Excerpt from Chapter Eight

Exit, Voice and Loyalty:
Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States

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[*Editor's Note: The author argues that there are two types of response to unsatisfactory situations in one's firm, organization or country. The first is "exit" or leaving without trying to fix things. The second is "voice," that is, speaking up and trying to remedy the defects. Loyalty can modify the response, causing one to stand and fight (voice) rather than cut and run (exit). The chapter excerpted here deals in forceful language with these choices in decisions about human migration.*]

It does not take much of a plunge, at this point, to take up as our last topic a special though sizable case — that of exit and voice in relation to American ideology, tradition and practice.

My principal point — and puzzlement — is easily stated: exit has been accorded an extraordinarily privileged position in the American tradition, but then, suddenly, it is wholly proscribed, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, from a few key situations.

The United States owes its very existence and growth to millions of decisions favoring exit over voice. This "ultimate nature of the American experience" has been eloquently described by Louis Hartz:

> The men in the seventeenth century who fled to America from Europe were keenly aware of the oppressions of European life. But they were revolutionaries with a difference, and the fact of their fleeing is no minor fact: for it is one thing to stay at home and fight the "canon and feudal law," and it is another to leave it far behind. It is one thing to try to establish liberalism in the Old World, and it is another to establish it in the New. Revolution, to borrow the words of T.S. Eliot, means to murder and create, but the American experience has been projected strangely in the realm of creation alone. The destruction of forests and Indian tribes — heroic, bloody, legendary as it was — cannot be compared with the destruction of a social order to which one belongs oneself. The first experience is wholly external and, being external can actually be completed; the second experience is an inner struggle as well as an outer struggle, like the slaying of a Freudian father, and goes on in a sense forever.[1]

This preference for the neatness of exit over the messiness and heartbreak of voice has then "persisted throughout our national history."[2] The exit from Europe could be re-enacted within the United States by the progressive settlement of the frontier, which Frederick Jackson Turner characterized as the `gate of escape from the bondage of the past.'[3] Even though the opportunity to "go West" may have been more myth than reality for large population groups in the eastern section of the country,[4] the myth itself was of the greatest importance for it provided everyone with a paradigm of problem-solving. Even after the closing of the frontier, the very vastness of the country combined with easy transportation make it far more possible for Americans than for most other people to think about solving their problems through "physical flight" than either through resignation or through ameliorating and fighting *in situ* the particular conditions into which one has been "thrown." The curious conformism of Americans, noted by observers ever since Tocqueville, may also be explained in this fashion. Why raise your voice in contradiction and get yourself into trouble as long as you can always remove yourself entirely from any given environment should it become too unpleasant?

It will be noted that all these "flights" are in the nature of true exits, that is, exits from private rather than public goods: whatever effect they had on the society that was left behind was an unintended side effect. Those who departed from their communities had no thought of improving them thereby or of fighting against them from the outside; they were immigrants rather than émigrés, and soon after their move "couldn't care less" about the fate of the communities whence they came. In this perspective, the present-day "cop-out" movement of groups like the hippies is very much in the American tradition; once again dissatisfaction with the surrounding social order leads to flight rather than fight, to withdrawal of the dissatisfied group and to its setting up a separate

"scene." Perhaps, the reason for which these groups are felt to be "un-American" is not at all their act of withdrawal, but, on the contrary, their *demonstrative* "otherness" which is sensed as an attempt to influence the square society they are rejecting. By making their exit so spectacular, by oddly combining *deviance* and *defiance*, they are actually closer to voice than was the case for their pilgrim, immigrant, and pioneer forebears.

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The traditional American idea of success confirms the hold which exit has had on the national imagination. Success — or, what amounts to the same thing, upward social mobility — has long been conceived of in terms of evolutionary individualism.[5] The successful individual who starts out at a low rung of the social ladder necessarily leaves his own group behind as he rises; he "passes" into, or is "accepted" by, the next higher group. He takes his immediate family along, but hardly anyone else. Success is in fact symbolized and consecrated by a succession of physical moves out of the poor quarters in which he was brought up into ever better neighborhoods. He may later finance some charitable activities designed to succor the poor or the deserving of the group and neighborhood to which he once belonged. But if an entire ethnic or religious minority group acquires a higher social status, this occurs essentially as the cumulative result of numerous, individual, uncoordinated success stories and physical moves of this kind rather than because of concerted group efforts.

The novelty of the black power movement on the American scene consists in the rejection of this traditional pattern of upward social mobility as unworkable and undesirable for the most depressed group in our society. Significantly, it combines scorn for individual penetration into white society of a few selected blacks with a strong commitment to "collective stimulation" of blacks as a group, and to the improvement of the black ghetto as a place to live. In the words of one spokesman:

> *Integration, particularly in the token way in which it has been practiced up to now … elevates individual members of a group, but paradoxically, in plucking many of the most promising members from a group while failing to alter the lot of the group as a whole, weakens the collective thrust which the group*

might otherwise muster.[6]

This formulation is strikingly similar to the previously mentioned situation — railroads in Nigeria, public schools, and so forth — in which exit was ineffective while voice was fatally weakened by exit of the most quality-conscious customers of a firm or of the most valuable members of an organization.

In the case of a minority that has been discriminated against a further argument can often be made: namely, that exit is bound to be unsatisfactory and unsuccessful even from the point of view of the individuals who practice it. The point is familiar, but it may be of interest to see it made not for "passing" Jews or Negroes in the United States, but for Andean Indians:

> *A normal pattern of change in the Andes is for the individual to become a mestizo by leaving his highland community of birth, rejecting his Indian background, and assuming all possible mestizo status symbols. The individual who becomes a mestizo by this route, however, finds himself part of a despised "cholo" minority in a world dominated by urban upper classes to which he cannot aspire.*[7]

This unsatisfactory process of individual mobility is then compared to the group process which, according to the author, was made possible in Bolivia by the Revolution:

> *In the formerly Indian communities of Bolivia, on the other hand, the group itself is the agency regulating the adoption of the mestizo traits. The individuals within the group proceed at the same pace, with few persons standing out as "more mestizo" than the others. Neither is there strong motivation physically to leave the community nor to reject identifiably Indian behavior patterns. Rather, the individuals are participating in a true cultural change, as a group … There is no rush to acquire status symbols, because there is a deep sense of the ridiculousness of a person wearing a necktie, for example, when that person is unable to speak Spanish.*[8]

A similar preference for the "collective thrust" approach over the "flight" or "melting pot" pattern of upward social mobility has been characteristic of spokesmen for seriously lagging regions within countries, such as Italy's South and Brazil's Northeast. In plans to catch up with the rest of the country, these spokesmen have usually assigned a quite minor role to emigration which they tended to consider not as a contribution to their region's uplift, but as an unfortunate "hemorrhage" of its best talent.

Upward social mobility of just the talented few from the lower classes can make domination of the lower by the upper classes even more secure than

would be achieved by rigid separation. This becomes evident if one imagines a society that would have a systematic policy of *adopting* promising low-class youngsters into upper-class families. Adoption practices of this sort can be found in Japan during the Tokugawa period when the country indeed enjoyed "two centuries of peace and stability."[9]

In practice, upward mobility for a disadvantaged or hitherto oppressed group is likely to require a mixture of the individual and the group process, that is, a mixture of exit and voice. The group process will come into prominence at certain intermediate stages, and there is special need for it when social cleavages have been protracted and when economic disparities are reinforced by religious, ethnic, or color barriers. In the United States, in fact, reality has often been different from ideology: as is well recognized, ethnic minorities have risen in influence and status not only through the cumulative effect of individual success stories, but also because they formed interest groups, turned into outright majorities in some political subdivisions, and became pivotal in national politics.[10] Nevertheless, the black power doctrine represents a totally new approach to upward mobility because of its open advocacy of the group process. It had immense shock value because it spurned and castigated a supreme value of American society … success via exit from one's group.

Apart from such latter-day dissonant voices, the ideology of exit has been powerful in America. With the country having been founded on exit and having thrived on it, the belief in exit as a fundamental and beneficial social mechanism has been unquestioning. It may account for the strength of the national faith in the virtues of such institutions as the two-party system and competitive enterprise; and, in the latter case, for the national *disbelief* in the economist's notion that a market dominated by two or three giant firms departs substantially from the ideal competitive model. As long as one can transfer his allegiance from the product of firm *A* to the competing product of firm *B,* the basic symbolism of the national love affair with exit is satisfied.

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Yet, as love may suddenly turn into hate, so can the national infatuation with exit give way in certain crucial areas to its utter proscription. To some extent, exit is itself responsible for the emergence of its opposite. In leaving his country the emigrant makes a difficult decision and usually pays a high price in severing many strong affective ties. Additional payment is extracted as he is being initiated into a new environment and adjusting to it. The result is a strong psychological compulsion to like that for which so large a payment has been made. In retrospect, the "old country" will appear more abominable than ever while the new country will be declared to be the greatest, "the last hope of mankind," and all manner of other superlatives. And one must be happy. Probably because of this collective compulsion to be happy, the word has gradually taken on a much weaker meaning than it has in other languages. This is illustrated in the story about two immigrants from Germany meeting for the first time after many years in New York. One asks the other: "Are you happy here?" Reply: "I am happy, *aber glücklich bin ich nicht*."[11]

As a country's central bank is the lender of last resort, so has the United States long been the "country of last resort." To most of its citizens — with the important exception of those whose forefathers came as slaves — exit from the country has long been peculiarly unthinkable.

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Suppose, however, things are not fully satisfactory — what then? In line with the earlier argument about the effects of a high price of entry on loyalty, it may be expected that the point at which one avows any qualms will be postponed. This is precisely the phase of compulsive happiness. Situations may well arise, however, in which qualms can no longer be repressed. A number of reactions are then possible:

1. As was just shown, another exit may be attempted, but this time within the (fortunately wide) confines of the country.

2. Since clearly the country cannot be at fault, responsibility for unhappiness, qualms, and so forth is assumed to lie with the person experiencing these sensations. Another dose of "adjustment" is in order.

3. Finally, if the country is too obviously at fault after all, it has to be *made* into the ideal place which one wants it so passionately to be. Hence voice will come into its own with unusual force. It will be animated by the typically American conviction that human institutions can be perfected and that problems can be solved. The compulsion to be happy is replaced by the compulsion to use voice for the purpose of

making the country live up to its image. It is, in fact, to this compulsion that the country owes some of its greatest achievements just as it owes its origin to exit.

[*The author goes on in this chapter to discuss the "extreme reluctance of Americans in public office to resign (exit) in protest against policies with which they disagree."*]

NOTES

[1] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), pp. 64-65.

[2] Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, p. 65 n. Note also his phrase, in the same footnote: "In a real sense physical flight is the American substitute for the European experience of social revolution."

[2] From the last paragraph of his famous 1893 paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," reprinted in Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), p. 38. Interestingly enough, Turner noted in a later essay that with the closing of the frontier new political processes, akin to "voice," would have to take the frontier's place if democracy was to be kept vigorous in the United States. "The present finds itself engaged in the task of readjusting its old ideals to new conditions and is turning increasingly to government to preserve its traditional democracy. It is not surprising that socialism shows noteworthy gains as elections continue; that parties are forming on new lines; that the demand for primary elections, for popular choice of senators, initiative, referendum, and recall, is spreading, and that the regions once the center of pioneer democracy exhibit these tendencies in the most marked degree. They are efforts to find substitutes for that former safeguard of democracy, the disappearing free lands. They are the sequence to the extinction of the frontier" (p.321).

[4] See, for example, F.A. Shannon, "A Post-Mortem on the Labor Safety-Valve Theory," *Agricultural History,* 19:31-37 (January 1945), reprinted by George R. Taylor, Ed., *The Turner Thesis* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1949).

[5] Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945).

[6] Nathan Hare, as quoted in John H. Bunzel, "Black Studies at San Francisco State," *The Public Interest*, no. 13 (Fall 1968), p. 30. That integration, as practiced so far, deprives the black community of "leadership potential" is also argued in Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 53.

[7] Richard Patch, "Bolivia: The Restrained Revolution," *The Annual of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 334:130 (1961).

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] R.P. Dore, "Talent and the Social Order in Tokugawa Japan," in John W. Hall and Marius E. Jansen, eds., *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 349, 354. The imagination of Michael Young takes the process one step further. In his anti-utopia where the upper and lower classes are increasingly separated as a result of individual mobility there develops a "disturbing growth in the black market of baby traffic, stupid babies from elite homes being sent, sometimes with princely dowries, in exchange for clever ones from the lower class." *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958, Penguin Books, 1968 edition), p. 184.

[10] For some forceful and well documented remarks along these lines, see Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1969), pp. 134-141.

[11] Translation: "but happy I am not." As another example of the intensity associated with the word "happy" in non-American languages, take the opening lines of a poem by Umbert Saba:

> *In quel momento ch'ero giá felice*
> *(Dio mi perdoni la parola grande*
> *e tremenda) ...*

which translates feebly into: "At that time when I was still happy (may God forgive me the great and awesome word)…" Saba, *Il Canzoniere* (Rome: Giulio Einaudi, 1945), p. 220.