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*How Countless Your Sins:
Anti-American Rhetoric and the
Prophetic Tradition*

Sacred Discontent

When academics and intellectuals revile this country for its countless sins, they are casting themselves—consciously or not—in the role of biblical prophet.

The biblical prophets were commanded by God to excoriate “Israel” (used here for both kingdoms) for its repeated violations of covenant law. Prophets such as Amos, Malachi, Jeremiah, and Isaiah performed this thankless and often dangerous task with such brio that their example established and legitimized within Western society the social role of the “relentless accuser,” Malachi’s term for the prophet (3:5). Through the ages, all sorts of social critics have enacted this prophetic role.

Max Weber, in *Ancient Judaism*, credits the Hebrew prophets with inspiring the “plebeian strata everywhere” to reproach court officials and the “patrician urban sibs” for their crimes against the poor and powerless (117). Marcus J. Borg describes the prophets as “God-intoxicated voices of radical social criticism and God-intoxicated advocates of an alternative social vision” (127). In *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition*, Herbert Schneidau argues that the biblical prophets introduced into Western thought a “pitiless critical attitude” towards all social and political institutions (211). In “remorselessly desacralizing” all “fatuous and complacent illusions,” the prophets established a “tradition of smoldering hostility” (208) towards the status quo that would inflame others to also denounce their society for its countless sins.

This is why it makes sense to describe some social critics—the most radical and relentless ones—as “prophets,” even if marginal or peripheral to their societies. The most important social critic of the modern age—Karl Marx—has

often been described by this term, despite the fact that he was a secular materialist. A friend found in Marx's "terrible powers of hatred, invective, [and] irony" the "righteous fury" of the Hebrew prophets (quoted by Stanley Edgar Hyman 142). The Jewish novelist Waldo Frank argued that "the Modern Jew . . . must interpret Marx as a prophet as surely as his forebears interpreted Moses and Isaiah" (249). H. Stuart Hughes also views Marx as an "Old Testament prophet" (70). And Karl Lowith argues that Marx is best understood as a "Jew of Old Testament stature" (44):

For the secret history of the *Communist Manifesto* is not its conscious materialism . . . but the religious spirit of prophetism. The *Communist Manifesto* is, first of all, a prophetic document, a judgment, and a call to action and not at all a purely scientific statement based on the empirical evidence of tangible facts (43).

Marx's treatise blends, according to Lowith, "old Jewish messianism and prophetism." Lowith does not spell out his view of the relationship between these two concepts, but it is possible that messianism—a powerful hunger for spiritual and social perfection—spawns prophetic denunciation. The higher the prophet's standards or the more utopian his hopes, the more corrupt society will appear, and the more vitriolic will be his prophetic response. As Lowith notes, this response need not be "based on empirical evidence of tangible facts" (43). Prophets are visionaries, not sociologists.

Marx is not the only "cultural heir of the Old Testament tradition of moral indignation" (Hyman 143). As Schneidau points out, the Bible's "image of the prophet estranged from his culture has shaped the adversary role" enacted by many contemporary social critics and accusers (45). Recently, Ralph Nader has been called an "Old Testament prophet" because of his obsessive need "to attack and attack and attack" the countless sins of his society (Pertschuk 58). Marcus Borg finds in the adversarial culture of the 1960s a perfect "prophetic critique" of the United States (123). To the idealistic students of the time, "the prophets seemed like powerful allies in the movements against racism, poverty, and the Vietnam War" (123): "I heard [the prophets] as

deeply political and only incidentally religious; I hear them as passionate about justice in this world and about the destiny and fate of societies within history" (124). In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann describes all those who indict the crimes and sins of their society as "peripheral prophets" locked in an adversarial struggle with the dominant community (xvi). Schneidau credits a prophetic "community of the alienated" with preserving through history the "prophets' messages" (17). He even suggests that today's "radical academics" may have found the sanction for politicizing their academic disciplines in the "Hebrew denunciations of pagan ways of living and knowing" (176). The most relentless accuser of the United States is Noam Chomsky, so it is not surprising that he has been honored with the label "Old Testament prophet" (cited by David Horowitz 6, n5).

What the biblical prophets did was to establish and legitimize not only the role of the relentless accuser but the themes and rhetorical strategies appropriate to the role. The point here is to outline this role in more detail, and to suggest how prophetic themes and rhetoric have helped shape the discourse of denunciation leveled at this country by its own "peripheral prophets." The purpose of this essay, then, is to explain some of the ways in which the prophetic tradition—as it originated in the biblical prophets and was re-vitalized by the Puritan prophets of colonial America—has helped shape anti-American discourse.

"I will act as a relentless accuser."

The divinely ordained mission of the Hebrew prophet was to expose and condemn over and over again the countless sins of the nation. There were always more than enough sins to expose and condemn. This was not because Israel was particularly sinful when compared to other nations but because the Covenant people were held to the highest of moral standards. According to a count furnished by a medieval rabbi, the Hebrews had to adhere to 613 laws imposing all kinds of social and religious obligations—every day of every year of every century. Moreover, the prophets judged their brethren from the divine perspective of Yahweh. As

noted biblical scholar Abraham Heschel puts it, the prophet “shuns the middle of the road” and demands that people “live on the summit to avoid the abyss” (19). It is hardly surprising, then, that these “God-intoxicated” messengers (Borg 127) always found plenty of grist for their relentlessly grinding mills. As the prophet Amos put it, speaking in the voice of Yahweh, “You alone have I singled out / Of all the families of the earth / That is why I will call you to account / For all your iniquities” (3:2; *The Prophets: A new translation*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978, is the source for all quotations from the prophets).

According to Heschel, the Hebrew prophets unveiled all manner of “social, political, and religious evils, and all manner of “injustice and oppression” (260). But, as “radical” social critics (Borg 127), the prophets focused their anger and accusations on the elites—political rulers, priests, merchants, and others who used their wealth and power to oppress the lowly. Isaiah condemned the members of these elites as “misleaders” who “grind the face of the poor” (3:12-15):

Those who write out evil writs
And compose iniquitous documents,
To subvert the cause of the poor,
To rob of their rights the needy of My people;
That widows may be their spoil,
And fatherless children their booty!
What will you do on the day of punishment,
When the calamity comes from afar? (10: 1-3)

With the same “pitiless critical attitude,” Ezekiel condemns the priesthood, in the voice of Yahweh:

Her priests have violated My Teaching: they have profaned what is sacred to Me, they have not distinguished between the sacred and the profane, they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have closed their eyes to My sabbaths. I am profaned in their midst. Her officials are like wolves rending prey in her midst; they shed blood and destroy lives to win ill-gotten gain. (22:26-7)

Similar courageous denunciations of the powerful can be found throughout the prophetic literature. Jeremiah had the temerity to pronounce a sentence of death on both a doomed priesthood and an equally doomed king (7:32). Micah denounced the greed and tyranny of merchants and landowners “who plan iniquity / And design evil on their beds,” who seize the fields they covet, who “defraud men of their homes, / And people of their land” (2:1-2). Zephaniah attacks the “soiled, defiled” leaders of Jerusalem, calling them “evening wolves” who prey on the poor (3:8). Micah’s lacerating denunciation of the ruling class is particularly vivid:

Listen, you rulers of Jacob,
You chiefs of the House of Israel!
For you ought to know what is right,
But you hate good and love evil.
You have devoured My people’s flesh;
You have flayed the skin off them,
And their flesh off their bones.
And after tearing their skins off them,
And their flesh off their bones,
and breaking their bones to bits,
You have cut it up as into a pot,
Like meat in a caldron.
Someday they shall cry out to the Lord,
But He will not answer them;
At that time He will hide His face from them,
In accordance with the wrongs they have done.
(3:1-4)

While the brunt of prophetic denunciation was directed at the elites, whom the prophets held responsible for creating and maintaining structures of exploitation, some denunciations were so sweeping as to indict the nation itself. In Ezekiel, the Lord says:

And the people of the land have practiced fraud and committed robbery; they have wronged the poor and needy, have defrauded the stranger without redress. And I sought a man among them to repair the wall or to stand in the breach

before Me in behalf of this land, that I might not destroy it; but I found none. (23: 28-30)

Hosea, as well, does limit his denunciation to the misleaders but indicts the whole nation:

Hear the word of the Lord,
O people of Israel!
For the Lord has a case
Against the inhabitants of this land,
Because there is no honesty and no goodness
And no obedience to God in the land.
[False] swearing, dishonesty, and murder,
And theft and adultery are rife;
Crime follows upon crime!
For that the earth is withered;
Everything that dwells on it languishes—
Beasts of the field and birds of the sky—
Even the fish of the sea perish. (4: 1-3)

Isaiah declares those in Israel to be a

sinful nation!
People laden with iniquity!
Brood of evildoers!
Depraved children! (1:4)

In short, prophetic accusation was sometimes breathtakingly broad, encompassing the whole nation, not only in the Bible but in the condemnations of both Puritan and contemporary accusers of this nation.

For the ancient prophets, the root of social injustice could be found in greed and venality, the principal theme of post-biblical prophetic discourse. It was the appetite for more—for more money, more land, more power—that drove Isaiah's "misleaders" to defraud and devour the innocent and helpless, shaming all Israel. Prosperity, comfort, and luxury were not blessings, according to the prophets, but curses, because they were squeezed from the blood of the defenseless, and purchased at the cost of one's soul.

The role of the prophet was not merely to denounce this or that social evil but to challenge the entire percep-

tual field of his community, what Brueggemann has labeled “royal consciousness.” Royal consciousness is a false consciousness that serves to guard the interests of the “haves” and legitimize their system of “domination.” This domination system need not be overtly oppressive; indeed, under the Hebrew kings David and Solomon, it provided considerable security and wealth for even the lowly. But it did so at the cost of intellectual and religious freedom to create a more righteous community. “Royal reality,” Brueggemann writes, “rode roughshod over Moses’ vision. The gift of freedom was taken over by the yearning for order. . . . The god of freedom and justice was co-opted for an eternal now” (34). Freedom was traded for consuming. As Marcus J. Borg puts it, the prophetic mission was to subvert all conventions, because it is the conventional that estranges people from what is true and real (298). We are justified, then, in viewing the ancient prophet—in the words of Heschel—as an “iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions” (12). An “unbearable extremist,” the prophet said “No” to his society” (xxix).

Heschel’s phrasing is provocative. What it claims is that the prophet said *no* to his society regardless of the situation, said *no* axiomatically. This axiomatic negation necessarily placed the prophet in a permanently and programmatically adversarial stance in regard to his society (thus providing a model, according to Schneidau, for the adversarial culture of today). This point raises nettlesome questions about the “truthfulness” of prophetic discourse. In a sense, programmatic denunciations must always contain some “truth” because all societies, to one degree or another, are unjust and cruel. To most people, however, that “one degree or another” does make a difference. But it doesn’t to the “God-intoxicated” prophets. They did not view themselves as sociologists obliged to compare the social indicators of Israel with those of, let’s say, Babylon. They insisted on judging Israel by unilateral moral standards that Max Weber described as “utopian phantasies” (112). By these perfectionist standards, Israel was doomed no matter what its people did or did not do to justify the most extreme prophetic ire. Even such a sympathetic reader of the prophets as Abraham He-

schel was forced to conclude that the prophets were “unfair to Israel.” Their sweeping allegations, overstatements, and distortions “defied standards of accuracy” and sometimes were downright “unbelievable” (15-16).

This leads to another provocative observation about the rhetorical strategy of the Hebrew prophets. In the words of Heschel, “pure patriotism may be an apt characterization of the so-called false prophets” (542). In contrast, true prophets, “instead of cursing the enemy,” “condemned their own nation” (14). The false prophet praised the nation, while the true prophet relentlessly condemned it. Since the role of the prophet, according to Heschel, “is mainly to castigate the children of Israel,” the mere act of castigating the children of Israel became the way to legitimize one’s claim to being a prophet. The fiercer the denunciation, the stronger that claim. This rhetorical strategy, as I shall explain in the last section, was not lost on today’s prophetic claimants.

The Biblical prophets, the first “dissident intellectuals” of Western civilization (according to Joseph Blenkinsopp, quoted by Podhoretz 134), created a template and a tradition that exerted considerable influence on the community of the alienated that came after. They introduced into Western thought the pitiless critical attitude towards one’s culture now found in many of our learned elite. This elite would find in the prophetic tradition a bitter denunciation of money-making and materialism (“the better, the worse”), a demagogic exaggeration of the perfidy of one’s nation almost to the point of demonization, an enviable display of courage, and a sonorous tone of moral righteousness. Just as the prophets were “God-intoxicated” (Borg 127), so their modern-day imitators and epigones may be said to be *prophet-intoxicated*.

The prophetic themes and rhetorical strategies just discussed were revitalized, as we shall now see, by the Puritan prophets of colonial America and used to condemn and demonize an admittedly flawed nation for failing to fulfill its messianic mission. The jeremiads hurled by the Puritans at this “sinful” nation imbued anti-American discourse with a rancor and degree of hostility not found in the ancient prophets, who never wished evil on their nation nor claimed it to be demonic.

“. . . you have great works to do, the planting of a new heaven and a new earth among us, and great works have great enemies”

As Michael Grosso puts it in *The Millennium Myth: Love and Death at the End of Time*, America was “where the prophetic imagination found a home” (114). That imagination was brought here, one might say, by Christopher Columbus, who thought that he was fulfilling the millennial prophecies of the Bible: “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me the spot where to find it” (114-115). Even before the Puritan colonists set foot on Plymouth Rock, the exploration of this land was wreathed with prophetic hopes.

The Puritan colonists who eventually followed Columbus to the New World were also convinced that they were fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy of “a new heaven and a new earth” (65:17). In 1653 Edward Johnson, an early chronicler of New England history, reassured fellow colonists that “this is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven and a new earth.” Boston political leader Samuel Sewall, writing in 1697, thought that America might be “the seat of the Divine Metropolis” in the approaching millennium. In 1742 Jonathan Edwards described America as the land where God could “begin a new world in a spiritual respect, when he creates the new heavens and new earth” (Boyer 68-69, 226).

The Puritans were convinced that they were chosen to cross their own Sea of Reeds to establish God’s New Israel in North America. Like ancient Israel, America was to be a “holy nation” (Exodus 19:6), but a holy nation of which God expected even more. As the Puritans saw it, their spiritual journey into the wilderness was fortified by both the Old and the New Testaments. Those to whom more has been given, more is expected. And the Old World was expecting the saints of the New World to inaugurate the paradise foreseen by Third Isaiah. This new land was not being colonized to create a more comfortable or commercially thriving nation but to finally incarnate the Edenic dream of spiritual perfection.

The learned elite of colonial America, many of whom were trained in theology and held religious posts, repeatedly warned their brethren about the perverse and diabolical forces that threatened their pursuit of the spiritual millennium. Most of these forces could be summed up as “carnal” desire, materialism, money-getting, and profit making, the same sins attacked by the ancient prophets. Headed for the New World aboard the *Arrabella*, in 1630, John Winthrop warned his coreligionists that if they “embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a Covenant” (in Cherry 40; spelling has been modernized). Were the Puritans to resist these carnal temptations, then they “shall find the God of Israel is among us.” Winthrop goes on to remind his people that “we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our god in this work we have undertaken,” and worship “our pleasures, and profits,” “we shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land wither we are going” (41).

William Stoughton (1668) also anguished over the consequences of failing to fulfill this demanding new covenant:

“If we should so frustrate and deceive the Lord’s Expectations, that his Covenant-interest in us, and the Workings of his Salvation be made to cease, then All were lost indeed; Ruin upon Ruin, Destruction upon Destruction would come, until one stone were not left upon another.” (in Miller, *Errand* 6)

From the very beginning, the learned elite of the New World were haunted by the fear that their millennial errand would fail and bring down upon them the bitter curses of their brethren and the wrath of their God.

And fail it did, of course, since no country, composed as it must be of flawed humanity, is capable of incarnating the utopian longings easily conjured by the imagination. So much had been expected of America that its failure to fulfill

these expectations would not be dismissed as just another utopia lost; it struck people as a devastating repudiation of Divine Grace, a crushing defeat for humanity's spiritual development. In response to this willful rejection of God's merciful second covenant, no degree of outrage was considered excessive. Extravagant hope gave rise to frenzied accusations, to those "curses" dreaded by John Winthrop.

The bitterness and anger found expression in a sermonic form that Perry Miller has named the *jeremiad*. This indigenous form of prophetic denunciation entailed a vivid and detailed enumeration of the countless sins afflicting the nation. The assumption was that only "a staggering compendium of iniquity" could adequately explain the failure of this nation to fulfill its holy enterprise. For seventy years, throughout the New England colonies, jeremiad after jeremiad condemned this country as the most wicked nation under the heavens, as America's "current Jeremiahs" also do (*Errand* 7).

As in ancient Israel, greed and economic exploitation were singled out by the Puritan prophets for special excoriation. Winthrop had warned his coreligionists that the greatest danger threatening their prophetic mission was "making money," or "seeking great things for our selves and our posterity." This seeking after wealth was to the Puritans tantamount to the Unforgivable Sin that Hawthorne felt lurked in the tormented consciousness of his Puritan characters. It was the sin of acquisitiveness that obsessed the relentless accusers of colonial America, as it continues to obsess the peripheral prophets of contemporary America. In an early jeremiad (1663), a concerned John Higginson pointed out to merchants and traders that the Lord had not stirred the founders by the promise of wealth. "Nor had we any rational grounds to expect such a thing in such a wilderness as this." New England was originally a plantation not of trade but of religion: "Let Merchants and such as are increasing Cent per Cent remember this" (in Miller, *New England Mind* 36). In 1676 Increase Mather denounced the growing acquisitiveness of the people: "Land! Land! Hath been the Idol of many in New England." The first settlers held things in common, but their descendents now "coveted after the earth, that many hundreds, nay thousands of Acres, have been engrossed by one man, and they that

profess themselves Christians, have forsaken Churches, and Ordinances, and all for land and elbow-room enough in the World" (37).

John Cotton, echoing Micah and Amos, complained in another jeremiad that rich men have eaten up the estates of the poor men by oppression, "and even Christian men, if they be not the more watchful, will be so eaten up with their business as they have no leisure to feed on the Lord" (473). Another jeremiad voiced the complaint that people were obsessed with "Wares, Merchandize and Trading, a gaining what they can possibly, as if Justice had set them no bounds, but to gain what they can is their professed justice; and their gain is their godliness." There is so much "rooting in the Earth," wrote another sermonizer, "that there is little growing upward."

In 1673, another jeremiad—this one quoting Isaiah—complained of too much "Griping, and Squeesing, and Grinding the faces of the poor." Charles Chauncy had said in 1655 that if a poor man wanted a pair of shoes, or clothes to cover his nakedness, "truely he must be fain almost to sell himself, to get some mean commodities." By 1674 Increase Mather could give a more penetrating description of the economic process: "A poor man cometh amongst you, and he must have a Commodity whatever it cost him, and you will make him give whatever you please, and put what price you please upon what he hath to give too, without respecting the just value of the thing." Two years later he wrote again, "And what a shame it is that ever that odious sin of Usury should be pleaded for, or practised in New England, especially by such as should give a better example?" As one can infer from these examples, the jeremiad was used to denounce, in the words of Miller, "nothing less than mercantile, capitalistic, competitive New England" (*Errand* 12). And the jeremiad has been used this way ever since, though without the label.

Over the decades, the relentless cataloguing of the same old sins grew tiresome. To breathe new life into the form, relentless accusers resorted to the time-tested rhetorical strategy of "piling horror upon horror" in what Miller describes as a "mounting wail of sinfulness" (*Errand* 8; *New England Mind* 33-34). It was unimportant whether or not the sins actually existed, as long as they riveted the

crowd and testified to the righteous fervor of the accuser. Eventually even this souped-up catalogue of sins lost its power to cower increasingly prosperous and happy—ergo “evil”—colonials. By the end of the century, a contemporary observer remarked that the accusations leveled at the country were “scarcely believed by any.” Going further, he dismissed these relentless accusations as “nothing else but the mistakes of an irregular (though well minded) zeal, or the dumps and night visions of some melancholic spirits” (in *New England Mind* 34). For this insightful observer, the problem lay not with the country being condemned but with the prophets who were condemning it. As in ancient Israel, crushed “utopian phantasies” engendered sweeping allegations, overstatements, and distortions that were as unfair to the New Israel as they had been to Old Israel.

Although the “axiomatic negations” of these melancholic night visions were losing their power, they had enough of it left to help provoke, I believe, the harrowing spasm of demonization that occurred at the end of the seventeenth century in Salem. To be clear, Perry Miller does not draw this connection, but surely it is not unreasonable to see one. For decades hundreds upon hundreds of jeremiads had piled “horror upon horror” to explain the malevolent refusal of the “saints” to usher in the New Heaven and the New Earth. Eventually, such perverse recalcitrance could be explained only in terms of demonic possession. Great works, after all, have great enemies, and the greatest enemy of all is Satan himself. Cotton Mather, one of the most learned “professors” of the time, argued that it was Satan who had seduced the chosen people into a witch’s covenant, “a most hellish League made between them, with various Rites and Ceremonies” (*Late Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions, Clearly Manifesting, Not only that there are Witches, but that Good Men [as well as others] may possibly have their Lives shortened by such evil Instruments of Satan*) (in 1689, 1691, in Dorson 32). This diabolical crew made up a “vast Power, or Army of Evil Spirits, under the Government of a Prince who employs them in a continual Opposition to the Designs of GOD.” These demons could be found lurking not only in the dark woods, but, as Hawthorne also understood, in the dark hearts of the new chosen people. Mather was hardly the only intellectual to seize on this demonic interpretation of

social and political imperfection. A Dutch traveler who visited America in 1679-1680 observed that he had never heard more talk about witchcraft and the devil than when among the educated elite of Boston (Dorson 35). This demonization finally led to the notorious outbreak of anger, guilt, and fear known as the Salem Witch Trials (1691-92). These trials were conducted by members of the learned elite.

Thanks largely to the Puritan prophets, America has been on endless trial since Colonial times. What the Puritan jeremiad did was to establish and legitimize a domestic rhetorical tradition in which this nation could be ritualistically denounced and even demonized, regardless of the evidence.

Over the centuries, the standard curses and accusations of the prophetic tradition were intensified as the United States in the eyes of utopians and perfectionists wickedly failed to fulfill the millennial promise attending its founding. "God . . . set [America] in a good land and blessed its founding fathers," writes David Wilkerson not in 1665 but in 1985; "but evil has become so great, disobedience so widespread, God has declared, 'I will pluck it up, pull it down, destroy it, as it seemeth good to me'" (in Boyer 239). For secular prophets as well, America's great "sin" is to have betrayed its millennial mission to create the social utopia long envisioned by Western intellectuals. This secular longing for an earthly paradise was fed, as Max Weber and others have suggested, by the "utopian phantasies" of the prophets. America, for betraying its messianic mission, and for opposing the utopian projects of such "progressive" countries as the Soviet Union and Cuba, deserves to be relentlessly vilified and reviled. As Merrill Unger puts it (1973), no other country in history "has had a greater opportunity than America to realize a social and political utopia," so when it became clear that "postwar America" was not to fulfill the "spiritual promise and millennial hope it had once embodied," the condemnation of the country "was all the more implacable" (in Boyer 239). As historian Paul Boyer observes, during the twentieth century this "cosmic drama of a once-favored but now-apostate people hurtling to ruin became almost hypnotic in its repetition" (241).

“ . . . a sinful nation . . . laden with iniquity!”

Whether contemporary accusers of this country are labeled “prophets” or “modern jeremiahs” (Perry Miller’s term) or some other descriptive phrase, it is important to understand the ways in which, and the degree to which, their accusations have been shaped by the prophetic tradition, as it came from the Hebrew Bible and was revitalized and intensified by the Puritan experience.

The prophetic messages that wealth corrupts, that acquisitiveness is the root of much evil, that the powerful and the wealthy ruthlessly oppress the weak and the powerless, are echoed throughout anti-American rhetoric. For the “peripheral prophets” of today, the United States is a cesspool of avariciousness, mindless consumerism and materialism. It stands condemned merely on the grounds that it espouses and practices the sinful economic ideology of capitalism. As one accuser puts it, the United States is evil by definition, because “organized capitalism is an evil thing in itself” (in Hollander 561). Another accuser, echoing Revelation 18:7, imbues his denunciation of the rapacious materialism of the United States with a decidedly prophetic tone:

We have 5½ percent of the population, but out of all the money in the world that’s spent on food, we spend 60 percent of it. For she hath lived deliciously. . . . Yet we pat ourselves on the back and we declare that we are a Godly nation, that we are a God-fearing people, that our nation loves God, and we send out all the missionaries throughout the world. But, friend, we better wake up to the fact that we are also the wickedest nation on earth. (in Boyer 246)

According to another “peripheral prophet” writing in the 1980s, who manages to blend both religious and secular sentiments, the monstrous capitalistic sins of this country doom it to a chastisement of biblical proportions: “Capitalism encourages ‘hedonistic love of pleasure and selfish lust for money, possessions, and power,’ and for this reason capitalism would ‘eventually lose its battle with Communism.’” “God’s will is that the profit system be judged

and destroyed.” And it will be destroyed, this author hopes, with “a violence beyond that [en]visioned by Marx” (in Boyer 250).

Acquisitiveness, materialism, and consumerism are as revolting to the accusers of today as they were to the ancient and Puritan prophets. For some social critics, this crass and animalistic pursuit of material comfort and hedonistic pleasure is America’s most grievous sin. The parallelism between ancient Israel and contemporary America is quite obvious to Walter Brueggemann, who believes that the United States suffers from the same “royal consciousness” of “achievable satiation” that afflicted Israel and provoked the diatribes of the ancient prophets (35, 37). The “cultural situation” in the United States, he claims, is one of “narcotized insensibility to human reality . . . a mindless humanity of despairing conformity”(xx). This cultural catastrophe has brought forth yet another cohort of relentless accusers as eager to denounce the countless sins of their nation as were the Puritan prophets. And like the Puritans, they are prone to condemn the nation as not only sinful but as evil and demonic.

For many “modern jeremiahs”—academics, writers, pundits, and culture makers—this nation is not just flawed but the “embodiment of a totalitarian society.” One famous novelist condemns the “totalitarian tissues of American society.” Another writer describes the United States as a vast dungeon in which anonymous bureaucracies and corporations determine “where we live, work, are educated; whether and with whom we fight, where we may travel, what we wear, and what we may say in public, what information we receive.” And the “Old Testament prophet” Noam Chomsky compares contemporary America to the Third Reich, claiming that the United States has “picked up where the Nazis left off.” For these “modern jeremiahs” this nation is also “deeply genocidal” (Eliot Fremont Smith), “founded on genocide” (Susan Sontag) constantly evincing “marked genocidal proclivities” (Philip Slater), and guilty of “committing genocide every single day” (Morton J. Tenzer) (in Beichman 47, 45; in D’Souza 26). Chomsky accuses the nation of “annihilating . . . millions of people” throughout the world. For another member of the learned elite, American history is little more than a “history of reducing whole peo-

ples, countries and even continents to ruin by nothing short of holocaust" (in D'Souza 26).

Leaving no stone unhurled, contemporary accusers bent on demonizing this country insist that the United States, not North Korea or Iran, is the real "terrorist" threatening the world. Chomsky accuses the United States of being "the torture and political-murder capital of the world" and thus a "global terrorist" (in Puddington 66, 67). A successful novelist describes the American flag as "a symbol of terrorism and death and fear and destruction and oppression" throughout the world. Amir Muhammad, an American Muslim, calls this country "the number-one oppressor in the history of the planet Earth, the number-one murderer on the planet Earth, and the number-one spreader of terror on the planet Earth" (16).

In short, the United States is still the abode of demons, as it was for the Puritan prophets. One journalist makes this claim explicit: "The United States is akin to Satan. Let's look at the Satanic Bible. What are the values of Satan? Lust, greed, gluttony, revenge. Hmm. Sounds like American society. Is New York the head of the 'Great Satan'? All that is evil in the world can be found in New York" (in Sardar and Davies 205).

These vituperative accusations, of course, are nothing like the routine, predictable complaints and gripes that arise from partisan politics and from the chronic conflicts of a heterogeneous and dynamic society. These accusations vilify the nation as a whole: its institutions, its history, its basic values, its very existence. They seethe with the righteous judgmentalism to be found, according to Michael Walzer, in the traditional genre of "prophecy" (3).

As Herbert Schneidau suggests, the Hebrew prophets created the role of adversarial critic for Western society. Their relentless excoriation of the countless sins of their own nation inaugurated a tradition of programmatic and sweeping social criticism that shaped all subsequent critiques by elites of their societies. Those critical elites have been described as "peripheral prophets" who always exist, and often thrive, at the margins of their ineluctably imperfect societies.

The first "peripheral prophets" of this nation could be said to be those seventeenth-century Puritan divines who saw in America the promised fulfillment of Biblical proph-

ecies about a New Heaven and a New Earth. When these learned men had to abandon their millenarian expectations in the face of—as they saw it—the inveterate evil of the people, they turned with a vengeance against the country that destroyed their ravishing dreams of perfection. Those idealists and utopians—both Right and Left—who came after them grew ever more outraged with the passage of time as this country continued to refuse—as they saw it—to incarnate the spiritual, ethical, and social ideals assumed to be within its grasp. Like the Hebrew and Puritan prophets before them, “modern jeremiahs” heap on this nation “horror upon horror” not as atrocities materialize or as they are proven by evidence but as they are deemed useful in demonizing a country that has so maliciously repudiated its presumed destiny to inaugurate the New Heaven and New Earth of the prophetic tradition.

“. . . they prophesy unto you a lying vision.”

Are today’s peripheral prophets and modern jeremiahs aware of the prophetic ethos suffusing their denunciatory enterprise? I suspect many are. After all, it is unlikely that well-educated writers, academics, and pundits have not read at least some of the prophets, or that they are entirely ignorant of their cultural and social significance. Assuming they are aware, I’m led to speculate about another reason why this nation’s intellectuals may be attracted to the tradition of prophetic denunciation. I suggest that by mantling themselves in a prophetic aura, modern jeremiahs are attempting to assuage an acute sense of innocuous desuetude, one of the lamentable afflictions that intellectuals, writers, and academics have to bear in a materialistic and utilitarian nation.

As Michael Walzer observes, “social critics” aspire to the “supreme dignity of the risk-taker, which is otherwise reserved . . . for hunters and warriors.” Social critics, in other words, want to be regarded as “heroes” (15). But heroes must risk their lives to earn self-respect and the regard of others. This poses a gigantic problem for the “social critics” of the United States: they happen to live in a country that does not torture and kill dissidents and denouncers. This is why Simon de Beauvoir claimed that “America is hard on

intellectuals." Hard on their heroic pretensions, that is. Making matters worse, this nation even pampers and rewards its most provocatively anti-American intellectuals, academics, and writers with such ignoble blandishments as tenure, book awards, TV appearances, endowed chairs, ample food, dependable paychecks, health insurance, retirement plans, and a shameful array of "increasingly unnecessary commodities, services, gadgets, images, [and] information" (to quote Susan Sontag). There seems no end to the material benefits heaped on those who denounce the nation for its satanic materialism. Even the greatest denouncer of them all, Noam Chomsky, has amassed a fortune from delivering Khomeini-like diatribes attacking his country, allowing him to live "deliciously" in the very belly of the beast.

The shame and frustration that result from such a cosseted existence are assuaged, at least to some degree, by the creation, through rhetoric, of a world full of imagined menace in which pampered "social critics" can envision themselves enacting the heroic role perversely denied them by the real world. I am reminded of the Queen's peevish shout in *The Lion in Winter*: "I am vilifying you for God's sake. Pay attention!" The prophetic tradition has proved useful in this social-psychological enterprise. Those "troublers" of the kings of Israel epitomize the social critic as hero because they literally risked their lives by excoriating the countless sins of their nation. According to tradition, First Isaiah was martyred by Manasseh, Jeremiah almost killed by a mob, and Amos threatened by the authorities (7:16). But Amos, as the "social critic" Michael Walzer proudly notes, stood firm, "defiant, outspoken, fearless." The mighty example of these brave prophets has provoked in today's vastly safer "peripheral prophets" a certain measure of what I call prophetic envy.

Today's accusers often exploit the denunciatory discourse of the prophetic tradition to imbue themselves with prophetic cache. Prophetic discourse is used to "script" a psychodrama in which social critics cast themselves as prophetic heroes. By plastering on the country their "verbal atrocity posters" (Borg's description of prophetic denunciations), they try to convince themselves and others that they risk life and limb every time they denounce the United States. The more iniquitous they can make the coun-

try appear, the more prophetic charisma they bestow upon themselves. The monster has not created the accusers: the accusers have created the monster. Our modern jeremiahs are false prophets when they prophesy a lying vision full of distortion, exaggeration, bitterness, and hate.

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