The Good Man Fills His Own Stomach: All-American Crimes and Misdemeanors

The readings of history and anthropology... give us no reason to believe that societies have built-in self-preservative systems.
—Margaret Mead

WILDING IN BLACK AND WHITE

On April 19, 1989, in New York City, a group of teenagers aged 14 to 16 went into Central Park. It was a clear night and not too cold, at least not too cold to discourage hardy joggers from getting their exercise. The teenagers dispersed into small bands and began targeting victims for some mischief. One group of six youths came upon a young woman jogging alone past a grove of sycamore trees. They cornered her in a gully and began to have some “fun.”

That fun would capture headlines around the world. Using rocks, knives, and a metal pipe, they attacked her. Some pinned her down while others beat and raped her. One defendant, Kharey Wise, aged 17, told police that he held the jogger’s legs while a friend repeatedly cut her with a knife. They then smashed her with a rock and punched her face, Wise said, until she “stopped moving.” After half an hour, she had lost three-quarters of her blood and was unconscious. The group left her for dead.1

What most captured public attention were the spirits of the assailants during and after their crime. According to 15-year-old Kevin Richardson, one of the participants, “Everyone laughed and was leaping around.” One youth was quoted by police as saying, “It was fun... something to do.” Asked if they felt pretty good about what they had done, Richardson said...
The story of wilding quickly became tied to the race and class of the predators and their prey. The youths were black and from the inner city, although from stable working families. The victim was white, with degrees from Wellesley and Yale, and a wealthy 28-year-old investment banker at Salomon Brothers, one of the great houses of Wall Street.

To white middle-class Americans, wilding symbolized something real and terrifying about life in the United States at the turn of the decade. Things were falling apart, at least in the hearts of America's major cities. Most suburbanites did not feel their own neighborhoods had become wild, but they could not imagine walking into Central Park at night. Drugs, crime, and unemployment had made the inner city wild.

The fear of wilding became fear of the Other: those locked outside of the American Dream. They had not yet invaded the world most Americans felt part of, but they menaced it. The Central Park attack made the threat real, and it unleashed fear among the general population and a backlash of rage among politicians and other public figures. Mayor Koch called for the death penalty. Donald Trump took out ads in four newspapers, writing "I want to hate these murderers ... I want them to be afraid." Trump told Newsweek that he "had gotten hundreds and hundreds of letters of support."4

Six months later, a second remarkably vicious crime grabbed people's attention all over the country. On October 23, 1989, Charles and Carol Stuart left a birthing class at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, walked to their car parked in the adjoining Mission Hill neighborhood, and got in. Within minutes, Carol Stuart, eight months pregnant, was dead, shot point-blank in the head. Her husband, a stunned nation would learn from police accounts two months later, was her assassin. He had allegedly killed her to collect hundreds of thousands of dollars in life insurance.

The rape in Central Park began to emerge. Stuart had duped the whole nation by playing on the fear of the wild Other. Aware of the vivid images of gangs of black youths rampaging through dark city streets, Stuart brilliantly concocted a story that would resonate with white Americans' deepest anxieties. Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Harvard professor and advisor to Bill Cosby, said, "Stuart had all the ingredients ... [H]e gave blacks a killer image and put himself in the role of a model, an ideal Camelot type that white people could identify with."5

Chuck Stuart's crime became a national obsession. A 21-year-old Oklahoman visiting Boston told a Boston Globe reporter, "You wouldn't believe the attention this is getting back home. It's all anyone can talk about. I've taken more pictures of this fur shop and Stuart's house than any of the stuff you're supposed to take pictures of in Boston."6 The quiet Stuart block in Reading had become what the Globe called a "macabre mecca," with hundreds of cars, full of the curious and the perplexed, parked or passing by. One reason may have been that white middle Americans everywhere had an uncomfortable sense that, as the nineties emerged, the Stuart case was telling them something about themselves. Stuart, after all, was living the American Dream and reaping its benefits — tall, dark, athletic man with roots in working-class Revere making over one hundred thousand dollars a year selling fur coats, married to a lovely, adoring wife, and living the good life in suburban Reading complete with swimming pool. Had the American Dream itself, by the late 1980s, become the progenitor of a kind of wilding? Was it possible that not only the inner cities of America but its comfortable suburbs were becoming wild places? Could "white wilding" be as serious a problem as the "black wilding" publicized in the mass media? Was America at the turn of the decade becoming a wilding society?

To answer these questions we have to look far beyond such exceptional events as the Central Park rape and the Stuart murder. We shall see that there are many less extreme forms of wilding, including a wide range of antisocial acts that are neither criminal nor physically violent. Wilding includes the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, may be profit-oriented.
or pleasure-seeking, and can infect corporations and governments as well as individuals of every race, class, and gender.

THE MOUNTAIN PEOPLE: A WILDING * CULTURE

Between 1964 and 1967, anthropologist Colin Turnbull lived among the people of Uganda known as the Ik, an unfortunate people expelled by an uncaring government from their traditional hunting lands to extremely barren mountainous areas. In 1972, Turnbull published a haunting book about his experiences that left no doubt that a whole society can embrace wilding as a way of life.7

When Turnbull first came to the Ik, he met Atum, a sprightly, barefoot old man with a sweet smile, who helped guide Turnbull to remote Ik villages. Atum warned Turnbull right away that everyone would ask for food. Although many would indeed be hungry, he said, most could fend for themselves, and their pleas should not be trusted; Turnbull, Atum stressed, should on no account give them anything. But before he left that day, Atum mentioned that his own wife was severely ill and desperately needed food and medicine. On reaching his village, Atum told Turnbull his wife was too sick to come out. Later, Turnbull heard exchanges between Atum and his sick wife, and moans of her suffering. The moans were wrenching, and when Atum pleaded for help, Turnbull gave him food and some aspirin.

Some weeks later, Atum had stepped up his requests for food and medicine, saying his wife was getting sicker. Turnbull was now seriously concerned, urging Atum to get her to a hospital. Atum refused, saying "she wasn't that sick." Shortly thereafter, Atum's brother-in-law came to Turnbull and told him that Atum was selling the medicine that Turnbull had been giving him for his wife. Turnbull, not terribly surprised, said that "that was too bad for his wife." The brother-in-law, enjoying the joke enormously, finally explained that Atum's wife "had been dead for weeks," and that Atum had "buried her inside the compound so you wouldn't know." No wonder Atum had not wanted his wife to go to the hospital, Turnbull thought to himself: "She was worth far more to him dead than alive."8

Startling to Turnbull was not only the immense glee the brother-in-law seemed to take in the "joke" inflicted on his dying sister, but the utter lack of embarrassment Atum showed when confronted with his lie. Atum shrugged it off, showing no remorse whatsoever, saying he had simply forgotten to tell Turnbull. That his lair enterprise may have led to his wife's death was the last thing on Atum's mind. This was one of the first of many events that made Turnbull wonder whether there was any limit to what an Ik could do to get food and money.

Some time later, Turnbull came across Lomeja, an Ik man he had met much earlier. Lomeja had been shot during an attack by neighboring tribesmen and was lying in a pool of his own blood, apparently dying from two bullet wounds in the stomach. Still alive and conscious, Lomeja looked up at Turnbull and asked for some tea. Shaken, Turnbull returned to his Land Rover and filled a big, new, yellow enamel mug. When he returned, Lomeja's wife was bending over her husband. She was trying to "fold him up" in the dead position although he was not yet dead, and started shrieking at Turnbull to leave Lomeja alone because he was already dead. Lomeja found the strength to resist his wife's premature efforts to bury him and was trying to push her aside. Turnbull managed to get the cup of tea to Lomeja, who was still strong enough to reach out for it and sip it. Suddenly, Turnbull heard a loud goggle and saw Lomeja's sister, Kimat. Attracted by all the yelling, she had "seen that lovely new, bright yellow enamel mug of hot, sweet tea, had snatched it from her brother's face and made off with it, proud and joyful. She not only had the tea, she also had the mug. She drank as she ran, laughing and delighted at herself."9

Turnbull came to describe the Ik as "the loveless people." Each Ik valued only his or her own survival, and regarded everyone else as a competitor for food. Ik life had become a grim process of trying to find enough food to stay alive each day. The hunt consumed all of their resources, leaving virtually no reserve for feelings of any kind, nor for any moral scruples that might interfere with filling their stomachs. As Margaret Mead wrote, the Ik had become "a people who have become monstrous beyond belief." Scientist Ashley Montagu wrote that the Ik were "a people who are dying because they have abandoned their own humanity."10

Ik families elevated wilding to a high art. Turnbull met Adupa, a young girl of perhaps 6, who was so malnourished that her stomach was grossly distended and her legs and arms spindly. Her parents had decided she had become a liability and threw her out of their hut. Because she was too weak now to go out on long scavenging ventures, as did the other children, she would wander as far as her strength would allow, pick up scraps of bone or half-eaten berries, and then come back to her parents' place, waiting to be brought back in. Days later, her parents, tiring of her crying, finally brought her in and promised to feed her. Adupa was happy and stopped crying. The parents went out and "closed the ask behind them, so tight that weak little Adupa could never have moved it if she had tried."11 Adupa waited for them to come back with the food they had promised, but they did not return until a whole week had passed, when they knew Adupa would be dead. Adupa's parents took her rotting remains, Turnbull writes, and threw them out "as one does the riper garbage, a good distance away." There was no burial—and no tears.12

Both morality and personality among the Ik were dedicated to the single all-consuming passion for self-preservation. There was simply "not
room in the life of these people," Turnbull observes dryly, "for such luxuries as family and sentiment and love." Nor for any morality beyond "marangik," the new Ik concept of goodness, which means filling one's own stomach.

THE IK IN US: O. J. SIMPSON AND THE WILDING EPIDEMIC

Long before the rape in Central Park or the Stuart murder, Ashley Montagu, commenting on Turnbull's work, wrote that "the parallel with our own society is deadly." In 1972, when Turnbull published his book, wilding had not become part of the American vocabulary, nor did Americans yet face declining living standards, yet alone the kind of starvation experienced by the Ik's. Americans were obviously not killing their parents or children for money, but they dedicated themselves to self-interested pursuits with a passion not unlike that of the Ik.

In America, a land of plenty, there was the luxury of a rhetoric of morality and feelings of empathy and love. But was not the American Dream a paean to individualistic enterprise, and could not such enterprise be conceived in some of the same unsentimental metaphors used by Turnbull about the Ik? The Ik community, he writes, "reveals itself for what it is, a conglomeration of individuals of all ages, each going his own way in search of food and water, like a plague of locusts spread over the land." 13

America now faces a wilding epidemic that is eating at the country's social foundation and could rot it. The American case is much less advanced than the Ik's, but the disease is deeply rooted and is spreading through the political leadership, the business community, and the general population. Strong medicine can turn the situation around, but if we fail to act now, the epidemic could prove irreversible.

Only a handful of Americans are "ultimate wilders" like Charles Stuart. Such killers are noteworthy mainly because they may help wake us to the wilding plague spreading among thousands of less extreme wilders who are not killers. Wilding includes a vast spectrum of self-centered and self-aggrandizing behavior that harms others. A wilding epidemic tears at the social fabric and threatens to unrelax society itself, ultimately reflecting the erosion of the moral order and the withdrawal of feelings and commitments from others to oneself, to "number one."

The wilding virus comes in radically different strains. There is expressive wilding: wilding for the sheer satisfaction of indulging one's own destructive impulses, the kind found among the Central Park kids and the growing number of American youth who leave rocks off highway bridges in the hope of smashing the windshields of unknown drivers passing innocently below. The country's most famous perpetrator is O. J. Simpson, who

acted out the domestic violence that is one of the most common and Ik-like forms of expressive wilding. His alleged repeated abuse of his wife to sate his jealousy, maintain his control, or simply gratify his emotions of the moment evokes serious questions about the nightmarish spread of family violence among rich and poor alike. The national obsession with Simpson reflects the fear that when a country's icon beats his wife black and blue, smashes her windshield with a baseball bat, stalks her, and is finally charged with her murder, of which a jury acquitted him in a controversial verdict, we all participate in the crime, for heroes act out the passions and values of the cultures that create them.

Although mainly an example of expressive wilding, O. J. also modeled instrumental wilding. Not simply for fun or purely emotive gratification, this is wilding for money, career advancement, or other calculable personal gain. Simpson began as a youngster, running with gangs stealing food. Fantastically ambitious and opportunistic, O. J. later took naturally to a life of single-minded corporate salesmanship, obsessively remaking his voice, wardrobe, and demeanor according to the image lessons of the Hertz ad executives who greased his career, wheeling and dealing to sign movie deals and buy companies such as the Pioneer Chicken franchise (destroyed in the L. A. riots), and eventually succumbing to the greed-soaked financial dealings that led him, along with other entrepreneurial high rollers of his era, to bad loans and collapsed business deals.

Most instrumental wilding is far less dramatic or bizarre, involving garden varieties of ambition, competitiveness, careerism, and greed that advance the self at the cost of others. Expressive and instrumental wilding have in common an antisocial self-centeredness made possible by a stunning collapse of moral restraints and a chilling lack of empathy. I am mainly concerned in this book with instrumental wilding because it is the form most intimately connected with the American Dream and least understood in its poisonous effects on society. 14

Although much wilding is criminal, there is a vast spectrum of perfectly legal wilding, exemplified by the careerist who indifferently betrays or steps on colleagues to advance up the ladder. There are forms of wilding, such as lying and cheating, that are officially discouraged, but others, like the frantic and single-minded pursuit of wealth, are cultivated by some of the country's leading corporations and financial institutions. Likewise, there are important differences in the severity of wilding behaviors; killing a spouse for money is obviously far more brutal than stealing a wallet or cheating on an exam. But there are distinct types and degrees of infection in any affliction, ranging from terminal cases such as Stuart to intermediate cases such as the savings and loan crooks, to those who are either petty wilders or rarely exhibit symptoms at all. The latter categories include large numbers of Americans who may struggle internally with their wilding impulses but remain healthy enough to restrain them. The variation is similar to that in
heart disease; those with only partial clogging of their arteries and no symp-
toms are, indeed, different from those with full-blown, advanced arte-
riosclerosis, and those least afflicted may never develop the terminal stage of
the illness. But these differences are normally of degree rather than of kind;
the same underlying pathology—whether embryonic or full-blown—is at
work among people with mild and severe cases.

There are, nonetheless, real differences between white lies or misde-
meanors (forms of petty wilding) and serious wilding of the Central Park
or Charles Stuart variety. Petty wilding occurs in all cultures, will persist as
long as most people are not saints, and in limited doses does not necessar-
ily threaten civil order. When so limited as not to constitute a grave social
danger, it might better be described as “incipient wilding” and is not of
concern here.

However, certain types of petty wilding are growing at an alarming rate
in America, as I document in Chapter Five in my discussion of minor lying,
cheating, and ordinary competitiveness with and indifference to others.
Such transgressions on an epidemic scale can reach a critical mass and
become as serious a threat to society as violent crime or huge investment
scams on Wall Street. It is not the degree of brutality or violence, but the
consequences for society that ultimately matter, and I thus consider the full
spectrum of wilding acts—from petty to outrageous—that together con-
stitute a clear and present danger to America’s social fabric.

THREE TYPES OF WILDING:
ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL

Wilding, sociologically conceived, extends far beyond random violence by
youth gangs, the current definition of the word offered by Webster’s dic-
tionary, to include three types of assault on society. Economic wilding is the
morally uninhibited pursuit of money by individuals or businesses at the
expense of others. Political wilding is the abuse of political office to benefit
oneself or one’s own social class, or the wielding of political authority to
infiltrate morally unacceptable suffering on citizens at home or abroad. Social
wilding ranges from personal or family acts of violence, such as child or
spouse abuse, to collective forms of selfishness that weaken society, such as
affluent suburbs turning their backs on bleeding central cities.

Economic wilders such as convicted savings and loan banker Charles
Keating or Leona Helmsley, described as the “Queen of Mean,” the hotel
mogul’s wife convicted of tax fraud, are a different species from the kids in
Central Park. Partly because of differing opportunities and incentives, people
wild in different ways and for exceedingly varied reasons and motives ranging
from greed and lust to getting attention or respect. The different forms of
wilding, however, are all manifestations of degraded American individualism.

Wilding is individualism run amok, and the wilding epidemic is the
face of America’s individualistic culture in an advanced state of disrepair.
Individualistic culture promotes the freedom of the individual and its
healthy form nurtures human development and individual rights. In its
degraded form, it becomes a license for unrestrained and sociopathic self-
interest. Individualism—and its excesses—has a different face in the econ-
omy, in politics, and in the family. The deregulated free market created in
the 1980s and 1990s established the environment for the extreme economic
individualism that spawned such wilding calamities as the savings and loan
crisis. Degraded individualism in politics is reflected in the explosion of
government corruption, from the huge bribery and payoff scandals in the
Department of Defense, Housing and Urban Development, and other fed-
eral agencies, to the Iran-Contra scandal and Whitewater. The manifesta-
tions of degraded individualism in families range from casual divorce to
the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of children.

WILDING AND NOT WILDING:
VARIETIES OF INDIVIDUALISM

Wilding—a degenerate form of individualism—encompasses a huge vari-
ety of antisocial behavior. It includes so many seemingly unrelated acts that
it might appear to stand for everything—or nothing. But wilding includes
only a small subset of the entire range of behaviors that sociologists
describe as individualistic, a term that arguably can be applied to any self-
interested behavior. In a society such as the United States, dominated by
individualistic values and a market system that rewards self-interest, some
might argue that virtually all socially prescribed behavior has an individual-
istic dimension.

I propose a far more restrictive definition of wilding. Not all individu-
alist behavior is wilding, nor is wilding an umbrella term for any form
of self-interested or “bad” behavior. As noted earlier, wilding refers to self-
oriented behavior that hurts others and damages the social fabric, and this
excludes many types of individualistic action. The Jewish sage, Hillel,
 wrote, “If I am not for others, what am I?” Yet he also said “If I am not for
myself, who will be for me?” His maxims suggest that many forms of self-
interest are necessary and contribute to the well-being of others.

A doctor who works hard to perfect her medical skills may advance her
own career, but she also saves lives. A superbly conditioned professional
athlete may enrich himself by his competitiveness or ambition, but he also
entertains and gives pleasure to his fans. If I strive to be the best writer I can
be—an individualistic aspiration—I am educating others while fulfilling
myself. In none of these cases is individualistic behavior itself necessarily
wilding. Actions that advance one’s own interests and either help or do not
harm others are not forms of wilding, even when motivated by competitiveness or acquisitiveness.

Wilding includes only individualistic behavior that advances or indulges the self by hurting others. If the doctor advances her skills and career by cheating on tests, trampling on her colleagues, or using her patients as guinea pigs, her self-interest has degraded into wilding. The athlete who illicitly uses steroids to win competitions is wilding by cheating against his rivals and deceiving his fans.

Whereas all wilding behavior hurts others, not all hurtful behavior is wilding. If I get angry at a friend, I may hurt him, but that does not necessarily make it wilding. Such anger may be justified because it was motivated by a wrong done to me, and it may ultimately serve to repair the relation even if I am mistaken. Interpersonal relations inevitably involve misunderstanding, aggression, and hurt, which degrade into expressive wilding only when the hurt is intentional and purely self-indulgent, and when the perpetrator is indifferent to the pain inflicted on the other. Motivation, empathy, and level of harm inflicted are key criteria in deciding whether wilding has occurred. Deliberate physical or emotional abuse is clearly wilding, whereas impulsive acts that cause less harm and lead to remorse and remediation are more ambiguous cases and may not constitute wilding at all.

Similarly complex considerations apply to institutional wilding enacted by corporations or governments. Instrumental wilding takes place whenever institutions pursue goals and strategies that inflict serious harm on individuals, communities, or entire societies. Some of the most important forms of economic wilding, both legal and criminal, involve routine rote-steam by rapacious businesses exploiting employees, consumers, and communities. As discussed in Chapter Four, the line between corporate self-interest and economic wilding is blurring in today's global economy, but not all profits arise out of exploitation and many profitable businesses are not engaged in economic wilding. Socially responsible or employee-owned businesses that add to social well-being by creating jobs, raising the standard of living of employees, improving the environment, and enhancing the quality of life of their customers may be highly profitable but are hardly wilders. Systemic connections exist between American capitalism and wilding, but not all forms of capitalism breed wilding.

Finally, not all crime, violence, or evil behavior is individualistic wilding as conceived here. The horrific ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and the tribal warfare in Rwanda constitute wilding by any definition, but such wilding is rooted in fierce and pathological tribal or communal loyalties and is hardly an expression of rampant individualism. Individualism and communitarianism can each generate their own forms of wilding; I focus on the individualistic variant in this book because it is the type endemic in the United States. This should not be viewed as a preference for the communitarian form, because wilding in many of the world's cruelest societies has its roots in the excesses of community. Wilding can be avoided only by respecting the rights of individuals and the needs for community, a balancing act too many societies have failed dismally to achieve.

THE TWO AMERICAS: ARE WE ALL WILDERS?

Although the epidemic now infects almost every major American institution, cooperative behavior survives, and in every community one finds idealists, altruists, and a majority of citizens seeking to live lives guided by moral principles. In 1990, seven out of every ten Americans gave money to charity and five out of ten rolled up their sleeves and volunteered or became social activists; these are among the many hopeful indications, discussed later in Chapter Eight, that America can still purge itself of this epidemic.

For an analyst of wilding, there are two Americas: the America already seriously infected, which is the main subject of this book, and the America that has not yet succumbed and remains what I call in the last chapter a civil society. The majority of ordinary Americans, it should be stressed, are part of the second America, and retain a moral compass and emotional sensibilities that inhibit severe wilding behavior. But as the epidemic continues to spread, individual interests increasingly override common purposes, and the self, rather than family or community, increasingly grabs center stage in both Americas. Not everyone will become a wilder, but nobody will be untouched by wilding culture.15

Wilders who catch the fever and play by the new rules profoundly infect their own vulnerable communities, families, and workplaces. One dangerous criminal on a block can make a community wild, inducing aggression, violence, and a fortress mentality among peaceable neighbors. A particularly competitive salesperson or account executive can transform an entire office into a jungle, because those who do not conform to dress and sharpen their own swords may be left sunburnt in the dust. The new ethos rewards the wilder and penalizes those clinging to civil behavior. One defense against wilding in modern America is to embrace it, spreading wilding behavior among people less characterologically disposed to be wilders and still struggling against wilding as a way of life.

Many Americans misread the epidemiology of AIDS as a problem of deviant and disadvantaged groups. They are at risk of making the same miscalculation about the wilding epidemic, to which no sector of the society has any immunity. Its ravages may be most eye-catching among the poor and downtrodden, but the virus afflicts the respected and the comfortable just as
much: It exists in the genteel suburbs as well as the inner cities. Indeed, American wilding is, to a surprising degree, an affliction of the successful, in that the rich and powerful have written the wilding rules and it is ever more difficult to climb the ladder without internalizing them.

The progress of the wilding epidemic is shaped less by the percentage of sociopaths than by the sociopathy of its elites and the rules of the success game they help to define. A wilding society is one where wilding is a route to the top, and where legitimate success becomes difficult to distinguish from the art of wilding within—or even outside of—the law.

The wilding epidemic is now seeping into America mainly from the top. Although the majority of business and political leaders remain honest, a large and influential minority are not only serving as egregious role models but are rewriting the rules of the American success game in their own interest. Michael Milken was convicted of massive financial fraud, but his more important contribution to the wilding epidemic was helping change the rules of the financial game, helping inspire the $35 trillion global market in junk-bonds, derivatives, and other speculative instruments. Similarly, Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton have all helped fuel the wilding crisis, partly by virtue of the personal corruption and scandals in their administrations, but more importantly through radical new policy directions.

Our current wilding crisis is rooted politically in the “free market” revolution that began with President Reagan. As conservative analyst Kevin Phillips has noted, the Reagan revolution advanced the most ambitious class agenda of the rich in over a century, creating an innovative brew of market deregulation and individualistic ideology that, as I show in Chapter Three, helped fan the flames of wilding across the land. But the most radical and ominous changes have emerged in the mid 1990s, as both a new Republican Congressional majority led by Speaker Newt Gingrich and the “new Democrats” led by President Clinton raced against each other to dismantle the social programs that symbolize our commitment to the poor, the needy, and to each other.

WILDING AND THE AMERICAN DREAM: INDIVIDUALISM TODAY AND YESTERDAY

Many signs point to a corruption of the American Dream in our time. Most Americans do not become killers to make it up the ladder or hold on to what they have, but the traditional restraints on naked self-aggrandizement seem weaker—and the insatiability greater. Donald Trump, who by 1995 had made a big comeback and ruled vast gambling and real estate empires, is only one of the multimillionaire culture heroes who define life as “The Art of the Deal,” the title of Trump’s best-selling autobiography. Trump feels no moral contradiction about building the most luxurious condominiums in history in a city teeming with homeless people. Trump writes triumphantly about the Trump Tower: “We positioned ourselves as the only place for a certain kind of very wealthy person to live—the hottest ticket in town. We were selling fantasy.”

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that in America “no natural boundary seems to be set to the efforts of man.” But inspired by the Reaganites of the 1980s and the Gingrichites of the 1990s, a new version of the Dream has now emerged, more individualistic, expansive, and morally perverted than its predecessors. America has entered a new Gilded Age, where, as John Taylor writes, the celebration and “lure of wealth has overpowered conventional restraints.” Laurence Shames suggests that the name of the American game has become simply more.

Today’s high rollers in Wall Street’s famous investment banks are living out this new chapter of the American Dream. Youthful commodity traders fresh out of business school engage in feeding frenzies in the exchanges, pursuing quick fortunes “as if they’d invented the habit of more, when in fact they’d only inherited it the way a fetus picks up an addiction in the womb.” The craving, Shames writes, is “there in the national bloodstream.”

A dramatic model is Nicholas Leeson, the 27-year-old broker who in 1995 bankrupted the historic Baring’s bank of London by losing his $27 billion gamble in the international derivatives market. Derivatives, a 1990s variant of the 1980s junk-bond craze, which we discuss in Chapter Three, are part of the global financial casino in which bankers bet on currency rates, stock prices, or pork bellies to win trillion-dollar jackpots. Many Wall Street players in the derivatives game turn to inside trading—and more serious crimes—when their risky ventures go bad. The notorious Billionaire Boys’ Club—a group of youthful traders and investors—would show that respectable young men consumed by the Dream could become killers.

For less-privileged Americans the new “gilded” Dream became a recipe for wilding based on collapsed possibilities. A dream of having more had been sustainable when the pie was growing, as it had been through most of American history. But when real income begins to decline, an unprecedented development in the last decades of the twentieth century, an outsized Dream becomes illusion, inconsistent with the reality of most Americans’ lives. Oursized Dream, downsized lives. To weave grandiose materialist dreams in an era of restricted opportunities is the ultimate recipe for social wilding.
A new age of limits and polarization in the mid-1990s sets the stage for an advanced wilding crisis. In an America deeply divided by class, the American Dream, and especially the new gilded Dream, can not be a common enterprise and is transformed into multiple wilding agendas, unleashing wilding among people at every station, but in different ways. Among those at the bottom, the Dream becomes pure illusion; wilding, whether dealing drugs or grabbing handbags, mushrooms as a survival option and as a fast track out of the ghetto and into the high life. Among the insecure and slipping great American middle class, wilding becomes a growth area for those endowed with classic American initiative and ingenuity and unwilling to go down with their closing factories and shrinking industries. For the professional and business classes at the top, wilding is sanctified as professional ambition and pro- liferates as one or another variant of dedicated and untrammeled careerism. Ensnomed inside heavily fortified suburban or gentrified enclaves, these elites also pioneer new forms of social wilding in what Robert Reich calls a politics of secession, abandoning society itself as part of a panicky defense against the threat from the huge covetous majority left behind. The wilding crisis, as we see below, arises partly out of a virulent new class politics.  

The seeds of America’s wilding plague were planted long before the current era. A century ago, Tocqueville observed that conditions in America led every “member of the community to be wrapped up in himself” and worried that “personal interest will become more than ever the principal, if not the sole spring” of American behavior. Selfish and mean-spirited people can be found in every culture and every phase of history, and wilding, as I show in the next chapter, is certainly not a new phenomenon in American life. One of the world’s most individualistic societies, America has long struggled to cope with high levels of violence, greed, political corruption, and other wilding outcroppings.  

Over the last hundred years, American history can be read as a succession of wilding periods alternating with eras of civility. The Robber Baron era of the 1880s and 1890s, an age of spectacular economic and political wilding, was followed by the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, in which moral forces reasserted themselves. The individualistic license of the 1920s, another era of economic and political wilding epitomized by the Teapot Dome scandal, yielded to the New Deal era of the 1930s and 1940s, when America responded to the Great Depression with remarkable moral and community spirit. The moral idealism of a new generation of youth in the 1960s was followed by the explosion of political, economic, and social wilding in the current era.  

American wilding is a timeless and enduring threat, linked to our national heritage and most basic values and institutions. Although we focus in this book on wilding in the 1990s, the wilding problem riddles our history, for it is embedded in the origins of free market capitalism and the individualistic culture that helped shape the American Dream and our own national character. What distinguishes the current epidemic is the subtle legitimation of wilding as it becomes part of the official religion in Washington, the severity of the wilding crisis in banking and commerce, the spread of wilding into universities and other vital cultural centers, and the subsequent penetration of wilding culture so deeply into the lives of the general population that society itself is now at risk.  

ROOTS OF WILDING: DURKHEIM, MARX, AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL EYE  

More than a century ago, the founders of sociology had their own intimations of a wilding crisis that could consume society. The great French thinker Emile Durkheim recognized that individualism was the rising culture of the modern age. While Durkheim believed that individualism could ultimately be a healing force, he also feared that it could poison the bonds that make social life possible. Karl Marx, who gave birth to a different school of sociology, believed that the economic individualism of capitalism might erode all forms of community and reduce human relations to a new lowest common denominator: the cash nexus.  

Sociology arose as an inquiry into the dangers of modern individualism, which could potentially kill society itself. The prospect of the death of society gave birth to the question symbolized by the Ick: What makes society possible and prevents it from disintegrating into a mass of sociopathic and self-interested isolates? This core question of sociology has become the vital issue of our times.  

Although sociology does not provide all the answers, it offers a compelling framework for understanding and potentially solving the wilding epidemic. Durkheim never heard of wilding or the Ick, but he focused like a laser on the coming crisis of community. Durkheim saw that the great transformation of the modern age was the breakdown of traditional social solidarity and the rise of an individual less enmeshed in community. A grave danger was egoism, arising where “the individual is isolated because the bonds uniting him to other beings are slackened or broken” and the “bond which attaches him to society is itself slack.” Such an individual, who finds no “meaning in genuinely collective activity,” is primed for wilding, the pursuit of gain or pleasure at the expense of others with whom there is no sense of shared destiny.  

The other great danger is anomie, which Durkheim defined as a condition of societal normlessness breeding crime and suicide. Anomie arises when social rules are absent or confusing and individuals are insufficiently integrated into families, neighborhoods, or churches to be regulated by.
their moral codes. Durkheim believed that modern, individualistic societies were especially vulnerable to this kind of failure of socialization. As community declines, it leaves the individual without a moral compass, buffeted by disturbing and increasingly limitless “passions, without a custom to regulate them.” Anomie fuels instrumental wilding, making the individual more vulnerable to fantasies of limitless money and power. It also feeds expressive wilding of the O. J. Simpson variety, weakening the personal and community controls that sustain civilized values.  

Although Durkheim captures the kind of breakdown of community that is currently helping to breed the American wilding epidemic, he lacks the economic and political analysis that would help explain why wilding is startlingly pervasive among America’s ruling elites and trickles down to the population at large. As I will argue in chapters to come, American wilding is a form of socially prescribed antisocial behavior, modeled by leaders and reinforced by the rules of our free market game. As such, it reflects less the insufficiency of social conformity to society whose norms and values are socially dangerous.

Marx wrote that the market system "drowns the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation." In capitalism, as Marx conceives it, wilding is less a failure of socialization than an expression of society’s central norms. To turn a profit, even the most humane capitalist employer commodifies and exploits employees, playing by the market rules of competition and profit-maximization to buy and sell their labor power as cheaply as possible.

The champions of Western capitalism—from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman—agree that self-interest is the engine of the system and individualism its official religion, but reject Marx’s equation of a regime built around economic self-interest with exploitation and wilding. Marx was wrong, in fact, to assume that capitalism inevitably destroys community and social values. In some national contexts, including Confucian Japan and social democratic Sweden, the individualizing forces of the market are cushioned by cultures and governments that limit exploitation and help sustain community.

In the United States, however, rugged individualism has merged with free market capitalism, a fertile brew for wilding. Marx’s view of institutionalized wilding—and of political and business elites as carriers of the virus—helps to correct the Durkheimian hint of wilding as deviance. Durkheim, in a major oversight, never recognized that egoism and anomie can themselves be seen as norms, culturally prescribed and accepted.

This is a theoretical key to understanding wilding in America. Wilding partly reflects a weakened community less able to regulate its increasingly individualistic members. In this sense, the American wilder is the underso--

zialized product of a declining society that is losing its authority to instill respect for social values and obligations.

But Marx’s view of institutionalized wilding suggests that wilders can simultaneously be oversocialized, imbuing too deeply the core values of competition and profit-seeking in American capitalism. The idea of oversocialization, which I elaborate in the next chapter, suggests not the failure of social authority but the wholesale indoctrination of societal values that can ultimately poison both the individual and society itself. As local communities weaken, giant corporations, including the media, advertising, and communications industries, shape the appetites, morality, and behavior of Americans ever more powerfully. For the rich and powerful, the dream of unlimited wealth and glamour, combined with the Reaganite and Gingrichian revolu-

A different version of socially prescribed wilding trickles down to everyone else. For those exposed to the same inflated dream of wealth, glamour, and power, but denied the means of achieving it, illegitimate means provide the only strategy to achieve socially approved goals. Whether involving petty or serious wilding, such behavior gradually permeates the population and becomes socialized. Sociologist Robert Merton wrote that crime is a product of a disparity between goals and means. If that disparity becomes institutionalized, crime and other deviance are normalized, and officially deviant behavior becomes common practice. Wilding itself becomes a societal way of life.

New economic realities, including the fact that the coming generation is the first to face the prospect of living less well than its parents, could trigger a healthy national re-examination of our values, and the pursuit of a less materialistic and individualistic life. The polarization of wealth and opportunity could also prompt, before it is too late, a rethinking of our class divisions and economic system. But without such a rescripting of the American Dream and free market system, the new circumstances create the specter of an American nightmare reminiscent of the Ick.

NOTES