are not subordinate, blacks are not subordinate, Hispanics are beginning to mobilize." On this score, he notes, it hasn't helped that special-interest groups have been empowered by PACs and direct-mail solicitations.

And a third part lies in the countercultural protests of the sixties. Christopher Jencks, a sociologist at Northwestern University who has written several books on higher education with Riesman, calls his former Harvard colleague countercyclical.

One recurring aspect of Riesman's thinking is his restraint, the way he invariably pushes against the swinging pendulum to keep it from careening out too far. "All my life, I have counseled leftist protesters: 'Don't play one-person chess; think of the moves that the other person can make,'" he says. "With the ERA I did that. I strongly opposed the ERA. I said to its proponents, 'Think of what this says to the housewife who is made vulnerable because she is suddenly 'just a housewife.' ' It was a dreadful, meanspirited assault."

NEVER WAS RIESMAN'S ESSENTIAL CENTRISM MORE IN EVIDENCE than in the sixties, when he watched in horror as the youth movement ran amok. "As a faculty member, as a parent, and as a citizen, I was fiercely opposed to the counterculture," he says. "This was a time when the people to be socialized outnumbered the socializers, and it led to a terrible loss of authority by authority, the consequences of which we are still seeing today."

This was one trend that Riesman was onto early. "I wrote an essay in 1968 for the *New York Times Magazine* called 'America Moves to the Right,' in which I reported a conversation on the Plaza at Berkeley the day the Free Speech Movement broke out in the fall of 1964. I was by chance in San Francisco, and I went to the campus and I got talking to the leaders, some of whom I knew, and I said, 'If you're not careful, you will make Ronald Reagan governor and maybe president.'"

It is distressing for Riesman to see what he considers the excesses of the sixties left revisited upon the country as the nineties right. "What do we see in Wichita?" he asks, referring to the violent antiabortion protests that have paralyzed that city. "We have seen the left-wing model of violent protest adopted by



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the right. It is imitative of the worst excesses of the counterculture and the New Left, and it is just as mean and personal and vicious."

Riesman believes that the sixties extremism has also had a destructive effect on the nation's blacks. By raising up militant groups like the Black Panthers, it undermined the position of middle-class blacks, whom Riesman without apology calls the Negroes. He cites a study of the social organization of blacks in Chicago by the sociologist St. Clair Drake, which discerned, in Riesman's words, a "respectable pyramid of Negroes" and a "shady pyramid of blacks."

While the shady pyramid was extolled by the counterculture, the respectable pyramid was battered. "The Negroes were denigrated as Uncle Toms. They weren't with it." The white middle class has finally recovered from the ravages of the counterculture, he says, but the black middle class has not. "The influence of the black middle class today is negligible."

RIESMAN SEES TODAY'S AFRO-CENTRISM, WHICH IS ONE OF the more salient aspects of multiculturalism, as an attempt to restore the respectability of these middle-class blacks, but he believes that it is—at least as an academic enterprise—terribly misguided. "The idea that you can improve learning on the basis of ancestry or of having great traditions is completely false," he declares. "There is absolutely no connection between self-esteem and learning."

A student of his once studied the matter at Cambridge Rindge and Latin. "She discovered that the young man in the school who had the highest self-esteem was a cocky fellow who was sure he would get into college without taking the SATs," Riesman says. "The person who had the lowest self-esteem was the daughter of a Haitian immigrant who could never do enough to satisfy her own aspirations. Yet she was admitted everywhere she applied, and did extraordinarily well."

One might think that Riesman has concentrated on academia because of its potential to break the cycle of extremism, but he candidly explains that baser motives came into play. "I do anthropology and ethnography," he says. "I took academia as my field largely so I wouldn't have to learn another language or suffer great hardship." Whatever his motives, he has certainly made a thorough study of it, investigating everything from the place of cheerleading to the role of the president's wife. Says Robert Jay Lifton: "I can't believe anyone knows more about higher education than David Riesman."

Of all his opinions, probably the most deeply held and the most unexpected is his distrust of coeducation. "If one looks over the globe, one sees very few places where boys and girls are thrown at each other the way they are here in American schools—with everything unchaperoned, unsupervised, and permissive," he declares.

He gets uncharacteristically indignant when I suggest that it's natural for boys and girls to be together. "Natural?" he asks. "That's not natural, that's very unnatural." He points out that coeducation was begun at a time when there were models of "chaste vivacity" (movie stars, fictional heroines) to break the link between sensuality and sexual activity, between feeling and sex. There are few such models today. "As it is," he



The country's social fabric, Riesman says, is showing signs of wear.

says, "the idea that sex is all there is to life is absolutely heaped on the young. It's appalling!"

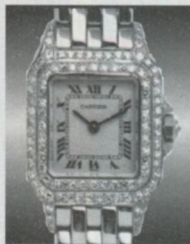
"Imagine what it has done to the young to be exposed to lascivious films, television, and advertising. They are deluged. And so sexuality drops down younger and younger. These children just can't delay any longer."

Riesman believes that while the young of both genders are immensely distracted by sex, females are more endangered by it. "I can't help thinking of all the fears girls have as teenagers, especially as young teenagers. Will they get pregnant if they sleep with a boy? Should they take precautions? If they do, will it show they were waiting for it? They have terrible anxieties about all this."

And such anxieties do not help their studies. "How can you possibly do well on your SATs if you are haunted by fears that you are the only virgin in your class? That's not the kind of problem faced in the rest of the world."

IN COLLEGE, RIESMAN CONTENDS, THE CONSTANT SEXUAL PRESSURE keeps women from applying (Continued on page 138)

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## Wrenching America

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themselves academically. They don't want to come across as too smart, for fear that that will hurt their chances with men. This is the case at Harvard, he has found. "Bright Harvard men have no less fragile egos than anyone else vis-à-vis women. And so the women hold back, not extending themselves fully in the presence of men, not getting as engaged in the curriculum, anxious, seeking intimacy but knowing themselves to be sometime things." Although the number of men and women at Harvard is roughly equal, one study last year reported that men speak up in class 12 times as often as women.

Or, just as bad, women adapt to the male environment by aping their male peers. "They have adopted men's forms of talk, and so again we have one of the many ironies of the liberation movements. They

tion," he notes, "and it has been an effective weapon in resisting some of the pressures for orthodoxy in a few of the more avant-garde institutions and a few of the more avant-garde areas within them. But the sciences, engineering, computers—there are whole realms of society that are completely untouched. Political correctness is all in the talk trades, in the humanities especially."

Riesman is far more concerned about a political development that has been much less discussed on campus: namely, the breakup of the Soviet Union. "It is astonishing to me how little attention is paid in colleges and universities to that."

Riesman himself always believed that the Soviet danger was exaggerated. "I knew there were dangers on the periphery, loose change to be picked up in Africa and the Caribbean, but the idea of an invasion of Europe seemed to me to be inconceivable, and the whole belief that totalitarianism was forever seemed to me to be overdone."

*"Educated blacks now are channeled into limited categories, and there is a lot of pressure to keep them there. I want to see blacks spread around the map, just as I want to see women spread around the map."*

have freed girls and women to behave as badly as boys and men."

Riesman has done his best to discourage various private boarding schools from going coed—to little avail. And he has also tried to promote all-women's colleges, which he believes insulate women from some sexual pressures and allow them to develop their confidence in a man-free environment. He points out that Wellesley College graduates do especially well at Harvard Business School, which, as he says, "is a very tough environment." And he also notes that such colleges allow women to consider entering academic areas like the sciences, which is often subtly discouraged in coed colleges.

Riesman recommends separate education for blacks as well—an idea being taken up by conservatives—for similar reasons. "Educated blacks now are channeled into limited categories, and there is a lot of pressure to keep them there. It makes it difficult for a black to be a professor of Sanskrit; he is supposed to be a professor of Africanism or black studies. I want to see blacks spread around the map, just as I want to see women spread around the map."

AS FOR THE MAJOR POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT on campus, the advent of political correctness, Riesman doubts it deserves all the media attention it gets. "The term is an extraordinary inven-

Back in 1951, he wrote a wry essay expressing his views. "I called it 'The Nylon War,' and in it I imagined consumer goods being dropped by American bombers on the Soviet Union, and the whole system collapsing." Amazingly, that is pretty much what happened, but Riesman takes little satisfaction in having been right.

Since Hiroshima, he has been a passionate advocate of arms control, and, despite the recent arms-reduction initiatives, he is alarmed by the prospect of the Soviet nuclear arsenal ending up in the hands of some renegade leader in the Ukraine or Kazakhstan. "Irrationality is very strong in that part of the world," he says. "I'm terrified. I think the hands of the doomsday clock are as close to midnight as they have ever been."

DOMESTICALLY, HE IS MORE SANGUINE. "I see no reason for extreme pessimism," he says. "What can look like a powerful trend can change very quickly and unexpectedly."

Does he have any predictions for the future?

He pauses for a long time, reflecting. He comes up with nothing. "I was trying to think whether something might happen to the crumbling infrastructure, but even there I can't be sure.

"For me, I have to say, the future remains very much opaque." □