

# Fifty Years of *The Lonely Crowd*

*Of the many books that seek to tell Americans about themselves, The Lonely Crowd stands among a small collection of classics. Yet the meaning of this modern classic was largely misunderstood during the decade of its greatest popularity, and its analysis of American society may be more relevant to our time than it was to the 1950s.*

by Wilfred M. McClay

The eminent American sociologist David Riesman, who celebrates his 89th birthday this September, has had a career of many parts: as an attorney, law professor, freewheeling intellectual, respected student of American higher education, fearlessly independent commentator on diverse political controversies, elder statesman of the American academy. But there is one accomplishment with which his name will forever be linked, above and beyond everything else he has done: an amazingly durable book of social and cultural analysis, now nearly 50 years old and still going strong, entitled *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*.

As its subtitle suggests, *The Lonely Crowd* was not only an examination of the changing structures and folkways of American society at midcentury but also an exploration of the changes taking place within the souls of individual Americans. In its various editions and translations, it has sold many hundreds of thousands of copies and been read attentively the world over. Along with such works as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, James Bryce's *American Commonwealth*, and D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, it has earned a place

on the small shelf of essential books about American society and culture.

The book's enormous popular success came as something of a surprise to Riesman and his then unknown co-authors, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, who were well aware of the many elements of chance and serendipity in its gestation. Composed during the late 1940s in a white heat of creativity, *The Lonely Crowd* started out as a relatively modest study of the sources of political apathy. But it grew like topsy, through many drafts, into a much more ambitious study of American life. When the book was finally published in 1950, the professional sociological community gave it a subdued reception, a mixture of lukewarm praise and mildly dismissive criticism. But, to Riesman's surprise, it received a far more enthusiastic reception from the general reading public.

In retrospect, it is not hard to see why. The very title of *The Lonely Crowd*—although the phrase was dreamed up virtually at the last moment by the publisher, and never appears in the book—seemed to register the ambivalences of an entire generation of middle-class Americans. The oxymoron also captured many of the more troubling features of the corporatized,



*Time's seal of approval: September 27, 1954*

bureaucratized, suburbanized, and homogenized white-collar America that had emerged in full flower in the years after World War II.

In particular, the book expressed a worry that, despite the postwar era's exuberant prosperity, the traditional American ethos of self-reliant independence was rapidly atrophying, and, as a result, America was turning into a nation of anxious, oversocialized, and glad-handing personality mongers,

salesmen, trimmers, empty suits, and artful dodgers. Hence the paradox captured in the title: a teeming throng whose individual members nevertheless feel themselves to be aching alone, empty, devoid of purpose or independent meaning.

*The Lonely Crowd* quickly became one of the defining works of the 1950s—a decade that, contrary to its reputation for intellectual blandness and timidity, was exceptionally rich in works of sharp and

enduring social criticism. In September 1954, four years after the book's appearance, Riesman appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, the first social scientist ever to do so. His sober countenance was surrounded by figures representing the central concepts drawn from the pages of *The Lonely Crowd*. Beneath this curious and fanciful tableau was the identification of "Social Scientist David Riesman" and the pointed question: "What is the American Character?"

That such a question was posed so earnestly, in such a place and manner, confirms *The Lonely Crowd's* significance as a popular icon of social-scientific inquiry. No single work provides us with a more valuable window onto America in the 1950s. But *The Lonely Crowd* is much more than a period piece. The Cold War is gone, tailfins are gone, the organization man in the gray flannel suit is gone, the cult of conformity is gone, the suburban ideal is teetering—in short, many of the particulars of the world we associate with *The Lonely Crowd* are no longer with us. But the book itself, and the questions it poses—about the kind of people we are, and are becoming, and about the meaning of human freedom in an organized age—remain very much with us. Such staying power is an extraordinary achievement. Consider, by way of comparison, how hard it would be to imagine a work of social analysis published in 1900 that would have had as much immediate interest for readers living in 1950 as *The Lonely Crowd* has for readers today. Indeed, it is not at all extravagant to claim, as the sociologist Dennis Wrong has suggested, that *The Lonely Crowd* "rings even more true today than when it was written."

Yet that statement calls for some qualification. Large and complex books peel in different tones for different readers, and *The Lonely Crowd* is no exception. Its marvelous title made prospective readers feel that they could intuitively grasp what it said, even before they opened the book. As

a consequence, some never did open it—or at least, never kept it open long enough to read it with care. Thus cuts the double edge of popular success. Such popularity always caused Riesman trepidation, precisely because he knew that the book was complicated, multilayered, and filled with internal tensions—and feared that its readers might appropriate its arguments selectively, in ways that would, at times, betray its larger vision.

The book's subsequent history bore out many of Riesman's fears. Given its considerable historical influence, it is perhaps inevitable that the book's "received" meaning is sometimes given more attention than its actual contents, a tendency that has hindered a fuller appreciation of its real virtues. The time is right for a closer, more nuanced assessment.



**T**he *Lonely Crowd* is above all else a study in what Riesman, following his mentor, Erich Fromm, called "social character": the dominant mode of psychological conformity that any cohesive society inculcates in its members. As such, it is of a piece with the works of numerous social scientists of the era who sought to connect "culture and personality," writers such as Fromm, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Karen Horney, Abram Kardiner, and Geoffrey Gorer. But *The Lonely Crowd* made a distinctive contribution to this burgeoning literature through its unforgettable taxonomy of personality types and its explanation of how these various types came into being historically.

The heart of the book's argument is its claim that the dominant social character of Americans had changed dramatically since the 19th century, in response to declining rates of fertility and the emergence of a service- and consumption-based economy. The change, as Riesman expressed it, was from "inner-directed" personality types—self-reliant and purposeful souls who navi-

> WILFRED M. MCCLAY, a Woodrow Wilson Center Fellow, is associate professor of history at Tulane University and the author of *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (1994), which received the Merle Curti Award of the *Organization of American Historians*. He is currently working on a biography of David Riesman. Copyright © 1998 by Wilfred M. McClay.

gated through life relying upon the firm principles implanted in them by parents—to “other-directed” types, who were brought up to rely upon the cues of others, particularly peer groups, coworkers, and the mass media, in addition to parents, to find their way in the world.

Riesman expressed this difference with an ingenious pair of metaphors, graphically rendered on the *Time* cover. The inner-directed man (who resembles a staid, hard-driving Victorian businessman) is guided by a gyroscope, a navigational device directed entirely by its own internal compass, without recourse to external referents. The other-directed man (who resembles an overly friendly, glad-handing salesman) is guided by a radar dish, entirely oriented to external referents, which bounces electromagnetic pulses off “others” to ascertain where the man is standing and where he should go next.

Both inner- and other-direction stood in sharp contrast to “tradition-direction,” the form of social character that had been generated by older, premodern, static, highly ascriptive social orders. Such unchanging orders encountered little difficulty in transmitting the correct patterns of thought and behavior to their members. The regime of tradition-direction, however, was no match for the dynamic capitalist world, whose social forms are highly fluid and changeable, and whose mechanisms of social and moral formation must therefore be designed to equip the individual with a dramatically different kind of social character—a portable and internalized equivalent of the pervasive checks and guideposts of traditional society.

Hence the emergence of inner-direction, which instilled in the souls of children a “rigid though highly individualized character,” a permanent moral “set” that enabled them to weather the storms and stresses of an unstable and unpredictable world. Inner-direction was the classic *modus operandi* of the 19th-century Western bourgeoisie, which is perhaps why one can hear such clear echoes of Sigmund Freud’s superego and Max Weber’s Protestant ethic in Riesman’s formulation of the concept. But the inner-

directed man can also be compared to an intrepid Victorian explorer or imperial conqueror, striding confidently through strange jungles and disordered circumstances with his pith helmet in place and his “civilized” values intact.

Inner-direction was highly appropriate to the era of imperial and industrial-capitalist expansion, an era that had learned to turn all productive energies to the task of conquering the “hardness” of the material world. But with the transformation from a production- and extraction-oriented economy to a service- and consumption-oriented one, dominated by large, bureaucratic business corporations and governments, inner-direction became outmoded. A

new kind of social character was required for the emerging social order.

Because the new forms of work generally revolved around effectiveness in personal relations, it was now less important to concentrate on the “hardness” of matter than on the “softness” and malleability of minds.

Riesman anticipated that there would be unprecedented uses in the future for “men whose tool is symbolism and whose aim is some observable response from people”—advertisers, marketeers, communicators, therapists, educators, media personalities, intellectuals.

This concept of a great transition from inner- to other-direction, then, was at the very heart of *The Lonely Crowd*’s vision, and the book ultimately stands or falls on the usefulness of such a concept. But such a bare summation does not begin to explain the book’s popularity, because it fails to do justice to the unusual verve and wit with which the work was written. Riesman and his co-authors managed to vitalize their potentially inert formulas through vivid portraiture, and through a set of clever dualisms and phrases that were often as wry as they were informative. These are especially evident in many of the book’s titles and headings: “From



Morality to Morale”; “From Craft Skill to Manipulative Skill”; “From Free Trade to Fair Trade”; “From the Invisible Hand to the Glad Hand.” In the age of other-direction, the individual’s “struggle for social acceptance” becomes “The Trial” by “A Jury of Their Peers.” The manner by which consumer preferences become socialized (Ford is better than Chevy, Coke is better than Pepsi, etc.) was dubbed “The Talk of the Town.”

Obviously, the last allusion would have been especially meaningful to highbrow readers of the old *New Yorker*. But Riesman and his co-authors showed an equally discerning feel for the middlebrow tastes of the lady from Dubuque, and for a wide range of popular culture as well. They were especially acute in their analysis of children’s literature. Other-directed parents, they noted, had stopped reading their children the inner-directed story *The Little Engine That Could*, and were instead reading them *Tootle the Engine*, a “cautionary tale” of a free-spirited young locomotive that is unwilling to “stay on the tracks,” and ends up paying the price for his reckless individualism.

Everywhere one looked in the culture, and particularly in the education of children, one saw evidence of “an enormous ideological shift favoring submission to the group,” a regime in which “the peer-group is the measure of all things” and “the individual has few defenses the group cannot batter down.” Such a culture appeared to value smooth socialization and “adjustment” far more than it did independence or dissent.

Even within the family, the severe internal discipline of inner-direction had evaporated, since informed parents realized that the possession of an inner-directed personality would actually be a liability to their children in a brave new other-directed world. Popularity and “social skills” were more important than the pursuit of excellence or fidelity to inner standards of behavior. Such parents did not want their children to be “different,” even if that meant discouraging them from solitary play, unstructured inquiry, and too much reading. Besides, such parents sensed that

they were no longer in control of the situation; in the new-order family, they would have to accept a costarring role, at best, in the formation of their children, taking their place alongside the power and authority of mass media, peer groups, “experts,” and other interlopers. The family was simply too permeable now for inner-directed childrearing to be possible.

Riesman and Co. also carried their analysis into a consideration of politics. The other-directed type, they argued, approached political life with the attitude of a consumer rather than a producer, which meant that he tended to be passive, disengaged, or indifferent. An all-too-familiar variation on this theme is a character Riesman called “the inside-dopester,” a savvy figure who delights in knowing, and talking about, the “inside story” of political dealmaking and horseracing, but who does so strictly as an amoral observer, and only for the social status that his “knowingness” confers upon him. Such a role would never appeal to the inner-directed type, with his superego-driven sense of moral obligation.

In addition, Riesman found laughable the assertion of social theorists such as C. Wright Mills that a “power elite” secretly controlled American politics. On the contrary, he contended, American politics was fundamentally polyvalent—chaotic, de-centered, populist, and nearly unmanageable. Indeed, in the age of other-direction, the dominant political force had become not the corporate chieftains and other highly networked elites but the increasingly powerful “veto groups,” whose main purpose in life was negative: preventing untoward or undesirable things from happening, rather than initiating policy changes that took a more generous or ambitious view of the aims of political society.



What, then, was one to make of this new regime of other-direction? *The Lonely Crowd* provided an ambiguous answer to that question, a fact that may have something to do with the tangled background of its principal author. Riesman was born in 1909 in Phila-

delphia, the son of prosperous and highly assimilated German-Jewish parents who lived on Spruce Street, just off Rittenhouse Square. They were formidable people, whose lives were cast in the classic late-Victorian mold. His father, also named David Riesman, was an eminent physician and professor of clinical medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of numerous books on the history of medicine. His mother, Eleanor, was a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and a woman of considerable intelligence and cultivation. She was also an acerbic critic of modern life, a somewhat snobbish aesthete who admired Spengler and Proust and looked down on people who did the day-to-day work of the world, including her own husband. In the domestic sphere, the hypercritical mother's imposing figure inevitably loomed larger in the mind of the young David than that of the busy, somewhat remote, often absent father. But both parents were united in setting very high standards for their son. Coming into the world under the auspices of such parents would prove an immense psychological burden for Riesman, since their expectations were impossibly high. He could either try to meet those expectations or find a way to free himself from them.

As most of us would in such a situation, he did a little of each, with the result that he had great difficulty settling upon a vocation. When he graduated from Harvard in 1931 with a major in biochemical sciences, it might have seemed that he was going to follow in his father's footsteps. But there was never the slightest chance of that. Instead he decided, for lack of anything better to do, to enter Harvard Law School, from which he graduated in 1934. Although he excelled in his legal studies and attracted the patronage of Felix Frankfurter, he would always find himself restless in the law, unable to still his growing interest in the larger world of ideas.

After a year as a research fellow at the law school, a clerkship with Supreme Court justice Louis D. Brandeis, and a year in private practice in Boston, Riesman made a rather abrupt change and took a position as a professor of law at the University of Buffalo Law School, which

he held from 1937 to 1941. He then came to New York for a year on leave, as a research fellow at Columbia Law School, hoping to use the time in part to sort out what to do next. Then, with the United States' entry into World War II, Riesman made another series of abrupt changes, first going to work in the district attorney's office in New York, and then joining the Sperry Gyroscope Company, where he was first assistant to the treasurer and then war contract termination manager.

In retrospect, we can see that Riesman was building up a remarkable fund of experiences in white-collar culture, ideal background for the writing of *The Lonely Crowd*. But that was by no means clear at the time. As the end of the war approached, Riesman experienced the most profound sense of personal crisis yet as to what he would do next—a crisis heightened by the fact that he was now almost 36, and had a wife and four young children to provide for. He had been informally offered the presidency of Sarah Lawrence College but had refused it, convinced that he had no talent for administration. He had all but decided that, if nothing else came along, he would take shelter at Yale Law School, in a position he did not really want. Then, virtually out of the blue, Edward Shils of the University of Chicago contacted Riesman and invited him to come to Chicago to teach social science to undergraduates. Riesman accepted the visiting assistant professorship and went to Chicago in 1946. By the time he left, in 1958, he was moving to an endowed chair of social science at Harvard.

Taken as a whole, the story suggests both the breadth of Riesman's interests and the restlessness with which he pursued them. Indeed, there was a daring, driven, almost reckless side to the younger Riesman, a quality consistent with his keen desire to break out of the psychological imprisonment of his upbringing—and suggestive of the compulsive need for self-validation hidden away in the hearts of so many achievement-oriented individuals who often spend their entire lives laboring under the weight of others' expectations.

In that sense, the struggle at the center of *The Lonely Crowd* was more than mere cultural analysis. Riesman understood in his bones something that many of the readers of *The Lonely Crowd* did not: that 19th-century individualism was not real freedom, and that there was a world of difference between the driven, impersonal, workaholic obsessiveness of his father's inner-directed ideal and the more genuinely liberatory ideal of a truly *autonomous* person.

There was no way, then, that he would publish a tract that explicitly advocated a return to inner-direction. He knew all too well, from his own observation and experience, about its obsessive and inflexible aspects. Perhaps for that very reason, he rejected the cultural priority still given to the work ethic, arguing instead that play was the only sphere of modern life "in which there is still room left for the would-be autonomous man to reclaim his individual character from the pervasive demands of his social character."

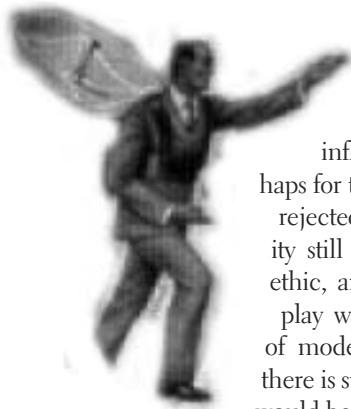
Even a casual reading should make it clear that *The Lonely Crowd* was not meant as a simple call for the restoration of older virtues. Instead, the authors argued, they were trying to "develop a view of human society which accepts rather than rejects new potentialities for leisure, human sympathy, and abundance." Far from being a critique of consumer culture, *The Lonely Crowd* was a celebration of the possibilities presented by consumption unfettered by the constraints of moralism or scarcity. That Riesman himself was among the most compulsively work oriented of men only went to show how much he was still his father's son, a fact that perhaps made him all the more disinclined to affirm inner-direction as a virtue. In many places *The Lonely Crowd* argues that other-direction, for all its faults, represented a vast and humanizing improvement over the soul-deadening constraints of inner-direction.

But that is certainly not the way the pub-

lic read the book at the time. Nor, in fairness to the readers of the 1950s, is it invariably the way the book reads to us today, considered as a whole. The authors may well have intended to write a neutral description and analysis, one that affirmed the positive possibilities inherent in the changes it describes. But the public embraced *The Lonely Crowd* because they found it a great secular jeremiad *against* other-direction. This detailed and extended sermon on our national failings seemed especially credible because it came delivered by a sage dressed, not in the black robes of the Protestant minister, but in the more respectable business suit of social science. As historian H. Stuart Hughes observed, the book "both reflected and stimulated a mood of national soul-searching," leading middle-class Americans to comb its pages in search of explanations for their dissatisfactions and doubts about their neighbors, their colleagues, their spouses, their children, and themselves. There was little chance that such readers would ever see anything admirable in the other-directed man's desperate yearning for acceptance, even if—especially if—they were vulnerable to such yearnings in their own lives. Even so respectful a commentator as Lionel Trilling, whose excited reading of *The Lonely Crowd* led him to wonder if sociology was "taking over from literature one of literature's characteristic functions," nevertheless shared the general reaction, finding inner-direction to be the "more attractive" and "more fully human" option.

But if there was no going back to inner-direction and no satisfaction to be had in other-direction, then what was a perplexed member of the lonely crowd supposed to do?

On this point, the book was less satisfactory. Riesman argued that within each of the three basic character types, tradition-, inner-, and other-direction, there are individuals who either conform happily to the characterological standard (*adjustment*), fail to conform to that standard (*anomie*), or transcend the standard (*autonomy*). Clearly the preferred goal is autonomy, which allows one to enjoy freedom from the compulsions and distortions caused by excessive adjustment (or maladjustment). The autonomous man



still has a social character, but he enjoys a certain distance from it. He can, as it were, turn off his social character at will, rather than be subjected to it at all times. In dealing with social conventions, he is captive neither to the need to conform nor the need to rebel, but instead looks upon such conventions with a mature and rational detachment.

An attractive prospect, in many ways. But there also were problems with it. In the first place, the public that embraced *The Lonely Crowd* never quite grasped that there was a difference between autonomy and inner-direction. This meant that much of Riesman's point about the untoward effects of inner-direction, and the real but limited virtues of other-direction, was lost in the shuffle. In the end, the most influential feature of *The Lonely Crowd* was its critique of other-direction, because that was the part of the book the public was primed to hear. *The Lonely Crowd's* influence therefore played into a more general '50s-era nostalgia for the lost American virtues of self-reliance and rugged individualism, a nostalgia that was visible not only in conservative attacks on "creeping socialism" and in the anticollectivist romances of Ayn Rand but in the challenging social criticism of William Whyte and Vance Packard, as well as the wild antinomian impulses bubbling to the surface in the movies of James Dean and the poems of Allen Ginsberg. Needless to say, such an outcome was not at all what Riesman—who was, like Trilling, a critic of liberalism from within—had envisioned, and he would later come to regret some of the uses to which the book was put, particularly in the anarchic 1960s and narcissistic '70s. But such uses were not without sources of support in the book itself.

In addition, there is a second, more profound problem. By asserting that individuals might have the power to don or remove their social character at will, Riesman was, in effect, making light of the most fundamental premise of sociology—the belief that beneath all appearances of individual autonomy and rationality were the irrational binding forces of society and the brute power of the master concepts—community, authority, kinship, status, class, religion—by which human societies are constituted and sustained. Such forces molded the individual

into an inescapably social and "heteronomous" creature who could no more step out of these forces at will than he could step out of his own skin. Was Riesman then, in effect, writing an antisociological work of sociology, by creating powerful typologies of social character, and then exhorting the reader to cast them aside in the name of some unconstrained freedom? Or is it more accurate to see *The Lonely Crowd* as a book moving, like surf waters, in two different directions at once, with the incoming waves of autonomy forever wrestling with the powerful undertow of social necessity?

The latter image perhaps comes closest to the mark. *The Lonely Crowd* was in fact a valiant effort to conjoin two very different sets of values: a social-scientific respect for the integrity of culture, and a classical-liberal respect for the autonomous individual. Nearly all important social science contains something of this tension between description and prescription. But Riesman's relationship to the social sciences was always limited and selective, and in the end, his greater loyalty was reserved for the liberal tradition, the tradition of John Stuart Mill, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Alexis de Tocqueville—thinkers whose central writings revolved around the fate of individuality in a mass age. *The Lonely Crowd* only appears to be a book of social analysis. It is really a book about human freedom, employing social analysis in order to transcend social determinism. Consider the words with which it concludes:

While I have said many things in this book of which I am unsure, of one thing I am sure: the enormous potentialities for diversity in nature's bounty and men's capacity to differentiate their experience can become valued by the individual himself, so that he will not be tempted and coerced into adjustment. . . . The idea that men are created free and equal is both true and misleading: men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other.



It is refreshing to see *diversity* used not as a code word for an abstract pattern of racial-ethnic-sexual demographics but as an affirmation of the individual person, considered free of confining labels.

The possibility of just such an affirmation of the individual person was, and is, the grounding premise of *The Lonely Crowd*. Riesman understood, and *The Lonely Crowd* argued, that while human beings cannot live outside of social arrangements, which determine much of what we are, there is no conceivable set of social arrangements that can make us free. The freedom to which we can reasonably aspire is to be found neither in acts of mindless conformity nor in acts of mindless rebellion. Instead, it is to be found in an individual disposition that is able to accept gracefully the social limits within which it must operate—but is able to accept such limits precisely because it does not feel itself to be psychologically bound by them. It is, to use an older, nonsociological understanding of freedom, the ability to operate *in* a social order without being *of* it.

Such a disposition is very different from the anarchic or Nietzschean myth of the “unencumbered self” that so captivates our popular imagination, and is so strongly, and rightly, condemned by our most influential communitarian thinkers (as well as by David Riesman himself). It is a disposition difficult to achieve even under the best of circumstances—and, paradoxically, times of material prosperity, such as the United States has enjoyed during the 1950s and 1990s, are not necessarily the best circumstances for the flowering of the human spirit. To be sure, the battle cry of “freedom” is the most powerful and inspiring of slogans, particularly when it is galvanizing social and political struggle against tyrannical institutions. But freedom in its deepest sense can never be the proper object of a social movement, because it is so irreducibly individual, and

therefore so diverse, in character.

One wonders whether *The Lonely Crowd's* account of things assumes the existence of some transcendent, or at least trans-social, frame of reference to which the self can repair and from which it obtains vital sustenance, apart from family, culture, and others. So it would seem. Yet *The Lonely Crowd* is silent on the potential shape of any such frame. Such silence marks some of the distance we have come since the 1950s, because, in today's climate, the modernist notion of a freestanding, autonomous person no longer seems credible or even desirable. Perhaps that is because the once-great binding power of our social institutions has been so greatly diminished, a development that has also, paradoxically, diminished our sense of individual possibility.

Our current concerns tend to revolve around restoring the fabric of families, communities, and civic life, rather than celebrating the existentialist act of self-creation, an enterprise we are increasingly likely to regard with a skeptical eye. Yet *The Lonely Crowd's* silences serve to remind us that the sources of genuine freedom, that most human of human aspirations, are ultimately mysterious and individual, not to be captured in any social or ideological recipe, or encoded in clever public-policy formulas.

*The Lonely Crowd* did not solve the mystery of human freedom, but it challenges us to think more concretely about what it might mean to be genuinely free, here and now, in our own America. The book's greatest and most enduring strengths are cautionary ones. It warns us against the peculiar forms of bondage to which our era is especially prone. And in doing so, it draws us into a deeper consideration of what freedom might be, both now and in the future. For that reason, it may well endure for another 50 years. Or even longer.