In Santa Barbara, California, Tom Andres is a freelance writer, often on environmental topics. In the following piece he reviews a book which he finds helpful in understanding the background of America's current fixation on rights and self-fulfillment.

SELFISHNESS TRIUMPHANT

A Book Review by Tom Andres

THE RISE OF SELFISHNESS IN AMERICA
By James Lincoln Collier
Oxford University Press
308 pp., $24.95

From 1910 to the 1970s, Americans went from having a Victorian social code based on self-restraint to one "in which self-gratification is a central ideal." This according to James Lincoln Collier's *The Rise of Selfishness in America* (Oxford University Press, 308 pages, $24.95), an impressive attempt to answer, "How did we get from there to here?"

As Collier describes it, the Victorians of the 19th century lived in a society that was "in many respects better" than our own. While there were serious injustices, "the great central mass of Americans" lived within a "social system that was predictable, stable and basically decent."

However, the beginning of the end for the Victorian social order came with the rise of the industrial city in the latter half of that century. And elemental to that change was the city's large immigrant population, whose outlook was "paradoxically less optimistic and more hedonistic."

It was not that the new immigrants were plagued by some alien character flaw. Family and hard work were important. But many had come from traditional peasant cultures that were a world apart from the Victorian idea that long years of sobriety, punctuality and striving would be rewarded with prosperity and elevated social status. History and experience had taught immigrants that life was hard and short and in need of tempering "with what pleasure they could get."

Also of central importance in the change that took place was the influence of the modern vice, or red light, district. Victorians were of the belief that ladies and gentlemen should not be idle. And when time permitted fun to be had, something uplifting was in order, such as a piano recital, which was not the typical form of entertainment along San Francisco's Barbary Coast or New Orleans' Storyville.

Collier maintains that vice districts were important not just because people could go there to sin, but because they served to "educate" the Victorian middle class. These "old stock" Americans, with their rural and small town orientations, could become familiar with more relaxed social behavior, presented to them as perfectly acceptable, or even preferable to their own austere style of living.

The vice districts proved to be of great importance in another way. Saloon and nightclub acts were modified to better conform to middle class sensibilities and then organized on a grand scale. The result was first vaudeville and eventually the "giant" entertainment industry we have today. Motion pictures, the phonograph, spectator sports and television would soon balloon into a major aspect of American life. Significantly, being entertained is a passive process, "essentially a solitary pursuit, an act of the self."

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Apart from the effects of immigration and vice establishments, there were other historical forces at work. Industrialization and urbanization were already making life more isolated and impersonal. To many, the Victorian social code began to appear irrelevant, as something that could be violated without cost.

As the country moved into the twentieth century, it became awash in great intellectual and artistic change. The popularized ideas of such thinkers as Sigmund Freud, John Dewey and John Watson further propelled society in the direction of self-fulfillment, "not simply as a worthwhile goal, but as a birthright." Partly in reaction to these new concepts, the arts also took up the cause, with dance, music, painting and photography holding up uninhibited self-expression as the highest ideal in the "on-going present."

From the late 1890s to the start of the First World War, intellectuals and artists were uncovering two great principles. First, was the importance of "real life," which generally meant life in a slum or vice district. As Collier points out, this implied that the tidy neighborhoods of the Victorians were somehow artificial. The second principle was, of course, freedom — "in art, in life, in thought."

Similarly, the new feminism of the early twentieth century was more about "self and freedom," such as the freedom to smoke cigarettes, than the good-works causes championed by many Victorian women. Although some important social concerns were again

involved — and women had certainly been unfairly chained to their pedestals — the central thrust, Collier maintains, was to break loose from constraints and obligations, to free the self.

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Surrounded by all of this change, the Victorians did fight back, most notably with Prohibition. Ultimately, however, the Victorian middle class was "seduced."

As Victorian social ties unravelled the new, freer style of living began to exert centrifugal force on families and communities. And so, according to Collier, "American society made a gigantic shift."

Needless to say, the "cult of the self" was riding high during the 1920s, with considerable help from the liberating power of the automobile. But considering how that decade would end, wouldn't the 1930s necessarily be a time of sane and sober reassessment? Not really. Apparently the Great Depression and the start of World War II were seen as something akin to a tragically inconvenient detour. America wanted to get back on course, to be once again barrelling down that freeway toward ever greater self-fulfillment.

This indeed became possible with the economic prosperity generated by the war and its consumer-driven aftermath. Of tremendous importance also was the introduction and rapid spread of television: "Nothing, perhaps, since the discovery of alcohol has so dramatically altered the nature of human consciousness." Television, in its mesmerizing way, has greatly contributed to further isolation and self-absorption.

Therefore, according to Collier's detailed and colorful accounts, American history is not best understood as something cyclical, or as governed by pendular swings, but as a one-way progression, albeit at irregular speeds, in the direction of self. Not only were the Jazz Age, the Swing Era and the Age of Aquarius similar in their underlying philosophies, but the conservatism of the intervening periods was pretty superficial. These quieter times were periods in which the intellectual groundwork could be laid for the next major thrust forward.

Thus, what had begun as a struggle to be free of Victorian social constraints, grew and evolved into a "conscious philosophy with the self at the heart of it." By the time we had reached the 1970s, the pursuit of personal fulfillment had moved from being acceptable, and then desirable, to being seen as a "positive duty."

Collier also sees the decade of the 1970s as significant because by 1973 there had been a "sudden, sharp upswing in self-indulgence." The main reasons for this were: the "astonishing and unprecedented" stretch of postwar prosperity; the influence of television; the delayed impact of the 1960s counterculture; and the "human potential movement" growing out of the works of psychologist Abraham Maslow and others.

As if all this were not enough, also in the 1970s Americans felt the combined impact of the war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal and persistent inflation, bringing about a "sharp break in American morale." There was a "loss of faith," ushering in what Collier sees as a "hell with it" attitude, a widespread "mood of cynical selfishness."

Not surprisingly, by the decade of the 1980s, politicians were routinely being elected because they offered voters as much self-gratification as possible. Government promised lower taxes and deregulation. Would this mean fewer government subsidies? No. Although schools and bridges could be neglected, other expenditures would move right along with the help of deficit spending. Thus, according to Collier, selfishness had become the "*official* policy of the United States."

And so we arrive at the society we live in today. The litany is all too familiar, including the breakup of the family, drug use, illiteracy, crime and environmental damage. Collier finds three consequences of the rise of selfishness to be particularly egregious.

Most appalling is the extent to which American children have been "abandoned." By raising so many children "outside of an intact nuclear family," our society, Collier warns, is doing something on a mass scale unprecedented in human history — and ignoring its own future survival.

The second most serious consequence is "our insistence on having huge quantities of private goods at the expense of public needs." School test scores fall. Infrastructure crumbles. Yet huge amounts of money are devoted to video games and the latest innovation in athletic shoes.

Finally, Collier is disturbed by what he sees as a belief "held by millions of Americans that they have a constitutional right to break the law." He provides the example of littering, although, as we know, examples are all around us.

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If we are now a self-involved "nation of loners", what can be done about it?

First, as Collier points out, we must recognize that we cannot rely on the standard liberal-conservative tug of war to provide answers, particularly since both sides are too busy sponsoring interest group demands for greater rights.

Collier believes many Americans have now grown tired of constantly hearing about rights without mention of corresponding responsibilities. And were a leader to arise who "promised to show where duty lay, he would be swept into office with astonishing majorities from all segments of society." He points out, however, that we as individuals must also expend time and energy examining the problem and figuring out what we can do to correct it.

Some critics will probably unfairly charge Collier with yearning for the good old days of Victorian inequalities, or complain that he is advocating a rollback of individual rights. His book makes clear, however, that his concern is with a movement toward rights and self-fulfillment that became so single-minded it forgot about family and community values. It is also worth noting that continually choosing individual rights over social cohesion will eventually bring about enough social disintegration to threaten even the most fundamental of rights.

At times Collier's book does seem a bit harsh, at least by implication, regarding past efforts to secure greater rights and fulfillment. One problem may be that no matter how worthy an individual's cause, once it has achieved a certain level of recognition, it becomes simplified and popularized by the news and entertainment media, and then commercialized into a brainless slogan in order to sell innumerable products that "free" us from something or other. Also, could it be that at least a portion of the individualism and selfishness we experience today has its roots in pioneer and Victorian optimism, and is not completely explained by a conquering antithesis?

As this book review is written, the latest in discovered "rights" featured on the evening news involves "reproductive rights for death row inmates." People formerly thought of as convicted murderers are now freedom fighters, advancing the cause of human rights in exciting new directions. In other words, James Lincoln Collier's thesis is a timely and compelling one, shedding much light on how we got to where we are today, and pointing us in the right future direction — toward a reinvigorated family and community life within a stable and just society. ■