

# Puritans' Progress

## Lawrence Mead and the Question of American Culture

*Peter Skerry*

Culture is too important to be left to the literati. But what do we mean by culture? Don't ask me, I'm a political scientist.

For a generation or more this has been social scientists' de facto answer to that question, though voiced less from modesty than expedience, risk aversion, and even cowardice. Ever since the controversy over *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, a 1965 report in which Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then assistant secretary of



conservatives, there have been admirable efforts by liberals—notably by Israeli political theorist Yael Tamir in her 2019 book *Why Nationalism*.<sup>1</sup>

Another political scientist who has stepped boldly into this arena is Lawrence Mead, a longtime professor of politics and public policy at New York University. Mead is not your average political scientist. Although not an international academic superstar like Francis Fukuyama, or even one who has wrapped an arresting finding in a clever metaphor like “bowling alone” and ridden it to fame and fortune, like Robert Putnam, he is hardly an obscure academic. Indeed, his research and writing have had a significant impact on US social policy. His 1985 book *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, in which he argued that the American welfare state is not too generous (or, for that matter, too stingy), but insufficiently demanding of its beneficiaries, greatly shaped the outcome of the welfare policy debates of the late 1980s and the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Mead is no narrow technocrat, nor even a particularly quantitative





non-Western immigrants arriving in America these days is overwhelming our capacity to absorb and properly assimilate them.

Given his provocative, even offensive perspective, it is worth noting how Mead

Relegating the heritage of African Americans primarily to the non-Western world, Mead is at pains to praise their contributions to American culture: “The black impact on the arts, and especially on music, has been transformative,” he writes. “Without spirituals, jazz, gospel, and many other forms invented and developed by blacks, America simply would not be the paragon it is. Blacks also figure prominently in US politics, the media, the military, and college and professional sports.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to being smarmy, Mead’s analysis suffers from even deeper flaws. Perhaps

that Hispanics simply do not experience the same degree or kind of residential segregation as African Americans.<sup>22</sup> Most tellingly, intermarriage between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites is far more common than between blacks and non-Hispanic whites.<sup>23</sup>

immigrants, however, are not individualists coming in.” And because the latter come from “largely passive and deferential societies,” they must “take on a new and demanding psychology, where they accept far more responsibility for their lives.” As a result, “their assimilation has been much more troubled.”<sup>27</sup>



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Some of Mead's takes on earlier generations of European immigrants are not merely

War II era, Catholics were discouraged from participating in the YM/YWCA, which was warily regarded as a hostile Protestant evangelical organization intent on making converts, as indeed it had been for much of its history.<sup>35</sup> The resulting “Catholic separatism” and self-imposed “Catholic ghetto” were being by the late 1940s and early 1950s decried by liberal Catholics associated with the journal *Commonweal*.<sup>36</sup> In that same period, the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray was silenced by Rome for his writings advocating freedom of religious conscience, which the Catholic Church did not actually embrace until the closing sessions of the reformist Second Vatican Council in 1965.<sup>37</sup> In other words, in 1960 one did not have to be a bigot to have reservations about electing a Catholic president.

Bungling another aspect of immigrant religion, Mead overlooks the fact that significant numbers of Latin Americans have been leaving the Catholicism of their upbringing and converting to evangelical Protestantism. This is occurring in their countries of origin as well as in the United States, where the Pew Research Center made an unprecedented finding in 2019: that less than a majority of Hispanics, 47 percent, identified as Catholic.<sup>38</sup> Similar if less dramatic developments are evident among Asian Americans. Ironically, even though these trends support Mead’s insistence on the importance of culture to understanding immigrant adaptation, and point to the appeal of Protestant individualism, he pays them no attention.<sup>39</sup>

Mead’s argument goes further astray in its insistence that contemporary immigrants from Asia and especially Latin America exhibit fundamentally different cultural traits from those of European immigrants of generations ago. He ignores considerable evidence that Italian immigrants from those earlier decades, especially those from Southern Italy, have much in common with today’s Hispanic, especially Mexican, immigrants. Not unlike young Mexican Americans, Italian American youth had a school dropout problem. Italian immigrant families also exhibited weak ties to the Catholic Church and other mediating institutions. In both instances, such patterns reflect excessively strong family bonds that hinder individual initiative, attachment to civic institutions, and overall integration—a dynamic that is rightfully at the heart of Mead’s concerns. Historical comparisons are fraught with complications, of course, but Mead completely ignores research demonstrating the overall similarity of these two immigrant profiles, work that is aptly summed up in the title of historian Joel Perlmann’s book *Italians Then, Mexicans Now*.<sup>40</sup>

*Some of the takes on earlier generations of European immigrants are not merely wrong-headed but surprising.*

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None of this is to suggest that immigrants today, especially the unskilled, do not pose a range of serious challenges. Nor is Mead’s emphasis on culture misplaced, though structural economic, social, and political problems also loom. Yet his insistence on how much the culture of contemporary immigrants differs from that of their predecessors is

unpersuasive. Among other considerations, he ignores how the mainstream *American* values to which immigrants today must adapt have also changed—and in troubling ways.

Mead's understanding of contemporary American culture is confused, or at least confusing. At one point he observes that "the Puritan mind-set survives in the strong work ethic, the demanding public ethics, the strict sense of personal responsibility." He even remarks on "the somewhat prudish social attitudes of Americans today."<sup>41</sup> Prudish? One can only wonder if Mead has watched cable television lately.

Less puzzling and more noteworthy are Mead's overall assessment and apparent approval of contemporary America's "acceptance of diverse lifestyles." He highlights the Supreme Court's legitimization of same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* as well as the legalization of marijuana in various jurisdictions. In that vein, he dismisses Sayyid Qutb's revulsion "at what seemed to him the moral squalor of American life," when the Islamist intellectual visited here in the late 1940s. Mead then paraphrases Tocqueville to the effect that our "superficial indulgences...are undergirded by a formidable institutional system." In a similarly smug tone, he goes on to comment on Arabs and Muslims today who "are offended and disoriented by *what seems to them* [emphasis added] the West's permissive society."<sup>42</sup>

What's missing here is any acknowledgment of the cultural change America has experienced since Qutb's visit. The Islamist's negative response to what he witnessed then—at a dance held by a church in Greeley, Colorado—*was* overwrought and extreme.<sup>43</sup> But in the intervening seventy years, American mores have changed in dramatically visible ways, in some instances for the better and in others for the worse. But putting all of these on the same plane and reducing them to "superficial indulgences" is obtuse. This is certainly not how many Americans, not just a few backwoods fundamentalists or unemployed machinists, regard these changes. To many they reek of self-indulgence, if not decadence. Yet, again, all this escapes Mead's notice.

Given Mead's concern with the maintenance of American primacy, it is striking that he is also oblivious to how contemporary American mores are being rejected in precisely those parts of the world whose cultures diverge from ours, cultures from which come many of the immigrants whom he fears we cannot assimilate. Resorting to clichés about the global appeal of American music and Hollywood films, he seems to be stuck in a Cold War frame of reference that ignores how twenty-first-century Americans are regarded with curiosity and suspicion for what millions regard as our indifference or even hostility to family and our obsession with sex and drugs.<sup>44</sup>

For his own part, Mead approves of the legalization of marijuana, citing it as evidence of our "acceptance of diverse lifestyles."<sup>45</sup> Yet when he later highlights Mexico and Central America as places "where endemic drug violence reigns," he fails to connect



Mead regards the presence of eleven million undocumented residents as a challenge



<sup>33</sup> Francis L. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan*