All these phenomena have multiple causes, all of which, though, are ultimately related to the process of modernization. A modern society, by its very nature, imposes strains on its symbol system. The reasons for this cannot be pursued here; suffice it to say that there is nothing mysterious about this, but that the explanation must be sought in the empirically available character of modern institutions. American society relates to modernization in a very special way. Talcott Parsons has called America the "lead society". This is by no means a statement of national pride, not even a positive value judgment. It simply means that a number of modernizing processes have gone further in America than anywhere else. Among these are social mobility, pluralism, cultural integration through mass communications and rapidly rising living standards. It is not surprising, in that case, that the strains brought on by modernization should have a particular virulence in America. One other factor should at least be mentioned here. American society has always given a very prominent place to religion and religious institutions. Only recently has America come to feel the impact of an overt secularization (which in other western countries has been a concomitant of modernization for a much longer time). It is very likely that this fact is closely related to the crisis in the plausibility of symbols and values. Religion, more than anything else, provides the cement of belief holding a society together; if this cement is suddenly softened, the effects on the societal edifice can be dramatic.

It is important to recall in this connection that America is a very big and complex country. It is dangerous, therefore, to generalize about it. In the matter under discussion here, there are great differences between the metropolitan areas and the rest of the country, as also between various larger regions. Thus the "Protestant ethic" may still be very much alive in some places while it is in full disarray in others, and so on down the line with the other developments discussed above. Put differently, while some of America may indeed be called decadent, other parts of the country and of the population may still be relatively unaffected. Caution in interpretation, then, is very much indicated. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt about the reality of the aforementioned erosion process, and it is probable that the process has not yet reached its widest spread or its greatest intensity.

What of the future? If decadence cannot be understood as a natural phase in the organic cycle of human societies, then there is nothing inevitable about it, especially not in the short run (in the long run, one could argue, all historical constructions come apart—not because they are organic entities, but