



**Jason Potter**

## Letter from home

Jason Potter on the way Americans see themselves — with feelings of solitude, dissatisfaction, and confusion.

Once we Americans lived in a world like that, a world divided between "home" and places "away from home", places you visited in the summer or when distant relatives died. In bad times you might run away or be driven into exile... one more Odysseus without portfolio. Plato wrote his *Republic* as a long meditation on how best to construct one of these: a recipe for a healthy home—remember? Take a fairly small town (10 square miles, some agricultural land, a city center with a marketplace, and say, five to ten thousand people who mostly speak the same language), make sure you have enough craftspeople to provide for your most basic needs, add some warriors to guard the perimeter against invaders, a handful of thoughtful monks to educate and guide you (chiefly in the art of recognizing your own best interests and getting along with others in the joint project of social life), and let history unfold. I suppose this is the kind of place the majority of so-called Westerners lived in or near for the next 2000 years. Then between roughly 1400 and 1900 AD, a series of things happened that made Plato's *Republic* obsolete and the idea of home unrecognizable. No longer a place where everyone you ever knew lived, and where you knew nearly everyone personally, or at least by sight, suddenly it became a place where you knew more about the people with whom you traded or made goods, fellow guildsmen, tradespeople, factory workers, laborers, than the people living next door or those you ran into on the street, and what you knew about each other was suddenly limited to the requirements and reality of work. To live with familiars as Plato did you had to be a farmer, and the price of that was usually lack of education and a lack of many goods and services enjoyed by those in town. It was also a fairly lonely life, with too few people to keep one stimulated. In any case, from 1400 to about 1950, people in Europe and the Mediterranean gradually left the smaller towns and the farms for the larger towns and the cities, pursuing what they thought was a better life.

America was born late in this period, and for about the first 150 years of its existence, enjoyed a kind of renaissance (partly delusional) of the agricultural, small-time trading society in which Plato lived. The worldwide reach of mercantile Europe spawned a new society, one aspiring to the freedom of a frontier, the capitalism of a village. Our first collective dreams were already based on a past that was fast disappearing, one in which you grew what you ate and traded with neighboring villages for the rest, seldom straying from the family homestead. Perhaps this is why some of our remarkably self-conscious founders formed ambitions for the new world similar to Plato's ambitions for

the *Republic*. Thomas Jefferson thought the best life was that of an educated farmer. He also assumed his fellow citizens recognized and respected the need for people like himself to offer those *arguments* and *ideas* on which our common way of life was based. But like most of these American guardians, and quite unlike Plato, he had a romantic attachment to the idea of an individual escaping the clutches of an all-too-clearly-defined social life. Drunk on a romance of escape, he seriously thought, for example, that a social revolution every twenty years was not only good but necessary for civil health. Lucky for us, we have never been *that* healthy.

All of our ideas about ourselves were formed in this early period. It is no accident that our most readily-identified poet is Walt Whitman, the man who wrote a Song of Himself. Marked by the images of a frontier imagination, we dreamed of rogues travelling over a wide open countryside where free riders and townsmen eye each other suspiciously and fencing itself is cause for violent confrontation. And this collective dream was strangely solitary: every man for himself.

Yet these ideas have nothing to do with the lives we have been living since 1900, and even less to do with the world that has grown up around me in the past five decades. You cannot grasp the changes that made our national imagination moot just by noting that in the period between 1950 and the present many people decided to move back out of urban areas into something that was neither city nor town, but an array of walled-off cubicles on little plots of land where people living side-by-side could pretend to be entirely alone in the money-making universe. People noticed this self-conscious rush to money and anonymity and some, like the Beat poets and the folkies, the writers and the worriers, worked out a "resistance imagination" by which they framed the *true* pursuit of a good life in mid-twentieth-century America: *we the living* were not going to submit to the life-denying conventions of the suburb and the ad agency, oh no! But really, that whole way of explaining our public and its problems, framed by Veblen (conspicuous consumption) and Freud (middle class anxiety) misses the point of things.

I suspect that what mainly happened since 1950 is this: life in America stopped existing anywhere at all. The world in which most Americans live is no longer a world with actual people in it, people you talk to and touch, people who owe you money and bore you at lunch and need a shave or a better spouse or an even break from Fate. The world that has come to matter to most Americans, the world in which their behavior and beliefs are formed and to which they appeal in explaining themselves, is mainly a world where experts and celebrities and other remote beings (philosophers from America, for example) *talk about life* against a backdrop populated by images and sounds and icons designed to activate your limbic system and put your frontal lobes to sleep. This is nothing new, of course, but it is spreading out into the self-referential system of thought and pseudo-experience by means of which more and more Americans record their lives and understand themselves. Of course, *The Matrix* seems real to the young. It is a thinly-disguised representation of that mock-up they must pretend is a real life.

If this were not true, I could not explain various obvious facts about my countrymen and their way of life that, as I said, are in plain view. For example, I live in a country that enjoys levels of safety (objectively defined by rates of all kinds of crime); prosperity (per capita mean income); access to information (information from books in those well-stocked libraries found in every single town above about 50,000 population, from our tens of thousands of schools,

public and private, K–12, higher, professional, and post–graduate, from the internet, bloggers, and those ubiquitous cross–checking news organizations of all kinds); creative artistic output; health; and individual freedom (per capita access to change of job, residence, marital status, etc.) that exceed that of any nation that ever existed prior to 1900, and exceed that of just about every nation that exists now or since (give or take this slightly–better health system, that slightly–lower crime rate). Yet this same country is populated by people very many of whom (if my experience serves) believe, or at least, behave *as if* they believe, every one of the following things:

1. We are in a terrible period of decline from which we will not recover.
2. Our way of life, particularly the part associated with our economy, is somehow founded on a mistake. It is immoral and is a major source of human misery, both here and abroad.
3. Life is very bad, and there is very little you can do about it short of self–medication, which just kills you eventually.
4. There are lively conspiracies afoot in many sectors of social life that are successfully robbing money and influence from we, the people, and there is nothing we can do about it (chiefly because the government and the owners are running everything... the *fix is in*).
5. We are in *grave danger*: from terrorists, criminals, foreigners, and history itself.
6. The scientific method, and the technology that derives from it, destroys our ability to live authentically and well.
7. Thinking is bad for you, and is at war with something intrinsic in the spirit of man without which life is not worth living.

I guess it goes without saying that I think every single one of these beliefs is demonstrably, plainly, perhaps even catastrophically false. But what matters to me is not that many of my fellow Americans believe things that are obviously untrue, but rather, that they seem to be able to maintain these false beliefs despite *the direct evidence of their own experiences to the contrary*. In order to make sense of the distance between what we actually see happening around us, and what we nonetheless believe, a cautious observer is driven to the conclusion that something is *distracting us from reality*. While Noam Chomsky is wrong to think that people are misinformed because a determined cabal of media conglomerates hides the truth from them, there is something right about his instincts in *The Manufacture of Consent*. Americans no longer seem to test their beliefs against their own experience. They have trouble identifying actual experience and distinguishing it from the counterfeit projection that has gradually become their only world–in–common. This cannot be a good thing, and our future may depend on reversing the trend.

I began this letter talking about "home". I want to return to that idea because it captures something about living in America that I have yet to mention, but which I think may be one of the causes of our tendency to form beliefs that float free of experience. As many others have noticed, life in the industrial and post–industrial world has a kind of *remoteness* that deepens with every passing day. We live at a distance from the means by which we live and these means themselves makes us remote from each other. Maybe this is inevitable, and for simple, technical reasons. I don't know exactly how the electricity gets from Boulder's coal–fired power plant to me, where it runs the motherboard and peripheral devices on my computer. I couldn't even begin to tell you how a central processor works, or random–access–memory–chips, or why these allow me to type letters on a keyboard and see simulations of printed characters on a television screen that will eventually be transmissible through

cyberspace to Uldis Tiron's computer, where he will edit and translate and convert it to a final Word document that will then be dropped into Quark Express and turned into printable pages that a web press somewhere in Latvia will produce for delivery to magazine subscribers in my favorite home-away-from-home. I am willing to bet you don't, either. Most of us don't know how we have warm water, or cold beer, green tea, or a pot to piss in. Yet that vast, invisible system of supports on which our survival increasingly depends also allows us to *ignore* other human beings, or minimize their significance, while simultaneously creating a vague anxiety that something could *go wrong* and we wouldn't even know where to begin in fixing it. I have to talk to my fellow worriers sometimes, but I don't have to talk for very long, or with any genuine feeling or involvement. We are worried strangers, after all, held in the cold bosom of a technical mommy we don't understand. What need do we have for actual *contact* with our fellow creatures, you know, the ones Plato regarded as his interlocutors, friends, and lovers? Our insular and remote life makes contact with anything that matters to us *personally* seem impossible except through strenuous effort against what feels like an ocean of resistance. Every cushion against our need for each other is a prison, after all. Floating on the technical ocean, we long for contact with something living, but the opaque, anesthetizing water closes in.

What an image... probably misleading! After all, there are lots of good things that come from being gloriously separate, as anyone who enjoys city living can attest. Maybe it is best that I don't have to consider what my neighbor thinks and feels. He may be an idiot, or worse, a talented meddler. Every intimacy is a possible prison, too. I just find it interesting that so many Americans seem unhappy with their lot, despite incontrovertible evidence that they are wildly lucky on any of those criteria by which most human beings have assessed their quality of life in the short course of human history. I wonder why that is, and I do not really know. I hope it is not an unavoidable consequence of this way of life we are all constructing. It is so hard to think clearly about anything so complicated and concrete. Maybe all this is nothing but a fever dream, another self-absorbed product of an obviously American imagination. Yeah, that's probably it.

Ok, that's enough. Thanks for listening. Oh, and, well, stay busy. We are BIG fans of work, you know.

One of your own,  
Jason in America

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